



West Africa in 2024

*Regional Security,
Democracy, and Women
and Youth*

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About this Report

Conflict Research Network (CORN) West Africa is delighted to present the maiden edition of our annual State of the Region report—a rigorous and multidimensional review of the political, security, and socio-economic trends that shaped West Africa. This inaugural publication, titled *West Africa in 2024: Regional Security, Democracy, and Women and Youth*, is the product of a high-level dialogue hosted by CORN West Africa at the end of 2024. The dialogue convened a diverse group of regional experts, scholars, and practitioners to critically assess the defining developments across key thematic areas: democracy and governance, regional security, and women and youth participation in the political and governance processes.

The year 2024 was a period of profound transformation for the region. The formal withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS underscored a major reconfiguration in West Africa’s geopolitical and institutional landscape. Military regimes consolidated their authority, bolstered by rising public discontent with democratic governance. At the same time, persistent insecurity—driven by extremist violence, climate-related shocks, and governance failures—continued to challenge stability across the Sahel and the rest of West Africa. Yet, amidst these challenges, the region also witnessed signs of resilience and renewal, pointing to enduring strengths within West African societies.

This report synthesises expert insights from the dialogue with evidence from credible secondary data sources to provide a balanced and credible overview of where West Africa was in 2024 and where it may be headed. We hope it offers practical value to policymakers, researchers, civil society, and development partners committed to advancing inclusive governance, human security, and sustainable development across the region.

Timipere Felix Allison, PhD.,
Executive Director.

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About CORN West Africa

CORN West Africa is a network of researchers in universities in West Africa and researchers of West African origin in foreign universities with expertise in democracy, governance and peace and security research. Our audience includes African security sector professionals, the diplomatic community, domestic and international development organisations, policymakers, academic institutions, media, and civil society. You can learn more about CORN at <https://www.cornwestafrica.org/>

CORN's outreach and public/policy engagement activities include regular in-person and virtual research roundtables, capacity building for researchers and policymakers, and technical support for public institutions on governance, conflict prevention and management.

Our network of researchers comprises more than 150 experts with substantial peer-reviewed and public information publications in reputable African and international outlets. Our membership make-up includes early and mid-career researchers and more established experts who mentor the younger researchers. Through capacity-building partnerships with international organisations, CORN organises regular training for its researchers to update their research and engagement skills.

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Introduction

On November 29 and December 2, 2024, Conflict Research Network (CORN) West Africa conducted its maiden 'State of the Region' dialogue which brought together regional experts to discuss significant events that occurred in the region within the year in the following thematic areas: Democracy and Elections, Gender and Violence, and Security and Regional Stability.

The year 2024 witnessed significant events in the region. Perhaps the most significant was the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by the military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, signalling their split from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) following months of diplomatic tension with the broader regional bloc. Also, the United States completely withdrew its troops from Niger following the termination of an agreement permitting US servicemen to operate in the country. Analysts believe this withdrawal has led to an increase in violent extremism and organised criminal activities not only in Niger but also across the Sahel. Adding to this volatile state are climate change-induced challenges, such as flooding in Niger and the Lake Chad region, and mass dissatisfaction with the decline in democratic principles as reflected by protests in Senegal over election postponement and in Nigeria's #EndBad Governance protest.

Despite these challenges, there have been some successes in the region. These include the low level of electoral violence at sub-national levels in Togo; the prevention of what many feared was a looming regional war following ECOWAS response to the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger; and the resilience of civic participation in Senegal's democratic processes. In addition, the World Bank and African Development Bank had predicted a 4% economic growth for the region in 2024. The region closed the year at 3.6% growth compared to 3.3% in 2023, and this was despite high inflation rates in Nigeria and Ghana, two of the region's major economies.

The following section presents the key points from the 'State of the Region' dialogue. The report analyses significant shifts in the political economy and security landscape, leveraging experts' opinions shared during the dialogue and triangulating these with insights from various institutional sources and databases to provide an overview of the events that shaped West Africa throughout 2024. This maiden report offers credible analyses of the region's political, economic, and social dynamics and provides valuable context for West Africa's trajectory.

Geopolitical Shifts and Regional Security

The regional divide in West Africa deepened in 2024 as tensions between the Sahelian states and the rest of the ECOWAS bloc intensified. The formation of the AES in September 2023 by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and the announcement of their intention to withdraw from ECOWAS on

28 January 2024, rattled West Africa's geopolitical landscape. The AES established a pact of non-aggression and mutual assistance updated in July 2024 to the status of a confederation to expand defence and security cooperation, and in January 2025, would go on to [announce](#) the establishment of a Joint Military Force aimed at curtailing escalating extremist violence. The coalition is comprised of approximately 5,000 personnel equipped with aerial, terrestrial, and intelligence resources, and the initiative seeks to enhance regional security coordination and address the persistent insurgencies linked to groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The withdrawal of the AES became official on 29 January 2025 as the one-year transitional period necessary for their withdrawal from ECOWAS came to an end.

■ ECOWAS and mediation efforts

Realising its failure to achieve concrete gains in reversing the coups and withdrawal of the AES, ECOWAS changed its initial strong-handed approach to one which favoured the negotiation of a smooth exit that minimises impact on civilians. It instead, chose to preserve the free movement of people and goods. This reflects a preference for an arrangement that supports continued security cooperation, especially in intelligence sharing with the juntas.

Since the establishment of the AES, ECOWAS has been engaged in mediation to reintegrate the three nations into the regional bloc. On 15 December, ECOWAS approved an exit timeline for these countries, setting a transitional period from 29 January to 29 July 2025, however, it has continued to express its willingness for potential reconciliation. ECOWAS has [determined](#) that member states are obligated to recognise the passports and identity documents; to permit freedom of movement for citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; and to continue to facilitate trade with these states per ECOWAS protocols, pending the finalised agreement on future engagement with the three countries. This move is likely to curtail the impact of ending certain terms of partnership, which would increase hardship for citizens of the region whose integration supersedes supra-national agreements, whilst encouraging the creation of new informal routes for migration and the creation of new illegal economies.

Throughout 2024, ECOWAS intensified efforts at shuttle diplomacy, appointing Senegalese President Bassirou Faye to lead the reconciliation alongside Togo's President Faure Gnassingbe in July. Nigeria, as the head of the ECOWAS commission, has also been active in reintegration negotiations. However, strong public backing for the decision to leave within the AES states has posed a serious hurdle to the negotiations.

While ECOWAS has been weakened by these events, with the loss of an estimated 53% of its territory and 17% of its population, the organisation continues to operate as normal but now faces the risk of further disintegration in the event of future conflicts. The region's peace and

security landscape is also threatened by rising tensions on the borders between Benin and Niger, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, and, to a lesser extent, Nigeria and Niger. While the likelihood of interstate conflict in the region has typically been low due to the existence of ECOWAS mechanisms put in place to manage disputes, tensions are growing in the aftermath of AES withdrawal as the juntas' distrust of their neighbours grows, especially as regards the hosting of opposition members.

■ Worsened insecurity

Conflicts, resulting from political competition, climate change, natural resource competition and extremism, remained rife in 2024. Communal and ethno-political rivalries also ensued due to corruption and economic pressures. ACLED [reports](#) that in the first half of 2024, reported fatalities across the three Sahelian states [reached](#) a record-high of 7,620 – an increase of 9% compared to the same period in 2023, a 37% increase compared to 2022, and a staggering 190% rise compared to 2021. However, the number of total fatalities decreased marginally year-on-year from 2023 to 2024. The total number of recorded conflict events decreased in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, while only Niger recorded an increase, at 49%, in the total number of fatalities in 2024.

The rising insecurity in West Africa is directly related to the expansion of armed extremist groups, including factions of the Islamic State, JNIM¹ and emerging actors like the Lakurawa in various parts of the Sahel and other locations in West Africa. Exploiting ethnic and social divisions in poorly governed areas, these groups increased their presence and activities, a development which poses significant threats to regional stability and national and international interests. There are indications that the overall downward trend in conflict events and fatalities is linked to strategies focused on expanding territorial control as opposed to inflicting mass violence. These developments are connected to the withdrawal of security responders in the Sahel as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger severed partnerships with traditional allies, leaving a vacuum yet to be adequately filled by domestic capacity and new choice partnerships with Russia and Turkey.

The high level of insecurity across parts of the region necessitates cooperation between the AES and ECOWAS states to improve the realities on the ground. However, efforts such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and the Accra Initiative have been undermined by the standoff with the AES. These developments have undermined the collective counterterrorism efforts, demonstrating the need for joint action and collaborative intelligence sharing. Consequently, some states have ramped up domestic security operations to curtail insecurity leading to a rise in the number of state-orchestrated conflict events in 2024 in Mali (14%), Niger (40%), Nigeria (35%) and Benin (62%). This trend raises concerns about the lack of professionalism, welfare and corruption in state security institutions.

¹Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)

■ Environmental and resource triggers

Climate change continues to be a driver of conflict, exacerbating resource competition and communal hostility as it strains agricultural productivity and deepens vulnerabilities. With the intensifying impact of climate challenges, ineffective resource management, and the limited uptake of adaptation strategies, migration patterns are being transformed. Consequently, resource competition and anti-state sentiments have intensified. As essential resources like water and arable land become increasingly scarce, communities have faced more strife, raising popular discontent and distrust in the state's ability to provide basic resources. The farmer-herder crises in the region demonstrate the climate-sensitive nature of conflict. Faced with governments' inability to alleviate frustrations associated with climate pressures, communities have looked towards other means to protect livelihoods with destabilising effects. This has opened pathways for extremists to practice elements of statecraft aimed at winning hearts and minds and filling the void left by the legitimate state.

Climate-insecure communities are vulnerable to all forms of ethno-religious sentiments, and crises ensue as divisions become more pronounced and as climate pressures increase, fuelling conflict and instability. This context of fragility has allowed armed organisations to thrive, contributing to regional insecurity. The emergence of the Lakurawa, members of which includes migrants from Mali and Niger, in Sokoto and Kebbi in Nigeria's northwest is indicative of this threat. The Nigerian government on 24 January 2025 designated the group as a terrorist organisation, recognising it as a significant threat to national security. Other organisations like JNIM, IS Sahel, and ISWAP continue to threaten regional and national security, particularly as they control access to certain critical resources and seek to displace government authority.

The issue of natural resource governance remains a pain point in the region owing to gross levels of resource mismanagement and limited regulation. In [Nigeria](#), more than 80% of solid minerals are [mined](#) illegally, and 95% of the USD 1.8 billion gold reserves are mined by private individuals with revenues that are not remitted to authorities. In Zamfara State, the illicit gold trade has catalysed the expansion of criminal gangs known widely as bandits. Residents have been drawn into the illicit trade of gold and other minerals in the absence of other alternatives to their destroyed livelihoods. The limited governance and security presence in the state, owing to the vast geography and the inability to effectively secure borderlands, constitutes a major national security gap. Unsecured borders continue to facilitate the flow of extremists, illicit trading of resources and organised crime.

Solid mineral mining in Sub-Saharan Africa is a driver of conflict, and this is demonstrated in the ongoing conflicts in Mali, Niger, Sudan and the DRC. However, the sea of change in the Sahel has catalysed [incidents](#) such as the arrest of mining executives in Mali, threats from Burkina Faso's junta to revoke permits, and the seizure of a French-operated uranium site in Niger. This

is indicative of the desire of the new military leadership to renegotiate the terms of foreign-controlled resource management to increase the share of revenue amid rising demands for commodities and shifting geopolitical alliances. Nonetheless, there is a sense that the French partnership has simply been replaced by a preference for Russia in the continued exploitation of these resources.

Critical minerals, the mainstay of the new economy focused on technological and climate adaptability and mitigation, have seen foreign partners attempt to redefine the terms of engagement with Africa. As the Africa Growth Opportunities Act (AGOA) expires in 2025, there are ongoing discussions to reform it, including through the addition of a [critical minerals agreement](#). The move is aimed at deepening opportunities for trade and diversifying investment away from China. Similarly, Europe and the UK have exhibited a keenness to form new relationships and leverage existing ones based on the need to secure access and determine the management of critical minerals. In December 2024, during President Bola Tinubu's official visit to France, the two countries signed an MoU to enhance cooperation in the development of critical minerals within their solid minerals sectors. A move aimed at ensuring continued access to these mineral resources in the wake of their declining influence in Francophone West Africa.

■ A flashpoint for geopolitical competition

Amidst the ongoing issues, there is a sense that the region could become a flashpoint for geopolitical tensions as alliances shift and new partnerships take shape. In December 2024, both Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire announced the closure of French bases to be fulfilled in 2025. This follows the trend of the withdrawal of French troops from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger since 2022; the conclusion of MINUSMA in December 2023; and the withdrawal of US forces in Niger in September 2024. As Nigeria has established closer relations with France; Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have deepened alliances with Russia and increasingly Turkey for military support and weapons. On a regional level, the Sahelian states may choose a closer relationship with Morocco or Algeria over repairing their relationship with ECOWAS.

Democracy and Governance

■ Erosion of faith in democracy

The shifting governance dynamics in the region in 2024 can be attributed to the changing environment of acceptance of military rule and the declining favourable perception of democracy. The instigation of coups by military leaders has been advanced by narratives that project a vision of sovereignty in line with decolonial and pan-africanism precepts and has spurred the trend of breaking long-standing partnerships with Western allies, most significantly with France in Francophone Africa. These coups have garnered considerable legitimacy in the context of

declining satisfaction with the outcomes of democratic governance, the surrounding narrative of decoloniality and the pursuit of new geopolitical alliances. Popular support for the juntas is undeniable and is bolstered by mass frustration with the status quo, given the minimal change in their socio-economic trajectories despite years under democratic governance.

Data from Afrobarometer [indicates](#) that there is strong support for democratic governance in Africa, but declining satisfaction with democracy is rooted in the reality of poor socioeconomic and political outcomes. This has been coupled with weakened opposition to military rule in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso. The coup in Niger in August 2023 was the sixth military takeover in four out of the seventeen West African countries in three years. ECOWAS' threat to intervene militarily to reinstate President Bazoum backfired as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formed a security alliance aimed at deterring the existential threat to their regimes and insulating themselves from pressures to hand over power to civilian rule. This move was backed by segments of the population dissatisfied with ECOWAS' engagement and which perceived the bloc as a tool for advancing Western objectives. ECOWAS has also been criticised for its failure to condemn other unconstitutional changes of government instituted through the manipulation of institutions and processes related to electoral, legislative and judicial outcomes.

In March 2024, Togo adopted a new constitution that transformed its presidential system into a parliamentary one and gave parliament the authority to elect the president – a major change likely to enable President Faure Gnassingbe to extend his 20-year tenure. In Benin, President Talon subverted the democratic political order, weakening institutional checks on their authority and suppressing opposition participation in electoral processes. And in Côte d'Ivoire, speculations emerged that President Alassane Ouattara might attempt to run for an unprecedented fourth term in office in the 2025 elections. These events eroded regional democratic standards of governance and are precedents with long-lasting impacts on the political institutions within these countries.

Democratic consolidation in Senegal was a highlight for the future of democracy in West Africa. It was an election cycle full of tension; from the early speculations that President Sall intended to run for a third term, confrontations between supporters of the opposition (PASTEF) candidate Ousmane Sonko and security forces, the shrinking of civil liberties, to the arrest of opposition demonstrators. On 3 February, President Sall announced the postponement of the presidential election set for 25 February 2024 following rising expectations that his chosen successor, former Prime Minister Amadou Ba, would lose at the polls. This development raised uncertainty about Senegal's democratic trajectory and spurred political activism across the country.

Popular resistance to Sall's attempts at electoral manipulation was vital in securing the path to continued democratic governance in Senegal. Young people, religious leaders and civil society organisations demonstrated resistance to attempts to undermine due constitutional and electoral

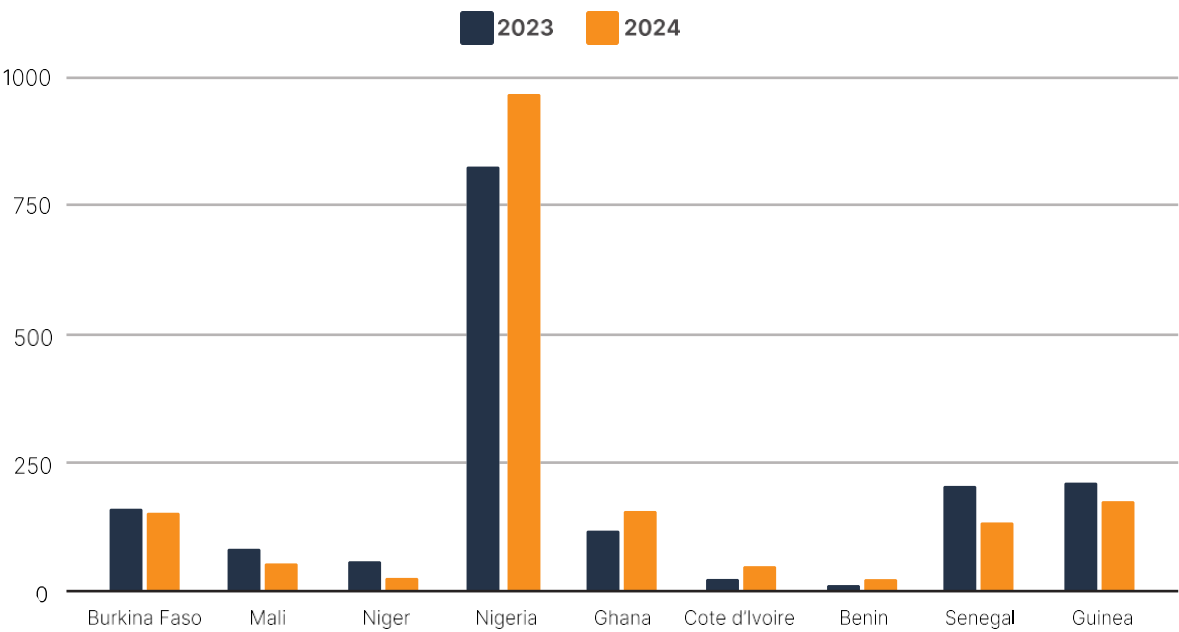
processes with mass protests amidst state-orchestrated mobile internet cuts and the deployment of large anti-protest police units.

The judgement of the Constitutional Council on 6 March set an exemplary standard for institutions across the region by declaring President Macky Sall’s attempt to postpone the election and prolong his term as president as unconstitutional, stating that the polls must be held before the president’s term expired on 2 April. It is also notable that despite the political crises and rising trend of coups in the region, the military retained its neutrality and did not interfere in the democratic process. Significantly, the Constitutional Council resisted political pressure to reconsider the exclusion of potential candidates who did not meet the qualification criteria. Accordingly, Ousmane Sonko’s candidacy was revoked, leading to the emergence of Bassirou Diomaye Faye as the youngest president in the region on 24 March. Faye, who was detained in April 2023 on accusations of ‘acts likely to compromise public peace’, contempt of court and defamation, was released in March 2024.

■ Protests and riots

Data from ACLED reveals a decline in the number of demonstrations in states under military rule, while states like Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire experienced an uptick in demonstrations in 2024. Rising economic pressures, particularly the rate of inflation, have intensified hardship in these states and worsened socioeconomic outcomes on the ground, creating the conditions for protest.

Figure 1: Demonstrations in West Africa



In early October in Ghana, environmental activists organised a three-day demonstration to protest against the impact of illegal mining, known as Galamsey, on water and forests, and to demand the release of 53 activists arrested during similar protests in September. The declining trust in democratic governance to deliver favourable outcomes for all, as observed in Nigeria and Ghana, has led analysts to suggest that it is unlikely that certain West African states have developed coup resistance. They instead argue that the political opportunities for military takeovers have not yet emerged. For instance, a 2022 [report](#) on trust and corruption in Ghana’s public institutions reveals the police, the judiciary and the presidency are among the institutions that Ghanaians have the least trust in, with citizens having higher confidence in religious and traditional institutions and the military.

Despite a widespread adherence to the procedural aspects of democracy in the region, through the regular holding of elections, there has been limited translation of the system of governance to tangible developmental outcomes in people’s lives. The failures of leadership in upholding efficacious management, accountability, transparency and innovation continue to impede democratic institutions. Government reforms have had limited uptake and reach, as there continues to be a lack of continuity of ideas and projects in infrastructure. Attempted reforms either do not work, are going in the wrong direction or simply do not exist.

■ Elections

Elections continue to serve as a non-violent means to gain political power and allow citizens to determine their leaders through the ballot. Multi-party, free and fair elections are a key component of democratic governance and legitimacy, serving as a beacon of the social contract between the government and its citizens.

Table 1: Elections in West Africa in 2024

2024
Mali - Presidential - 4 February (postponed)
Senegal - Presidential - 24 March
Togo - Legislative - 29 April
Ghana - Presidential and Legislative - 7 December
Guinea - Presidential and Legislative - December (postponed)
Guinea-Bissau - Presidential and Legislative - November - December (postponed)

Electoral processes in West Africa have typically been constrained by institutional irregularities, malpractice, cooption by the ruling party and incidents of violence, usually as a result of the exclusion of certain ethnic and political groups. These challenges have weakened the trust between citizens and leaders, leading to declining voter turnout rates, high levels of political apathy, low government accountability and a poor quality of democratic governance.

■ Ghana as a standard for electoral discipline and credible elections

Aside from Senegal's story of democratic resilience, Ghana also stood out as a bright spot for democracy in the region in 2024. The National Democratic Congress (NDC) secured victory over the New Patriotic Party (NPP) as former President John Mahama defeated the incumbent Vice-President Mahamudu Bawumia on 7 December. Ghana also made history by electing Naana Jane Opoku-Agyemang as its first female vice president. The elections took place against the backdrop of an economic crisis, following Ghana's debt default in December 2022. Rising inflation, currency depreciation and lower investor confidence in Ghanaian markets worsened livelihoods for citizens and eroded trust in the government. This was evidenced by the low voter turnout recorded at the recent polls – 60.9% of registered voters cast their ballots in 2024, down from 79% in 2020 and 69% in 2016. Ghanaians expressed discontent with the status quo and sought a leadership change that would transform the economic realities and improve living conditions, however, the low voter turnout indicated a lack of faith in the electoral system and political parties' failure to drive citizens' interest in the electoral process.

■ Delayed democratic transitions

Elections in Mali and Burkina Faso, which were scheduled to be held in 2024, were postponed with no indication of a transition date. In Burkina Faso, junta leadership extended the transition period by five years, citing the persisting threat of jihadist activity in the northeast, where armed groups have seized considerable government territory. In Mali, the postponement of elections was attributed to an ongoing process of constitutional reform, and the timeline for the return to civilian rule remains undecided. In Guinea, ahead of elections scheduled in April 2025, the military regime in October [dissolved](#) 53 political parties and placed 54 others under a three-month observation period, with no election date set. Since the 2021 coup that ousted President Alpha Condé, Guinea has been under military rule. The dissolution of political parties has been articulated as part of efforts to 'clean up the political chessboard'; however, the move does not inspire confidence that elections will be held as scheduled or take place without state manipulation.

Guinea-Bissau's rescheduled legislative elections are set to take place in February 2025. This follows President Umaro Sissoco Embaló's postponement of the elections on 4 November 2024, for which he cited logistical and financial incapacities affecting the country's ability to hold

a credible vote. The move has been widely regarded as a ploy to prolong the administration's tenure and avoid political accountability. Guinea-Bissau's parliament was dissolved by the president in December 2023 following an alleged coup attempt. Political tensions remained high amidst the landscape of uncertainty.

Côte d'Ivoire's presidential elections, scheduled to be held in October 2025, are a definitive assessment of the region's democratic credibility. Indications were that President Ouattara (83) would run for an unprecedented fourth term. Former President Laurent Gbagbo, who was acquitted by the ICC in 2019, announced his intention to run under the African People's Party and maintains strong support, but is barred from contesting due to his previous corruption conviction. The rivalry between Ouattara and Gbagbo (79) has dominated politics in the country since 2010. It remains to be seen what effect this might have on the upcoming polls. Cote d'Ivoire in the past decade has enjoyed a period of stability under President Ouattara, Economic growth has averaged 5% per year, and real per capita income has increased by 80%. Following the successful hosting of the 2023 African Cup of Nations (AFCON), topped off by Cote d'Ivoire also winning the tournament, President Ouattara's fourth-term bid has become more attractive.

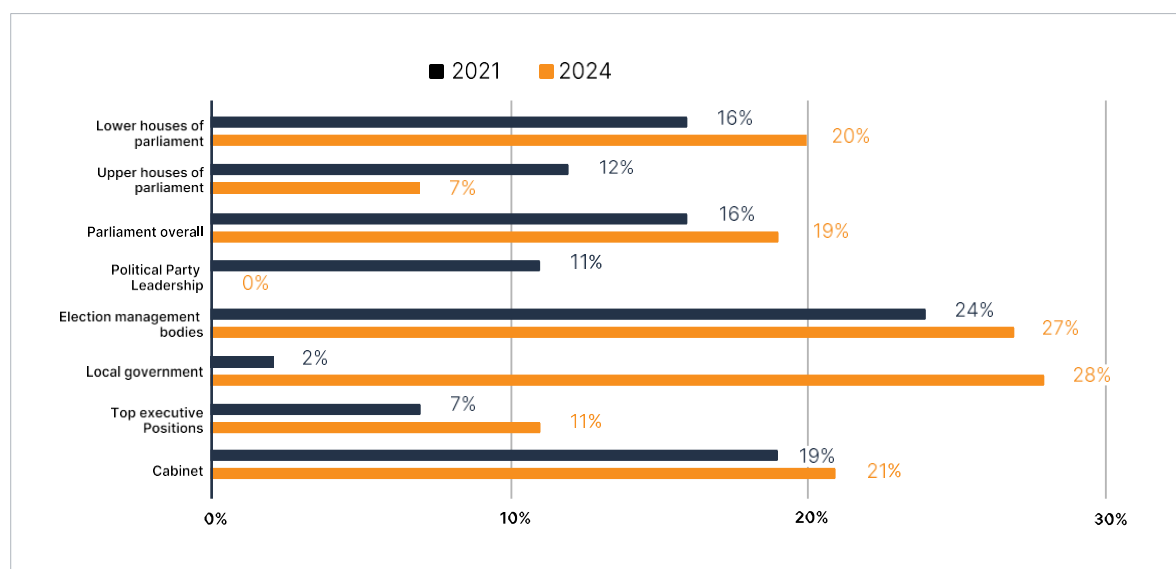
Women, Youth and Governance

Regionally and even globally, identity has become the mainstay of elections and politics. Nonetheless, the political arena remains non-inclusive, and women's role in political processes, particularly elections, is contested and conflictual. Socioeconomic and cultural barriers, political violence, a lack of financial resources and limited female representation in the public space affect women's participation in politics. These challenges erode political participation on all levels, undermining representation and the quality of democratic rule.

At the same time, women are not a homogeneous group. Women as political actors are perceived based on their status, age, economic access, the networks they belong to and the men they associate with, all of which are determining factors in how they are received in the political arena. Women's roles in politics, especially at the grassroots level, demonstrate that the issues stem from the local level. STER Initiative research indicates that many women interested in pursuing political office are discouraged by family members and threatened.

Ultimately, there is limited political will to increase female representation. This is even as international frameworks such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration on Women's Rights and Goal 5 of the SDGs aim to advance global goals and policies on gender equality and to hold governments accountable for their efforts in this arena. The institution of gender quotas has become one of the mechanisms through which progress is achieved; however, uptake in West Africa has been slow, despite the growing trend in countries like Nigeria and Ghana to place women as running mates to male forerunners.

Figure 2: Women's political representation in West Africa



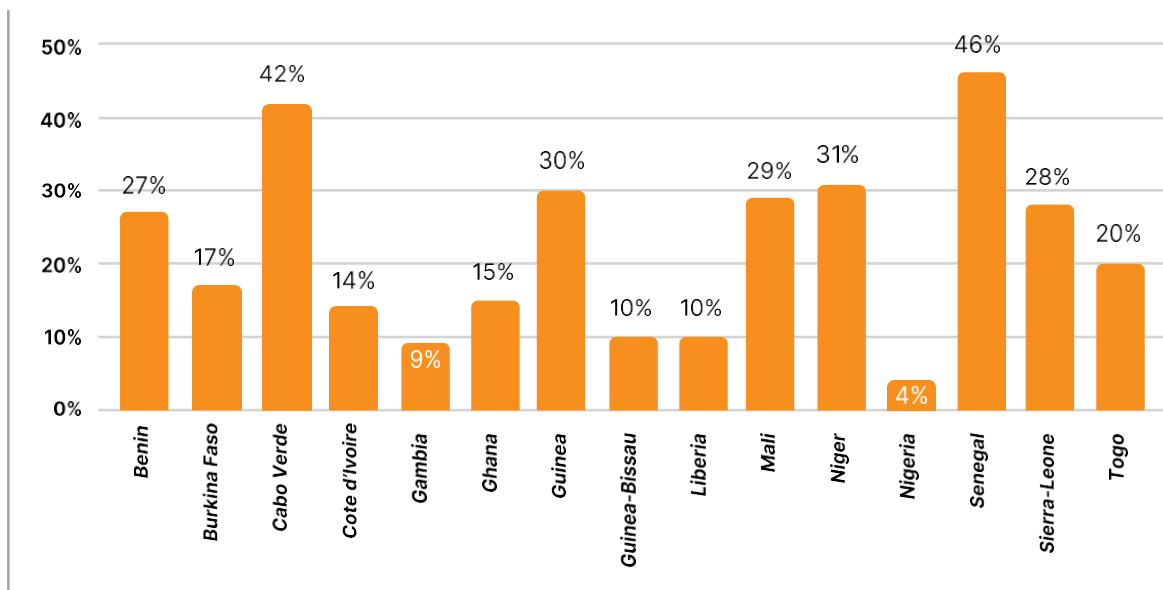
Source: IDEA (2024)

■ Legal framework for quota representation

The introduction of quota systems has served as a means of incentivising female representation in governance through the mandate of the law. In Côte d'Ivoire, the 2016 constitution and a 2019 law introduced a 30% quota for female representation in government, but it has largely been ignored. Following the 2021 legislative election, only 12% of parliamentarians were women. These disparities highlight the persisting barriers preventing women from accessing leadership roles and influencing decisions that affect the nation and yet, during the 2024/25 electoral cycle, 45.6% of registered voters are women. The gender quota law mandating 30% female leadership is a step in the right direction that must be enforced effectively. The government of Côte d'Ivoire must foster awareness of the importance of equal representation and create enabling conditions, including through the provision of training and resources, and ensuring free and fair electoral processes. Sierra Leone also has a legal framework requiring a 30% minimum benchmark for female representation in government institutions, but despite these gains, the barriers to participation remain, with extreme repercussions on women who choose to enter public domains.

Despite concerted efforts by civil society, Nigeria has failed to make legislations that set quotas for female participation in government. Other means, such as political parties waiving form fees, have been implemented sporadically as a means of reducing barriers to entry, but the economic cost of participation often excludes women and people from the lower classes. While female representation in the private sector has risen in the past 15-20 years, there has been a decline in the political space in the absence of a legal framework to push female representation in politics. In the short to medium term, progress in Nigeria would include the signing of a legal framework that imposes mandatory quotas on female political participation. However, the legislation has failed to pass in a predominantly male National Assembly, where the prevailing sentiment has been that gender bills discriminate against one gender in favour of another.

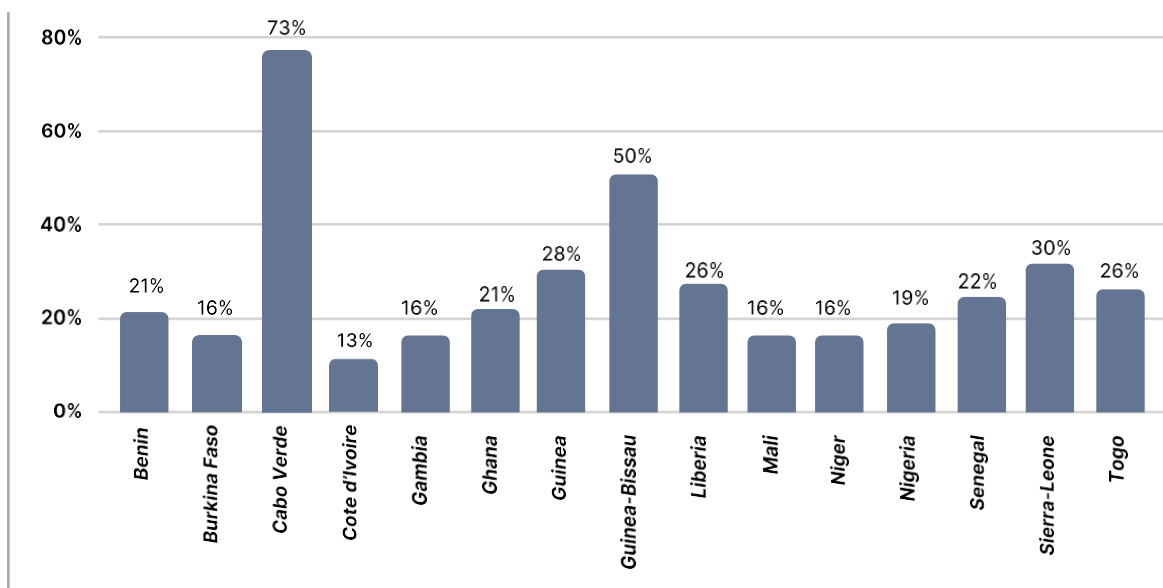
Figure 3: Women in Parliament in West Africa



Source: IDEA (2024)

In 2022, Nigerian legislators declined to pass a constitutional amendment – the Special Seat Bill – which would create an additional 37 senatorial seats, 74 seats in the House of Representatives, and 108 seats in state houses of assembly, specifically for women, for 16 years (4 electoral cycles). They did not pass the Affirmative Action for Women in Political Party Administration bill, which seeks to ensure that at least 35% of the members of the executive committee of a political party at all levels are women. The 35% quota seems out of reach in a country where the highest level of female representation in the National Assembly was recorded at 12% (2011-2015). Today, the percentage of women in the 10th Assembly is at 4%. The low level of female representation in the National Assembly also means that reintroduced gender bills are unlikely to pass.

Figure 4: Women in national cabinets in West Africa



Source: IDEA (2024)

Analysts have stated the need to investigate the female candidates put forward by the political parties and governments for political appointments. Many of the female appointees put forward by the government in power are party stalwarts who continue to perpetuate the same patterns of abuse of office and corruption, advancing the goals of their benefactors without working to achieve favourable outcomes for the under-represented segments of the population. As such, they are unable to push forward the women's agenda and are rather part and parcel of a system that continues to debase women.

While formal barriers may be removed (through quota representation), the hidden structural and systematic practices are ingrained in cultural norms, traditions and narratives, and impact how electoral processes operate and how women access and hold political power. It is not enough to remove the formal barriers, without tackling the systematic issues which keep women psychologically intimidated and marginalised.

■ Gender-based violence in politics

STER Initiative in 2022 researched the violence that women face during political or electoral cycles, finding evidence of increased instances of verbal or sexual abuse against women close to political power-holders.

Even women in positions of power remain victims of violence and harassment from colleagues and the wider public. There is a widespread negative perception of women in politics. The concerns are typically expressed as questions like 'Who will take care of her children, the home, and the husband?', and concerns around attending meetings at unconventional hours. The STER (2022) study shows that many women are threatened by their spouses when trying to run for political positions, as it is seen as an affront to women's culturally prescribed role in the home and the public.

Across the region, women active in political processes have suffered from hazing or, in some extreme cases, have had their houses or places of business burnt down. The poor response from law enforcement agencies raises concern, as security agencies have often turned a blind eye to the violence, and there has been minimal prosecution for such acts. The situation is complex as the violence that women suffer from electoral and political violence is not only immediate and direct but often perpetuated through sinister and indirect means, irrespective of the law. There is targeted violence, both physical and psychological, against women, not just against the politicians and candidates but also against female electoral commissioners, journalists and voters. Consequently, these acts further discourage women's participation. It is important to investigate the structural and systematic violence that continues to keep women from the mainstream despite the existence of legal frameworks to promote representation in politics.

There is a need for legal frameworks that support women's political rights. In Nigeria, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (VAPP) 2015 has been domesticated in 35 states and the FCT, except Kano State, and the Child's Rights Act has been passed in almost all states. However, the issue remains with the implementation of these frameworks. There is a disconnect between these existing policies and the realisation of their objectives as a result of the dereliction of duties by the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government.

It is widely known that there is an underreporting of gender-based violence, as many female politicians and government officials are reluctant to talk about the sexual and gender-based violence they face because of stigma. It thus becomes important to consider the role of socialisation in the restrictions that women face in the political space, as well as the role of women in the process of socialisation. This highlights the need for education or re-education at the grassroots level of our communities. A role which many civil society organisations play.

■ The role of civil society

Community organisations and civil society have a long history in the advancement of gender equality to date. In Sierra Leone, women's solidarity support groups amplify these issues and concerns of female candidates and provide a platform for solidarity with victims of gender-based violence and advocate for justice. In Nigeria, STER is running a project to advocate for a legal quota for female representation. It continues to sensitise communities on the special seat bill and is engaging the Constitutional Amendment Committee to ensure that these policies pass through due process. Civil society needs to amplify public sensitisation on the need for legal protections and capacity building for women interested in participating in political and electoral processes. Empowering female leaders and protecting them is critical to ensuring that women are not afraid to take up these roles.

The consensus from experts at CORN's State of the Region dialogue is that there is a need for concerted and consistent advocacy and policy activity to improve female representation in domestic politics. As a matter of necessity, political parties should be mandated to have a quota system for female representation, electoral commissions can also do more to boost female representation by protecting female candidates during election cycles. In line with this, law enforcement must be capacitated to protect women in political spaces and roles. There is a need to ensure that once women face violence in the course of their political aspirations, there are avenues for redress. Furthermore, the international community through their developmental partnerships and donor activities, should also instate a baseline threshold for female representation to enable access to certain grants, loans, agreements and concessions.

■ Youth participation

Data on youth representation in Africa is not as well developed as other demographics, due to the issue of youth being hard to define concretely. This has exposed young people to the politics of youth, nonetheless, there are many avenues through which young people have tried to find their way into the political space. Youth (30s-40s) are used as communicators for political

parties to defend or criticise party positions. They are often in charge of electoral processes like registration at the constituency level and in terms of controlling the ballots.

Youth participation in the region has largely been understood from the perspective of violence. Young people are often seen as actors who can serve as political vigilantes to mobilise supporters for political purposes from universities and at the community level. Due to a lack of trust in the state security services, parties rely on young men for security for their campaigns, the consequence of which is often political violence. The high rate of unemployment also makes youth vulnerable to political manipulation and violence in elections. Young people's participation in politics is thus not limited to the role of violence; rather, their vulnerabilities render them subject to the political system and its decision-makers.

In Ghana, within the last 20 years, the establishment of the National Youth Policy has aimed to integrate youth into civic, political, economic and environmental affairs. The National Youth Authority oversees the National Youth Employment Scheme and the National Youth Service Scheme towards the advancement of the youth policy objectives. Nonetheless, there has been minimal success in the integration of youth in public service and the political domain. While youth constitute 38-40% of the population, there is a limited reflection of youth in government or political appointments. The National Youth Authority, as a tool for youth empowerment, remains underfunded and vulnerable to manipulation and misappropriation by politicians. This can be attributed to the highly monetised nature of politics. Candidates often need millions of dollars to contest or to become a representative or candidate, even before the main elections. Meanwhile, high rates of unemployment further put a barrier between youth being able to mobilise funds unless through political godfathers who may act as sponsors, at the expense of the candidates' autonomy.

Solving the issue of youth participation in politics requires a structural overhaul that transforms the dynamics that influence politicisation by making sure that young people have access to the required economic resources and political opportunities. While civil society plays a crucial role in community engagement with young people, these organisations often lack the required resources to transform the system or to place youth in positions of power.

Whereas political actors typically see young people as helpless, vulnerable and violent, civil society is also susceptible to perpetuating these stereotypes. Conversely, youth recognise their agency, and their ability to take on leadership positions and exercise initiative, particularly as they become more exposed to modern tools of development. The philosophy of engagement with young people has to change to attain meaningful youth participation in the government.

The inherently weak and undemocratic nature of political parties has spurred a majority of young people's disengagement with the political system. This has allowed for political identity to be leveraged for ethnoreligious polarisation and has encouraged the breakdown of social cohesion. Youth participation is important for a healthy democracy. With the polarisation of youth along political divides, apathy and alienation have intensified ethnopolitical and ethnoreligious divisions, reducing the avenues for activism and participation in the face of systemic barriers like political violence and manipulation.

Conclusion

The year 2024 marked a pivotal moment for West Africa—one defined by a shifting balance of power, deepening regional fragmentation, and growing disillusionment with established democratic institutions. Among the most consequential developments was the formal withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the strengthening of their Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This transformation into a confederation with plans for a joint military force reflected not merely a geopolitical realignment, but a broader rejection of regional bodies perceived as vehicles for foreign influence, particularly French interests. It also signalled the growing entrenchment of military regimes legitimised by populist, pan-Africanist narratives.

ECOWAS responded by transitioning from sanctions to a more conciliatory approach focused on negotiation and pragmatic engagement. However, the bloc's credibility and cohesion were severely strained, as intra-regional distrust and border tensions increased. Mediation efforts were further complicated by strong domestic support for the juntas, even as ECOWAS attempted to preserve economic and human mobility across the region.

Insecurity escalated, particularly across the Sahel and northern Nigeria, as extremist groups such as JNIM, the Islamic State, and emerging actors like the Lakurawa capitalised on weak governance, environmental stressors, and social fragmentation. Although conflict fatalities marginally declined in some areas, Niger saw a sharp increase in violence. Climate change, coupled with poor natural resource governance, continued to exacerbate intercommunal tensions and erode state authority. Meanwhile, heightened global competition for critical minerals intensified the region's strategic relevance, prompting a shift in alliances toward Russia, China, and other non-Western powers. Democratic governance was under significant strain. While Afrobarometer data indicated strong support for democratic ideals, satisfaction declined markedly due to persistent corruption, economic hardship, and elite impunity. Coups were increasingly perceived as legitimate correctives to failing civilian leadership. In contrast, Senegal offered a rare example of democratic resilience, while elsewhere, electoral processes were manipulated or postponed indefinitely under the guise of insecurity.

Efforts to advance gender and youth inclusion in politics remained largely symbolic. Despite being central to electoral mobilisation, women and young people were consistently marginalised from decision-making spaces. Legal quotas were ignored or underenforced, and female political actors continued to face targeted violence and systemic exclusion. Youth were more often instrumentalised by political elites than meaningfully empowered, while civil society's efforts were hindered by limited resources and entrenched political resistance.

Taken together, the events of 2024 reveal the fragility of West Africa's democratic and security foundations. The region is undergoing a fundamental recalibration—driven by domestic discontent, global realignments, and a legitimacy crisis affecting traditional institutions. Whether these dynamics can be redirected toward inclusive, accountable, and locally anchored governance will critically shape the region's trajectory in the years to come.

Annex

Annex 1: Conflict Events and Fatalities in West Africa

	2023			2024		
	Conflict Events	State-led Conflict Events	Fatalities	Conflict Events	State-led Conflict Events	Fatalities
Burkina Faso	1865	551	8499	1463	327	7520
Mali	1658	402	4302	1535	458	4004
Niger	496	91	1146	458	127	1705
Nigeria	4353	661	8689	5271	891	9485
Ghana	384	24	196	455	26	164
Côte d'Ivoire	99	9	27	133	7	18
Benin	304	21	227	284	34	253
Senegal	244	5	48	173	4	20
Guinea	301	17	72	272	14	68

Source: ACLED (January 2025).

Annex 2: Conflict Events and Fatalities in West Africa

	2023	2024	% Difference	2023	2024	% Difference	2023	2024	% Difference
	Conflict Events			State-led Conflict Events			Fatalities		
Burkina Faso	1865	1463	-22%	551	327	-41%	8499	7520	-12%
Mali	1658	1535	-7%	402	458	14%	4320	4004	-7%
Niger	496	458	-8%	91	127	40%	1146	1705	-49%
Nigeria	4353	5271	21%	611	891	35%	8689	9485	9%
Ghana	384	455	18%	24	26	8%	196	164	-16%
Côte d'Ivoire	99	133	34%	9	7	-22%	27	18	-33%
Benin	304	284	-7%	21	34	-62%	227	253	-11%
Senegal	244	173	-29%	5		-20%	48	20	-58%
Guinea	301	272	-10%	17	14	-18%	72	68	-6%

Source: ACLED (January 2025).

Annex 3: Demonstrations in West Africa

	2023	2024	% Difference
Burkina Faso	159	151	-5.03%
Mali	80	52	-35.00%
Niger	57	25	-56.14%
Nigeria	826	967	17.07%
Ghana	118	154	30.51%
Côte d'Ivoire	23	51	121.74%
Benin	10	23	130.00%
Senegal	204	131	-35.78%
Guinea	213	176	-17.37%



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