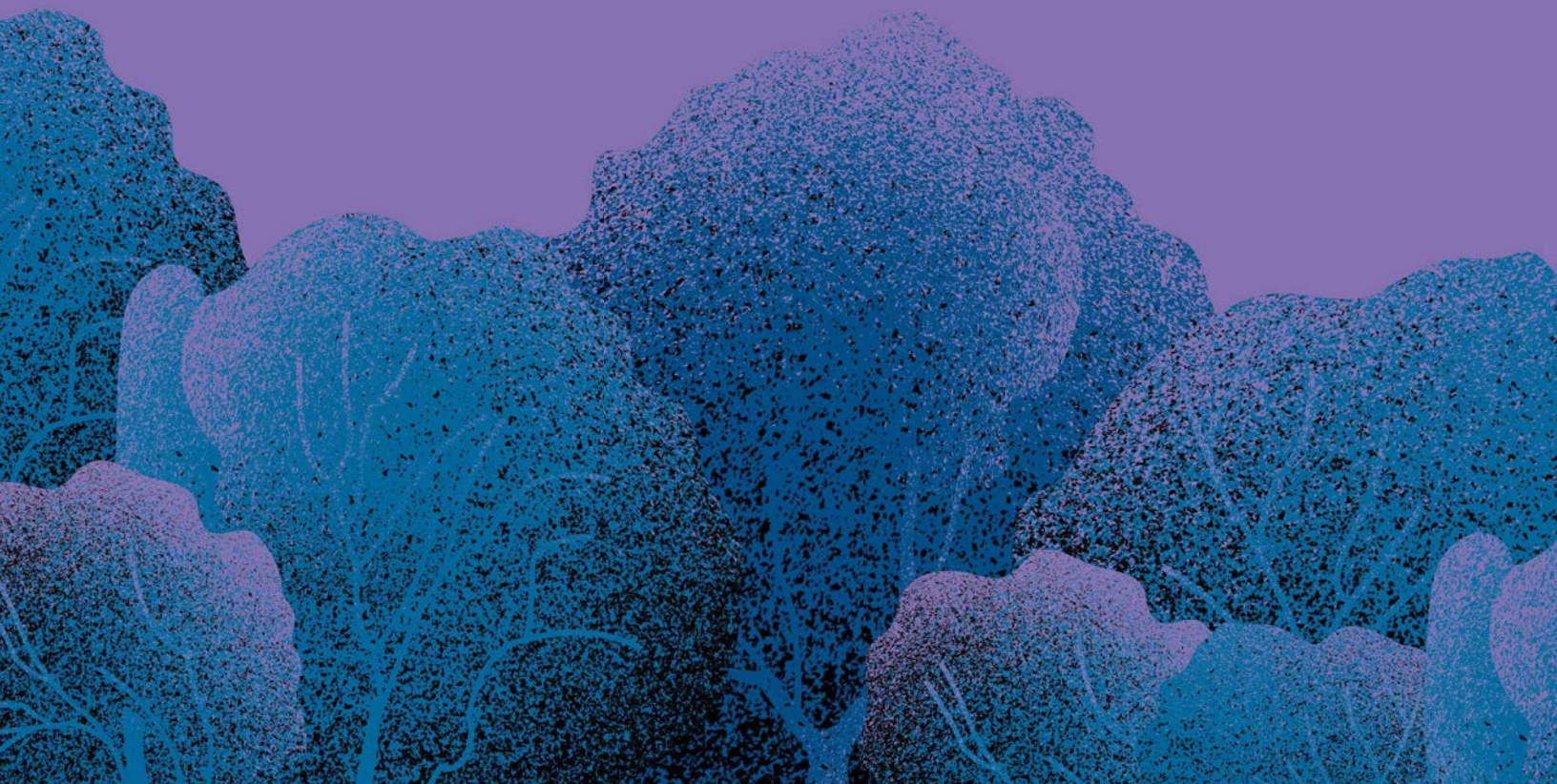




# GOVERNANCE



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# Governance trends in Africa: Resilient demand, flagging supply

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Africa's democratic project is facing its toughest challenge yet. The men in green are back, and prospects for democratic consolidation have dimmed significantly. In just four years (2020-2023), seven countries—Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon—have fallen to military coups, prompting an uncomfortable but reasonable question: Which country is next? While the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States have condemned these coups and, in the case of Niger, threatened military action, citizens in some countries have openly celebrated them on the streets.

In the spirit of a zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs), the AU and regional economic communities (RECs) have adopted numerous governance instruments, some dating back to Organization of African Unity days, but have struggled to oversee their effective implementation, largely due to non-compliance by member states. In 2014, the AU Peace and Security Council noted that UCGs often stem from deficiencies in governance marked by “greed, selfishness, mismanagement of diversity, mismanagement of opportunity, marginalization, abuse of human rights, refusal to accept electoral defeat, manipulation of constitution[s], as well as unconstitutional review of constitution[s] to serve narrow interests and corruption.”<sup>1</sup>

This diagnosis is largely on point. Governance deficits continue to plague the region as elected governments fail to address crime and insecurity, widespread corruption, official impunity, and inadequate infrastructure and basic services. The military juntas have cited some of these as reasons for their actions, a rhetoric that clearly resonates with citizens. But the euphoria that greeted the military's arrival in some countries is likely to be short-lived as their performance record on governance, economic management, and even security is no better.

Amid global democratic decline intensified by military coups in Africa, what do the views of ordinary citizens tell us about the prospects of a democratic Africa? Afrobarometer, a pan-African survey research organization, recently spoke to about 55,000 of them in 39 countries.

1 African Union. 2014. “Press statement of the 432nd meeting of the PSC on ‘Unconstitutional changes of Governments and popular uprising in Africa.’” <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/press-statement-of-the-432nd-meeting-on-unconstitutional-changes-of-governments-and-popular-uprisings-in-africa>.

## Democracy in Africa

Notwithstanding strong headwinds, the aspiration to live under governments that are democratic and accountable remains strong among Africans. In the latest round of Afrobarometer surveys (2021-2023), two-thirds of respondents said they prefer democracy to any other system of government.<sup>2</sup> They were even more emphatic in their rejection of non-democratic alternatives, with roughly eight in ten rejecting “one-man rule” and “one-party rule,” while nearly seven in ten opposed military rule.

Support was not limited to the “d-word.” Citizens also strongly endorsed norms, institutions, and practices associated with democratic governance, such as choosing political leaders through the ballot box (still strong at 76% despite a decline from 81% in 2014), constitutional limit on presidential tenure (72%), presidential compliance with court rulings (69%), parliamentary oversight of the executive (67%), media freedom (65%), multiparty competition (64%), and accountable governance (61%).

Indeed, between 2014 and 2023, support for media freedom increased by 11 percentage points, the preference for accountable governance over effective governance gained 10 points, and demand for presidential compliance with court decisions increased by 4 points.

## Worrying trends

But other over-time trends portend danger for the African democratic-governance project. Over the past decade, popular support for democracy declined sharply in several countries, including Mali (down by 36 percentage points), Burkina Faso (-26 points), South Africa (-21 points), Namibia (-19 points), and Guinea (-15 points). Indeed, support for democracy is now a minority position in Mali (39%), South Africa (43%), Angola (47%), Mozambique (49%), and Lesotho (49%).<sup>3</sup>

Opposition to military rule has also weakened, by 9 percentage points on average, across 32 countries for which we have over-time data. Only three countries—Mozambique, Liberia, and Uganda—record significant increases in popular aversion to military rule, while we see alarming drops in Mali (-46 percentage points), Burkina Faso (-34 points), Côte d’Ivoire (-29 points), and Niger (-29 points).<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, more than half (53%) of Africans expressed a willingness to tolerate military intervention “when elected leaders abuse power for their own ends” while a little over 4 in 10 (42%) said the military “should never intervene in politics”. Tolerance for military intervention is the majority opinion in 23 of 39 surveyed countries, led by Mali (82%), Tunisia (72%), and nearly 70% of Ivoirians, Guineans, and Tanzanians.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer. Unpublished. Round 9 Survey: Pan-African Profile on Democracy and Governance.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

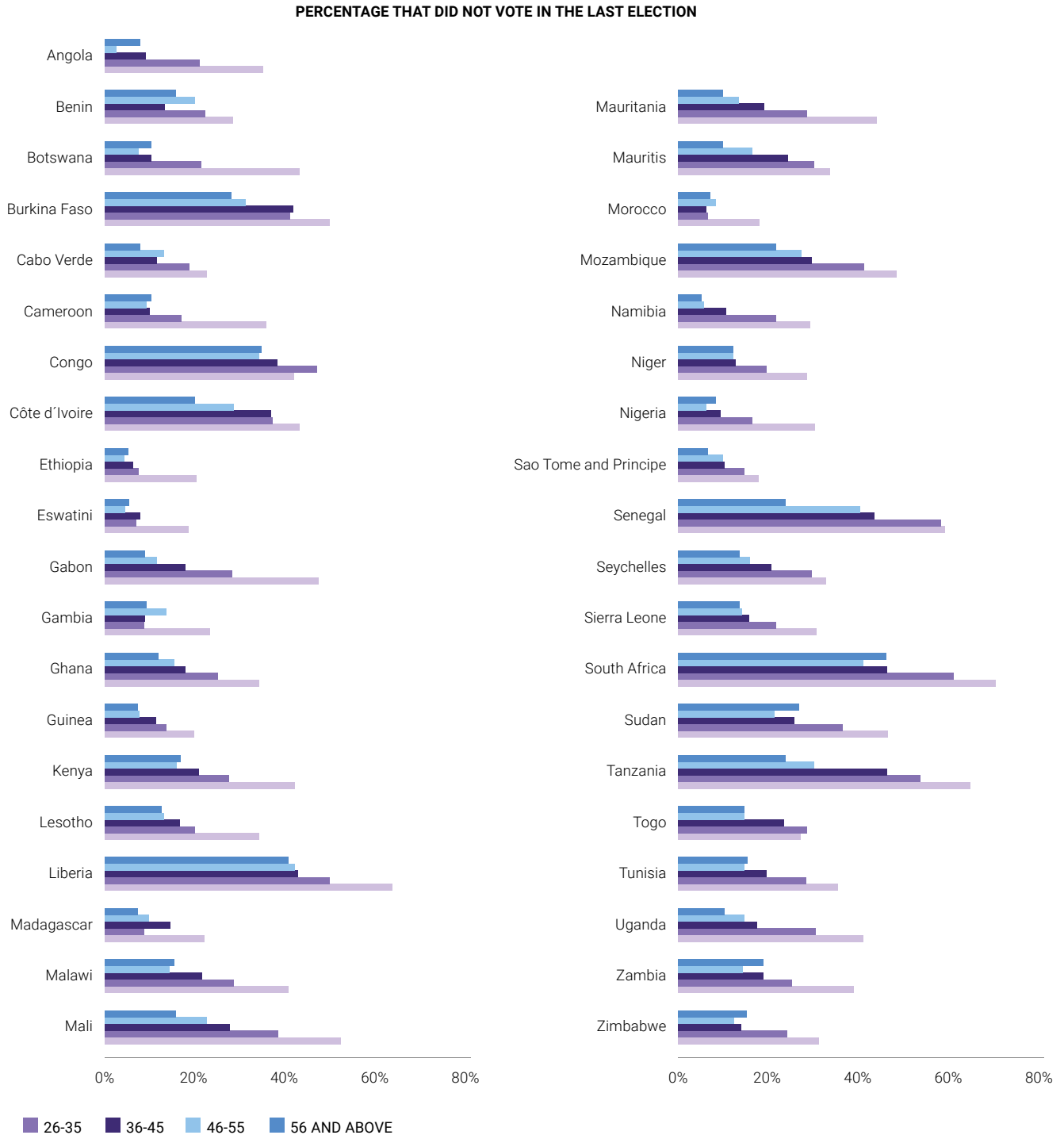
<sup>4</sup> Note: Round 9 surveys were completed in Niger and Gabon before the military coups; and also before the conflict in Sudan erupted.

<sup>5</sup> Afrobarometer. Unpublished. Round 9 Survey: Pan-African Profile on Democracy and Governance.

**FIGURE 28**

## AFRICAN YOUTHS ARE THE LEAST LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS

*Africa has the world's fastest-growing population. Despite this demographic boom, a large portion of African youths remain disconnected from political engagement. In sub-Saharan Africa, there is a noticeable trend where younger demographics tend to abstain from voting. It is imperative to prioritize efforts aimed at enhancing youth political participation for the sake of fostering good governance and strengthening democracy in the region.*



Note: Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in [20xx], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say "did not vote," excluding respondents who were too young to vote).

Source: Afrobarometer survey. R9 2019/2021.

## The youth factor: Cause for optimism and concern

Given Africa's median age of about 19, the attitudes of African youth will shape the future of democracy on the continent. The good news is that youth (aged 18-35) differ very little from their elders in their support for democracy and its core institutions and their rejection of military rule and other non-democratic alternatives.

However, youth expressed greater willingness to tolerate military intervention if elected leaders abuse their power: 56% of those aged 18-35 vs. 47% of those aged 56 and above. Interestingly, youth are less trustful of the military as an institution than their elders.<sup>6</sup>

## Supply of democracy: A gloomy picture

While Africans have remained committed to democracy, the supply side of the equation is much less encouraging. Perceptions of democratic and accountable governance delivered by elected leaders have either been declining over time, as in the case of freedom of speech and presidential respect for the courts and Parliament, or have remained stagnant at very low levels, as in the case of equal treatment before the law.<sup>7</sup>

The proportion of citizens rating their country as a democracy has dropped by 3 percentage points, on average, across the 32 countries where we have overtime data between 2014 and 2023, with steep declines in Mauritius (-33 points), Mali (-30 points), and Botswana (-23 points). And citizen satisfaction with the way democracy works has declined in a majority of countries (5 points on average across 32 countries), most strikingly in Botswana (-38 percentage points), Mauritius (-34 points), Mali (-24 points), and South Africa (-23 points).<sup>8</sup>

The fact that long-standing democracies such as Botswana and Mauritius are failing to live up to their citizens' expectations must be marked as an important danger signal. More broadly, the failure of governments to deliver democratic and accountable governance sets the scene for confrontation between Africans and their political authorities in the coming years.

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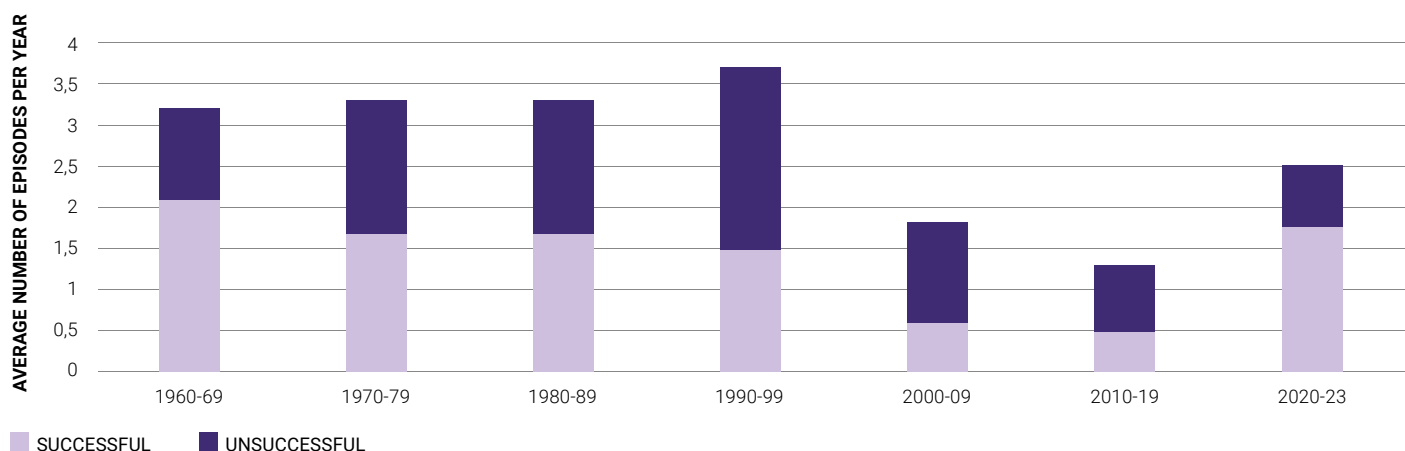
6 Sanny, Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye, Shannon van Wyk-Khosa and Joseph Asunka. 2023. "Africa's youth: More educated, less employed, still unheard in policy and development." Afrobarometer: Dispatch No. 734. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/AD734-PAP3-Africas-youth-More-educated-less-employed-still-unheard-Afrobarometer-13nov23.pdf>.

7 Afrobarometer Network. 2023. "Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren't listening." <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PP85-PAP20-Africans-want-more-democracy-but-leaders-arent-listening-Afrobarometer-Pan-Africa-Profile-18jan23.pdf>.

8 Afrobarometer. Unpublished. Round 9 Survey: Pan-African Profile on Democracy and Governance.

**FIGURE 29****COUP ATTEMPTS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA ARE ON THE RISE**

*The past few years mark the resurgence of successful coups in sub-Saharan Africa. This poses a significant economic risk that deters foreign direct investment and impedes infrastructure development thereby negatively impacting economic stability and prosperity. Urgent actions are needed to mitigate political unrest and enhance good governance.*



Source: International Monetary Fund. 2023. Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa: Light on the Horizon? Jonathan Powell, University of Central Florida, and Clayton Thyne, University of Kentucky.

## What can be done?

Declining resistance to military rule and significant tolerance of military intervention are more a reaction to the failure of elected leaders to meet citizens' democratic aspirations than an attraction to the military rule per se. AU and RECs' leadership and other stakeholders on the continent and beyond must therefore take steps to enhance the supply of democratic governance, including:

- Investments in proactive prevention of "constitutional coups," including, for instance, strong condemnation of such "constitutional coups" by the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities; other unconstitutional changes in government by elected leaders; and securing firm timelines for transition to civilian rule in countries currently under military rule—*before* the inevitable public revolts and the brutal response that would follow.
- Aid conditionality to promote democracy and human rights. Previous Afrobarometer findings show that more than half (51%) of Africans favor such aid conditionality, including about seven in ten citizens in Senegal, Tunisia, Tanzania, and Niger.<sup>9</sup> Revisiting aid conditionality is likely to be viewed favorably if it contributes to securing Africans' expressed desire for democracy and accountable governance.

**Declining resistance to military rule and significant tolerance of military intervention are more a reaction to the failure of elected leaders to meet citizens' democratic aspirations than an attraction to the military rule per se.**

<sup>9</sup> Sanny, Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye and Jaynisha Patel. 2021. "Beyond borders? Africans prefer self-reliant development, remain skeptical of free trade and open borders." Afrobarometer: Dispatch No. 492. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AD492-PAP4-Africans-prefer-self-reliant-development%5eJ-skeptical-of-free-trades-Afrobarometer-dispatch-bh-20nov21.pdf>.

# Elections and the state of democracy in Africa

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General elections can offer Africans the opportunity to strengthen their governance frameworks. However, as coups in Niger and Gabon in 2023 have shown, without a governing process characterized by fidelity and adherence to the rule of law, elections are not likely to function effectively as instruments for institutionalizing and consolidating democracy. President Mohamed Bazoum came to power in Niger in 2021 through democratic elections, and his subsequent inauguration as president represented the first peaceful transfer of power in Niger since independence in 1960. This represented an important contribution to the deepening and institutionalization of Niger's democracy. However, Bazoum was ousted—not by democratic elections, but by a military coup in July 2023.

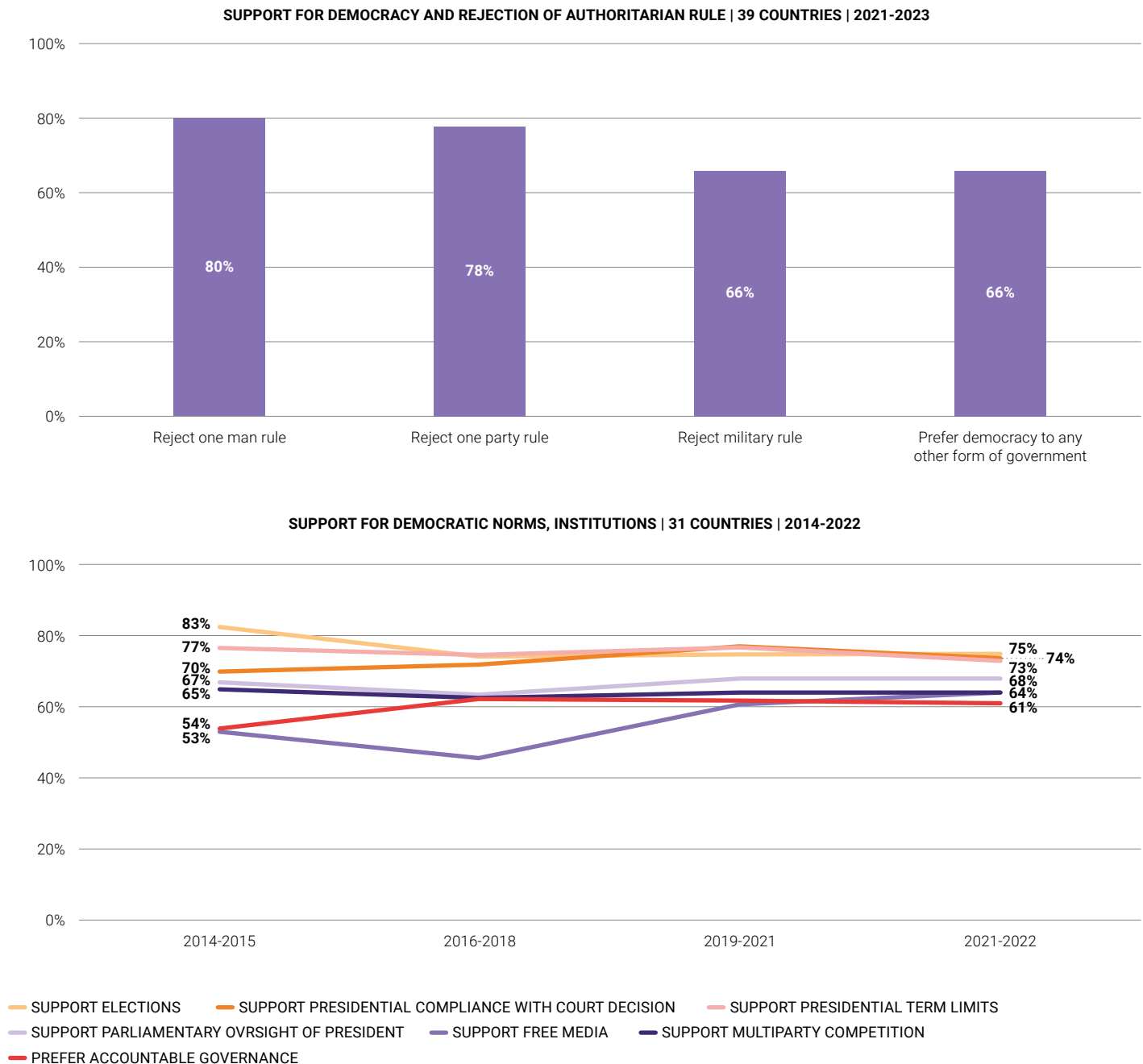
Recent coups in Chad, Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, and Sudan do not augur well for strengthening democracy generally and improving democratic institutions in particular in these countries. Hence, while elections are an important mechanism for deepening and institutionalizing democracy, they can only do so where countries have a competent and balanced governing process, one that is characterized or undergirded by the rule of law and minimizes unconstitutional change of government. First, in order for elections to serve as a foundation for building viable and sustainable democratic institutions, they must be regular, fair, free, and credible.

Second, citizens must be granted other rights. These include the right to freely organize political parties and participate in elections, the right to a fair trial and due process, the right to seek redress or a legal remedy, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly and of association, etc. In countries where citizens enjoy these rights, the government is more likely to be responsive to the preferences of citizens, there are effective legal mechanisms (e.g., an independent judiciary) for citizens to seek relief for their grievances, putschists are subject to severe penalties, and government impunity is minimized.

**FIGURE 30**

## AFRICANS STRONGLY PREFER DEMOCRACY TO AUTHORITARIAN RULE

African preferences lean toward democratic governance and its principles rather than military rule. While some countries have been successful in establishing sustainable democratic systems, the continent has witnessed a troubling trend of democratic regression. This trend is evident through declining democratic values, highlighted by a rise in militarization and the emergence of autocratic leaders across the region.



Note: Support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian rule in 39 countries 2021-2023; Support for democratic norms, and institutions in 31 countries

Note for top figure: Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion? Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable. Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have. Note for bottom figure: \*Question on Parliamentary oversight was not asked in Burkina, Sudan, Eswatini, and Guinea; and question on presidential compliance with courts was not asked in Guinea, Eswatini, and Sudan (% who say democracy is preferable). There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office? The army comes in to govern the country? Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything? (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree")

## Priorities for the declared winners of 2023 elections

### LIBERIA

Liberia held its presidential election on October 10, 2023. Because neither the incumbent, George Weah, nor his opponent, Joseph Boakai, captured the 50% majority needed for victory in the first round, they were forced into a runoff on November 14. Three days later, Weah conceded defeat to Boakai, ending “a presidency marred by graft allegations but helping to ensure a smooth transition of power in the once volatile African nation.”<sup>10</sup>

The new president pledged to upgrade the country’s crumbling infrastructure, invest in the agricultural sector, fight the influx of illicit drugs and extreme poverty, and improve the people’s trust in the government.<sup>11,12</sup>

### GABON

After an election considered fraudulent by the international community, plagued with irregularities, and denounced by the opposition, incumbent Ali Bongo was reelected to a third term as president of Gabon on August 26, 2023.<sup>13</sup> A few days later, soldiers declared on television that they had cancelled the results of the election, dissolved state institutions, and that Gen. Brice O. Nguema had emerged as the country’s new leader. Although coups contribute to “democratic backsliding,” that hardly applies to Gabon, which has never held a free and fair election since independence in 1960. The coup effectively terminated almost 60 years of the Bongo dynastic rule.

France condemned the unconstitutional change of government and called for the results of the August 2023 election to be respected. However, Paris did not admit to its role in perpetuating corrupt, self-dealing, and political dynasties in its former colonies, including Bongo’s in Gabon, through the so-called *Francafrique* policy.<sup>14</sup> As in Gabon, these highly corrupt regimes have frustrated the development of effective and sustainable democratic institutions in their respective countries. Although Gabon is a resource-rich country, more than one-third of the population lives in extreme poverty due to significant inequalities in income and wealth distribution.<sup>15</sup> The Bongo family and its friends, however, have amassed large fortunes for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

10 Doe, Carielle and Alphonso Toweh. 2023. Reuters. “Liberia President George Weah concedes election defeat to Joseph Boakai.” [https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/joseph-boakai-brink-liberian-presidency-vote-count-nears-completion-2023-11-17/#:~:text=MONROVIA%2C%20Nov%2017%20\(Reuters\),the%20once%20volatile%20African%20nation.](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/joseph-boakai-brink-liberian-presidency-vote-count-nears-completion-2023-11-17/#:~:text=MONROVIA%2C%20Nov%2017%20(Reuters),the%20once%20volatile%20African%20nation.)

11 TRTAfrika. 2023. “Joseph Boakai: Opposition veteran set to be Liberia’s new president.” <https://www.trtafrika.com/africa/joseph-boakai-opposition-veteran-set-to-be-liberias-new-president-15875683>.

12 Akwagyiram, Alexis. 2023. Semafor. “Liberia’s president-elect Joseph Boakai has a full in-tray.” <https://www.semafor.com/article/11/22/2023/liberia-joseph-boakai>.

13 Reuters. 2023. “Gabon President Ali Bongo wins third term after disputed election.” <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/gabon-president-ali-bongo-wins-third-term-after-disputed-election-2023-08-30/>.

14 Resnick, Danielle. 2023. “The broader lessons of Gabon’s coup for democracy in Africa.” The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-broader-lessons-of-gabons-coup-for-democracy-in-africa/>.

15 Social Inclusion Program at UNICEF Gabon. <https://www.unicef.org/gabon/en/social-inclusion>.

16 Donmez, Umit. 2023. AA. “Resource-rich Gabon fails to share wealth with public.” <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/resource-rich-gabon-fails-to-share-wealth-with-public/2982976#:~:text=900%2C000%20live%20in%20poverty,an%20unemployment%20rate%20of%2030%25>.

Gabon's coup makers claimed that they were responding to “severe institutional, political, economic, and social crisis,” implying that these soldiers would be able to remedy this political and economic dysfunction and deepen and strengthen the country's democratic institutions. Yet, Nguema, the one chosen to lead the junta, has surrounded himself with “heavyweights” from the *ancien régime* who were close to the Bongos.<sup>17,18</sup> The dilemma faced by Gabon and its supporters is that coups rarely ever lead to effective democratic transformations. On the other hand, democracy under the Bongos had been a farce, with the Bongos manipulating the country's laws and institutions to enrich themselves and stay in power indefinitely. For example, Ali Bongo changed the constitution in 2023 to render himself eligible to remain in power indefinitely. It is no wonder that thousands of young Gabonese actually celebrated Mr. Bongo's unconstitutional ouster.<sup>19</sup>

## ZIMBABWE

In general elections held on August 23 and 24, 2023, Zimbabwe's incumbent president, Emmerson Mnangagwa of the ZANU-PF party, was reelected with 52.6% of the vote to 44.03% amassed by his main opponent, Nelson Chamisa. The opposition refused to accept the results, accusing the incumbent of “rigging and voter suppression.” The new government represents a continuation of the ZANU-PF regime, whose “43-year rule has been battered by its disastrous management of the economy and charges of authoritarianism” and which has been accused by Professor Stephen Chan of SOAS (London) of turning the country into “an economic wasteland, . . . with world-record hyper-inflation.”<sup>20,21, 22</sup>

Hyperinflation has returned to Zimbabwe, the country continues to suffer from “a litany of failed economic policies,” and significant levels of corruption.<sup>23</sup> Given that Mnangagwa won reelection through an election that was considered by various domestic, regional, and international observers as neither free nor fair and carried out in a climate of fear, it is not likely that this regime will contribute to the deepening and institutionalization of democracy in Zimbabwe.

17 Resnick, Danielle. Ibid.

18 Rolland, Antoine. 2023. Africa Intelligence. “Gabon coup: Gen Oligui Nguema brings back the old guard.” <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2023/09/08/gabon-coup-gen-oligui-nguema-brings-back-the-old-guard,110041136-ar2>.

19 Melly, Paul. 2023. BBC. “Gabon coup: Why young Africans are celebrating military takeovers.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66657571>.

20 Aljazeera. 2023. “Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa wins second term, opposition rejects result.” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/27/zimbabwes-president-mnangagwa-wins-second-term-opposition-rejects-result#:~:text=Elections%20commission%20says%20Mnangagwa%20won,percent%20for%20challenger%20Nelson%20Chamisa.&text=Zimbabwe's%20President%20Emmerson%20Mnangagwa%20has,opposition%20and%20questioned%20by%20observers>.

21 Aljazeera. 2023. “Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa wins second term, opposition rejects result.” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/27/zimbabwes-president-mnangagwa-wins-second-term-opposition-rejects-result#:~:text=Elections%20commission%20says%20Mnangagwa%20won,percent%20for%20challenger%20Nelson%20Chamisa.&text=Zimbabwe's%20President%20Emmerson%20Mnangagwa%20has,opposition%20and%20questioned%20by%20observers>.

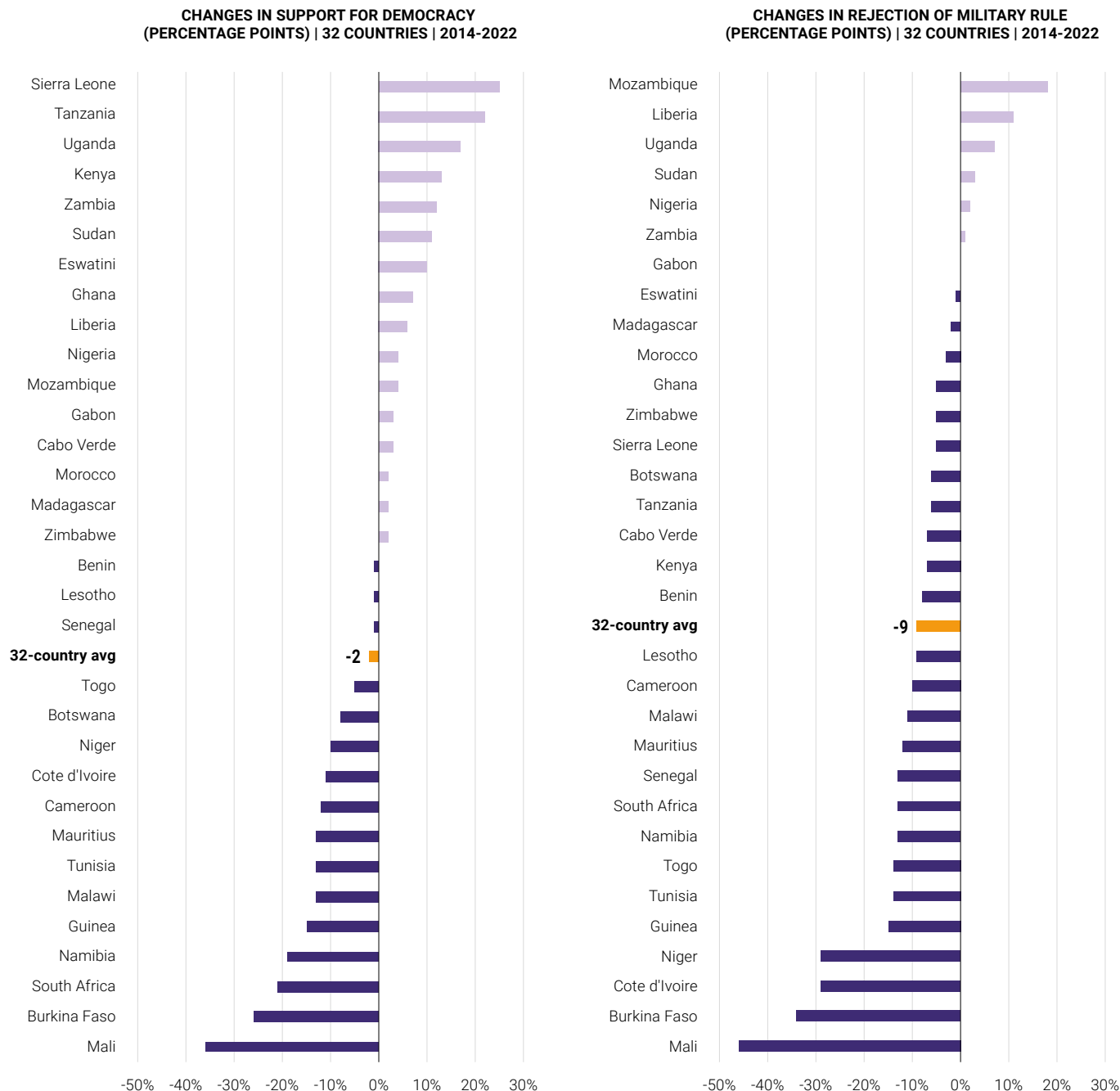
22 Chan, Stephen. 2023. African Arguments. “A Shameful Shambles: An account of Zimbabwe's elections of August 2023.” <https://africanarguments.org/2023/09/a-shameful-shambles-an-account-of-zimbabwes-elections-of-august-2023/>.

23 Ibid.

**FIGURE 31**

## AFRICANS' PUBLIC SENTIMENTS ON GOVERNANCE DEPICT DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

*There are diverse shifts in public opinion on democracy across Africa, where some nations witness a surge in democratic support, while others face a concerning decline. Additionally, only a few countries have demonstrated a rise in opposition to military rule over the years, with a regional trend in West African countries that mostly depicts a noticeable inclination toward supporting military involvement in governance.*



Note for left-side: Percentage points change in the proportion between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022 who say "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government."

Note for right-side: Percentage points change between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022 in the proportion of respondents who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of military rule.

Source: Afrobarometer. 2023. Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey.

## Key elections to watch in 2024

Since it took office in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC), has not been able to improve living conditions for a majority of South Africans by providing them with “adequate housing, water, and electricity.”<sup>24</sup> Frequent power outages, high youth unemployment, rising food inflation, various corruption scandals, an economy considered the most unequal in the world, and a failing land reform effort, are major challenges to the ANC’s political survival.<sup>25, 26</sup> Top challengers to the ANC in 2024 will be the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which is appealing to former president Jacob Zuma’s supporters and many disenfranchised and disaffected voters, many of whom feel ignored and neglected by the ANC government. The 2024 elections could prove very competitive, effectively strengthening the country’s democracy.

In Botswana, social stability is threatened by inflationary pressures, relatively high structural unemployment, especially among young urban residents, and income inequality. In the 2024 elections, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) will face opposition from the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), which is an alliance of center-left political parties. However, “the fractured nature of opposition parties” augurs well for the BDP, which is likely to retain its legislative majority in the 2024 elections.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, threats to incumbent President Mokgweetsi Masisi’s re-election have increased significantly since former president Ian Khama indicated his opposition to Masisi’s reelection efforts. The power struggle between Khama and Masisi could interfere with serious debate on important policy issues. However, if debate is focused on structural unemployment and how to diversify the economy, that could clarify choices for voters in 2024 and strengthen Botswana’s democracy.

Afrobarometer surveys show that most Ghanaians support elections as an effective way to choose their representatives and 80% of them believe that elections offer them a way to remove “unrepresentative leaders from office.” Although partisanship continues to color how voters judge whether elections are fair and free, Afrobarometer determined that as Ghanaians head into 2024, there is “strong support for elections as well as a belief in the efficacy of elections.”<sup>28</sup>

24 Schwikowski, Martina. 2023. DW. “South Africa: Can Ramaphosa secure a 2024 victory?” <https://www.dw.com/en/south-africa-can-ramaphosa-secure-a-2024-victory/a-66929368>.

25 Stats sa. Department: Statistics South Africa. 2022. “South Africa’s youth continues to bear the burden of unemployment.” <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15407>.

26 USDA. 2023. “South Africa: Food Inflation Surged to a 14-Year High in South Africa.” <https://fas.usda.gov/data/south-africa-food-inflation-surged-14-year-high-south-africa>.

27 BMI. 2023. “Split Opposition in Botswana to Benefit Ruling BDP in 2024 Elections.” [https://www.fitchsolutions.com/bmi/country-risk/split-opposition-botswana-benefit-ruling-bdp-2024-elections-24-04-2023?fSWebArticleValidation=true&mkt\\_tok=NzMyLUNLSC03NjcAAAGPAlirepXNQ77\\_VeRaqqDKxh8lNiYlIFxddbCbCeWCsQ4md7rUrSluKycXN-0sn2Pi180MwJ3XmWnVZC\\_AUHMih\\_XadBca9FDbm4vZljtNNPYzc\\_kohlQ](https://www.fitchsolutions.com/bmi/country-risk/split-opposition-botswana-benefit-ruling-bdp-2024-elections-24-04-2023?fSWebArticleValidation=true&mkt_tok=NzMyLUNLSC03NjcAAAGPAlirepXNQ77_VeRaqqDKxh8lNiYlIFxddbCbCeWCsQ4md7rUrSluKycXN-0sn2Pi180MwJ3XmWnVZC_AUHMih_XadBca9FDbm4vZljtNNPYzc_kohlQ).

28 Osae-Kwapong, John. The Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). 2023. “Beyond the Ballot: Exploring Trust, Freeness and Fairness in Ghana’s Electoral Process for the 2024 Elections.” <https://cddgh.org/beyond-the-ballot-exploring-trust-freeness-and-fairness-in-ghanas-electoral-process-for-the-2024-elections/>.

Ghana's 2023 by-elections were peaceful, with the national police providing effective security to minimize interference by party vigilantes, which has often led to violence.<sup>29</sup>  
<sup>30</sup> This augurs well for the 2024 general elections in which the top competitors will be the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and its main opposition, the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

Although Ghana faces many economic and political challenges, it remains “a stable, democratic country with a history of successful transitions, a free press, an active civil society, and an independent judiciary.”<sup>31</sup> Regardless of which party wins, the 2024 elections should strengthen the country's democratic institutions.

## The importance of fair, free, credible, and regular elections to governance in Africa

Elections are very important for deepening and entrenching democracy. They also help a country strengthen its governance institutions and provide citizens with the opportunity to check the exercise of government power as well as contribute to nation-building. Through elections, citizens can participate in the development of the national agenda, choose those who represent them in government, and discipline recalcitrant and poorly-performing political elites by denying them votes at the polls.

An important lesson from African elections in 2023 is that while they are critical for institutionalizing democracy, they can only do so if they are carried out within governing processes that are undergirded by the rule of law. Most importantly, Africa's political and military elites must understand that unconstitutional changes of government, such as military coups, are antithetical to the strengthening of democratic institutions and the development and sustaining of a democratic culture.

Despite the frequent reports of democratic backsliding in West and Central Africa, democracy remains robust, viable, and strong in several countries in the continent. Elections in general and the 2024 elections in particular can be used to strengthen and deepen democracy in these countries.

**Despite the frequent reports of democratic backsliding in West and Central Africa, democracy remains robust, viable, and strong in several countries in the continent.**

29 Aikins, Randy Enoch. Institute for Security Studies. 2023. “Ghana by-elections yield vital lessons for 2024 national polls.” <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/ghana-by-elections-yield-vital-lessons-for-2024-national-polls>.

30 Aning, Kwesi and Peter Albrecht. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). 2020. “Vigilante groups of Ghana's political parties pose a serious threat to a security in the country.” <https://www.diis.dk/en/research>.

31 USAID. “Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance.” <https://www.usaid.gov/ghana/democracy-human-rights-and-governance>.

# Subnational democracy and local governance in Africa

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**Looking ahead to  
2024, strengthening  
local governance  
will play a key  
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Democratic backsliding via military takeovers, electoral rigging, and unlawful constitutional amendments have notably increased in Africa over the last decade. However, subnational democracy remains relatively robust, and mayors are increasingly engaged in policy experimentation and tapping into global networks to tackle major development issues, such as climate change and food security. In fact, political decentralization—or the selection of local leaders via elections—has dramatically spread since the early 1990s when many African countries began pursuing twin democracy and decentralization initiatives. Between 1990 and 2017, the share of African countries with elected local councils grew from 28% to 59%.<sup>32</sup> Several countries, including Madagascar, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Zambia, allow citizens to directly elect their mayors rather than having them indirectly chosen by elected council members or appointed by presidents. Moreover, a commitment to some form of decentralization—which involves the transfer of powers from national governments to local authorities—is now a common feature in most African countries' constitutions. Looking ahead to 2024, strengthening local governance will play a key role in helping improve leaders' accountability to their constituencies and improving support for broader democracy in the region.

## Africa's local leaders at the forefront of development challenges

Several major development initiatives give Africa's local leaders, especially mayors, greater prominence. These include the localization efforts around the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and specifically SDG 11 on Sustainable Cities and Communities. Climate change is a particular threat to Africa's low-lying coastal cities, which has galvanized a dozen mayors of major African cities to join the [C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group](#). With rapid urbanization, feeding growing populations in Africa's cities with healthy, affordable, and safe food is an equally important concern. As such, many mayors have signed on to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact. In places like Freetown, Mayor Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr has even been working to deliver the "Healthy Food to All" initiative to improve diets and food consumption. More broadly, mayors in a dozen African countries committed to the [Global Mayors Declaration on Democracy](#), which was released during the 2023 Democracy Summit and expressed a commitment to fight back against illiberal forces, support free and fair elections, and defend against attacks on free expression. Many countries now also have robust associations of local authorities who tap into these global networks to elevate their own efforts to increase their autonomy to make policy decisions for the local communities that they oversee. For instance, the Local Government Association of

32 Resnick, Danielle. 2021. "The Politics of Urban Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa." *Regional & Federal Studies* 31(1): 139–61.

Zambia has been cited as a global leader in conducting a Voluntary Subnational Review of the state of SDG localization within Zambia and has emphasized that local government can be a critical avenue for increasing democracy in the country.<sup>33</sup>

## The dangers and disappointments of local government

Yet for all their potential, local governments face a variety of challenges on the continent. In South Africa, for instance, the number of powers that municipalities have, including over job creation and decisions over procurement contracts, make councilors vulnerable to criminal gangs. Political violence targeting local officials has escalated in recent years, and between 2000-2018, 89 local councilors were killed.<sup>34</sup> Coalition-governed councils in some parts of the country have exacerbated the violence, which is expected to get worse as the 2024 national elections loom and as the ruling African National Congress is anticipated to fail to get a majority of votes.<sup>35</sup> Intra-elite fighting in local government also leads to challenges of service provision. Johannesburg, for instance, has had six mayors since the country's 2021 local elections. In Harare, Zimbabwe, intra-party fighting on the city council similarly has resulted in frequent mayoral turnover.

More broadly, data from Afrobarometer highlights that trust in local government remains, on average, quite low in the region (around 45%) and often lower in urban areas than in rural ones (see Figure 1). Given that local governments often have authority over policy issues most important to citizens, such as waste collection, primary health, education, and management of markets, this low trust may be partially driven by disappointment with service provision. Since engaging with local authorities over services often represents citizens' most intensive encounter with participatory government, investments in local governance could be one potential route to improve public confidence in democratic systems more broadly in the region.

## Investments in local governance and democracy

Such investments would involve prioritizing at least four areas. Enhancing the capacity and morale of local civil servants to perform their functions is one important domain. Indeed, one study of human resource capacity in 16 African cities and local governments revealed that local government administrations have management staff ratios of 1.4 per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with 36 per 1,000 inhabitants

33 UCLG. 2023. Towards the Localization of the SDGs. Barcelona, Spain: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

34 SALGA. 2019. Violence in Local Government. Johannesburg, South Africa: South African Local Government Association (SALGA). Available at: <https://www.salga.org.za/Batch%20%20Latest%20Knowledge%20Products/SALGA%20Study%20on%20Violence%20in%20Local%20Government.pdf>.

35 Mwareya, Ray. 2023. "South Africa: Councillors' Political Murders at Crisis Level as 2024 Looms." The Africa Report. Available at: <https://www.theafricareport.com/327261/south-africa-councillors-political-murders-at-crisis-level-as-2024-looms/>.

in developed countries.<sup>36</sup> Salary payments for local civil servants may be months in arrears, and frequent transfers to new locations can also be problematic.<sup>37</sup> A second priority is to improve the ability of local leaders to be truly representative of their constituencies. This would involve reducing onerous party registration fees to compete in local elections and using either legislated or voluntary quotas for women's representation in local electoral contests.<sup>38</sup> Third, several countries, such as Angola, and Liberia, need to finally implement their longstanding constitutional provisions to allow local elections. Thus far, such elections have been delayed because of either concern about giving the opposition a gateway to govern through local authorities or a lack of sufficient funding. Fourth and relatedly, the democracy and governance donor communities are well-placed to expand their focus from funding only presidential and parliamentary contests to also providing financial support for subnational elections. This might help reverse the relatively low levels of turnout that are typically seen for local elections, especially in countries where they are not concurrent with national ones.

In the coming years, local elections will be held in several countries across the continent. How those contests are managed, the ability of local authorities to provide much-needed services and accountability, and the capacity of local leaders to leverage transnational networks around critical development challenges will all be critical for reinforcing democratic principles and citizen trust from the bottom-up.

36 Cities Alliance. 2017. *Urban Governance and Services in Ghana Institutional, Financial and Functional Constraints to Effective Service Delivery*. Brussels, Belgium: Cities Alliance. Available at: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/sites/default/files/Urban%20Governance%20and%20Services%20in%20Ghana.pdf>.

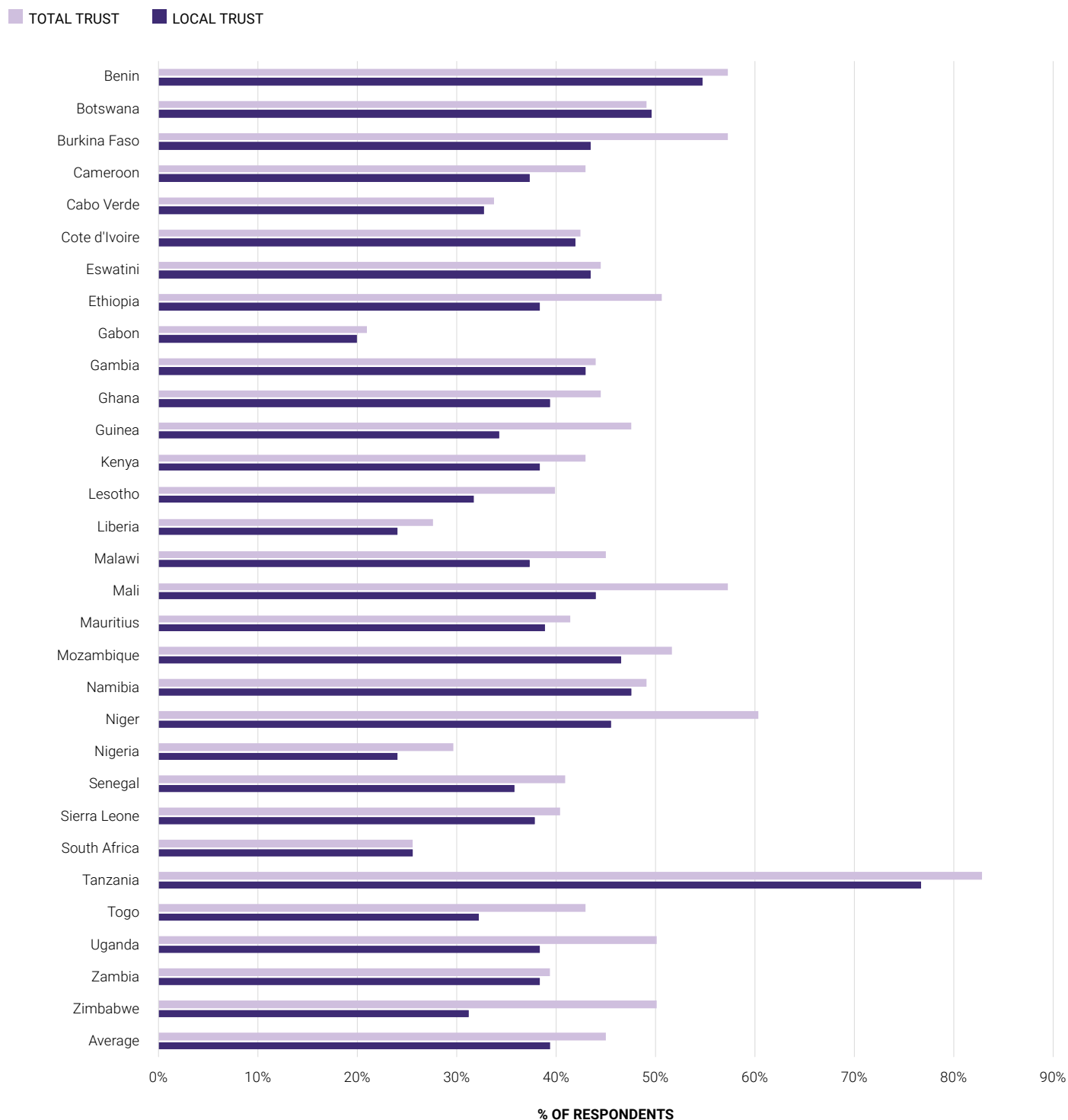
37 Resnick, Danielle, and Gilbert Siame. 2022. "Organizational Commitment in Local Government Bureaucracies: The Case of Zambia." *Governance*, 36(3): 933-952.

38 Berevoescu, Ionica, and Julie Ballington. 2021. *Women's Representation in Local Government: A Global Analysis*. New York: UN Women.

**FIGURE 32**

## TRUST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT REMAINS LOW IN THE REGION

*There has been increased decentralization to local authorities since the early 1990s. A recent Afrobarometer survey, however, highlights that trust in local government remains low across all regions, and especially among urban constituents. Restoring trust requires local politicians listening to their citizens.*



Source: Afrobarometer. 2022. Round 8 Survey: Trust in local government, % of respondents (2019-2021).

# To prevent democratic backsliding in the Sahel, establish democratic governance first

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The state of democracy in Africa, especially in the Sahel—the semi-arid belt connecting North Africa across the Sahara Desert to the tropical savannahs to the south—was the cause of considerable angst in 2023. Bad enough that the region has for some time been one of the most conflict-ridden in the world and even worse that it surged to the top of the annual [Global Terrorism Index](#)<sup>39</sup>—accounting for 43% of all deaths from terrorist attacks around the world—but with the overthrow of Niger’s President Mohamed Bazoum by his own guards in late July, one can now literally travel eastward across the African continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean without once setting foot in a country with an elected civilian government. No wonder there has been considerable handwringing about what the Mo Ibrahim Foundation’s flagship [Index of African Governance report](#) bemoaned as “widespread democratic backsliding” which, together with the deteriorating security situation, threaten to undermine the hard-won human development and economic gains of recent decades.

Nor, by any means, have the *coups d’état* been limited to the Sahel conflict zone. Since the August 2020 putsch in Mali deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, there have been more than a dozen attempts by military forces to overthrow governments across Africa, eight of them successful, including the overthrow at the end of August of Gabon’s President Ali Bongo Ondimba. Of course, each instance is unique, and best understood in the context of the particular circumstances of the country affected. Nonetheless, they share certain common characteristics that African regional organizations and their international partners would do well to keep in mind if they are genuinely interested in strengthening democratic norms and institutions.

**One can now literally travel eastward across the African continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean without once setting foot in a country with an elected civilian government.**

First, while juntas are hardly a part of the democratic toolkit, it does not necessarily mean that the regimes they replaced were democratic or even enjoyed popular legitimacy. That is why we have repeatedly witnessed the disconcerting spectacle of massive demonstrations in favor of coups across the region. Of course, the masses can be fickle and the momentary popularity of the men in uniform cannot be sustained unless they quickly and consistently deliver not just security, but also development—for which they will need partners whom it would behoove to be pragmatic if they wish to avoid even worse outcomes.

<sup>39</sup> Global Terrorism Index (GTI). 2023. The Institute for Economics & Peace.

Second, as I repeatedly emphasized during my service as America's Sahel envoy: "The heart of the crisis in the Sahel is one of state legitimacy—a perception by citizens that their government is valid, equitable, and able and willing to meet their needs... Absent states' commitments to meeting their citizens' needs, no degree of international engagement is likely to succeed." In all too many of the recent cases, what the soldiers overthrew was what French political scientist Bertrand Badie termed the "imported state," rather than a government which enjoyed the legitimacy that can only come from having won the "hearts and minds" of its citizens. If you want to prevent democratic backsliding, establish governance first.

Building such state legitimacy, founded upon governance, is an undertaking that requires time and commitment, both of the citizens involved and of their friends abroad. But there are glimmers of hope. Amid the specter of backsliding, there is evidence of democratic practice taking root. As the *annus horribilis* ended, there was the historic electoral upset in Liberia of incumbent President George Weah by former Vice President Joseph Boakai, Sr.—and the former's gracious concession in which he described his fellow Liberians as the true winners of the run-off. The journey to that moment was indeed long and hard, but nevertheless undoubtedly worth the effort and investment.

# Africa's prosperity tied to investing in democracy

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The legality by which leaders come to power is nearly always predictive of their commitment to upholding the rule of law. This is sobering news for Africa. Seven African countries have experienced coups since 2020 and 14 leaders have evaded term limits since 2015<sup>40</sup>. Less than half of recent presidential elections are considered credible.

As recently as 2019, 31 of Africa's 54 countries were on a democratic path. Today, that figure is flipped, with just 22 countries considered democratic leaning.<sup>41</sup>

This backsliding has direct consequences for the continent's economic, development, and political stability.

The median score on Freedom House's Global Freedom Index, measuring civil liberties and political rights, is 65 for African countries that uphold term limits (on a scale of 0–100). In countries where leaders have evaded these limits, the median score is only 21.

The median ranking on Transparency International's 180-country Corruption Perceptions Index is 83 for African countries that have upheld term limits. This compares to a median ranking of 142 for countries where those limits were evaded.

Nearly 40% of countries where leaders have evaded term limits or term limits do not exist are in conflict. In contrast, 11% of countries that have upheld or retained term limits are in conflict. Conflict, in turn, is the key driver of Africa's record 40 million forcibly displaced people and acute food insecurity.

Given this, it is unsurprising that the median annual per capita growth rate over the past decade for African countries that rank in the bottom third of the Freedom Index was just 0.53%. This compares to a 1.55% per capita growth rate for African countries in the top two tiers of democratic governance.<sup>42</sup>

40 Africa Center for Strategic Studies. 2023. Term Limit Evasions and Coups in Africa: Two Sides of the Same Coin.

41 Based on author's calculations of Freedom House data. <https://freedomhouse.org/>.

42 Based on author's analysis of Freedom House and World Bank data (World development indicators).

## Recommitting to norms on coups, term limits, and elections

**Strengthening accountable, democratic governance is critical to resilient African economic growth and development.**

Strengthening accountable, democratic governance is critical to resilient African economic growth and development.

Africa has 18 presidential elections on tap in 2024. To reverse the lowering bar for what passes for elections, national, regional, and international actors should compel reruns of elections lacking credibility, as was done in Kenya and Malawi in recent years.

Extended term limits are an issue in a quarter of the 2024 elections. To retain power, incumbents must typically resort to force and fraud. This is why the median time in office for leaders who have evaded term limits is 16 years, compared to just 5 years for those in countries that uphold term limits. Facilitating gracious exits for longstanding leaders is vital for bolstering the rule of law.

African civil societies and regional bodies must also eradicate the coup virus that has swept through parts of the continent. Each time a coup is accommodated, it emboldens other extralegal seizures of power. Juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Guinea have all ostensibly agreed to 2024 transition deadlines. Restoring civilian rule in these countries must be a top priority for the continent.

International democratic actors also need to double down on strengthening Africa's democracies and democratizers. Better governance merits more investment, development, and security cooperation. This, in turn, incentivizes democracy elsewhere on the continent.

# How African governments can regain the trust of their citizens

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Following his ouster in a military coup d'état, which brought the decades-long rule of the Bongo family in Gabon to an unceremonious end, former president Ali Bongo Ondimba urged his citizens to resist the junta and “make noise” to save their democracy. Not only was president Bongo’s call to stand up to the soldiers rebuffed, ordinary Gabonese took to the streets to welcome them and express relief at the termination of a democratic dispensation that was widely seen as having failed to live up to its billing. For Gabonese citizens, it was not so much that the army was welcome as that civilian rule had proved to be a huge anticlimax.

The situation in the West Central African country was far from unique. If the series of military interventions across the West African region over the past couple of years have a common feature, it is the revelation of an underlying popular frustration with democratic rule. Whereas scholars and policy analysts are wont to bemoan a pattern of democratic ‘backsliding’ or ‘recession,’ ordinary people insist that real democracy has been noticeable on account of its virtual absence. More significantly, they lament that governance in a majority of African countries has been reduced to a sweepstakes in which politicians and sundry office holders are the winners, while citizens who have seen none of the touted ‘dividends of democracy’ are the losers.

For this and associated reasons, African citizens are simultaneously distrustful and resentful of their governments, seeing in the embrace of the military by a section of the populace a serious indictment of self-serving leaders who continue to bleed governance of its moral content.

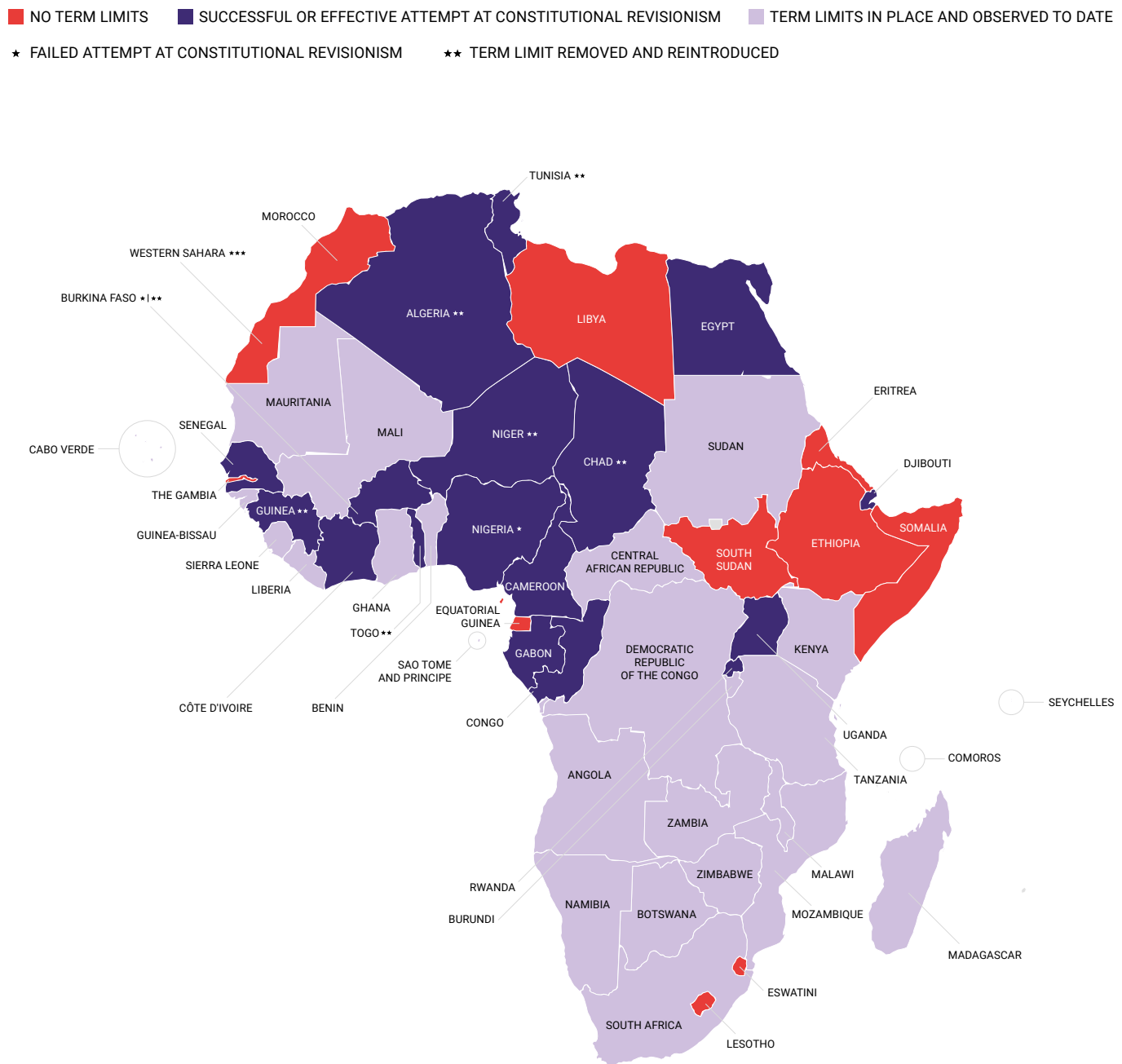
This trust can be easily regained if government officials hearkened to the wishes of their populace, especially frustrated and increasingly desperate young people, for greater accountability and judicious management of resources.

One thing that African governments must do as a matter of urgency is work towards changing the impression that political offices exist only for the acquisition of personal wealth. Part of the reason ordinary Gabonese refused to lift a finger in defense of their deposed president was that, for nearly six decades, the Bongos had turned the state into an extension of the family- and vice versa. It stands to reason that ordinary citizens would be disinclined to sacrifice themselves for a state that does not, properly speaking, belong to them.

**FIGURE 33**

## CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION AND TERM LIMIT DYNAMICS ACROSS AFRICA

*Most West African countries have experienced successful or effective attempts at constitutional revisionism, while this remains untouched in the southern African countries.*



Note: The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNDP concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined. \*\*\* Western Sahara is a Non-Self-Governing Territory.

Source: United Nations Development Programme. 2023. "Soldiers and citizens: Military coups and the need for democratic renewal in Africa."

**Africans desperately want to trust their governments. In return, African governments need to demonstrate that they can be trusted.**

Changing the impression that offices exist only for the acquisition of personal wealth must be complemented with an aggressive and deliberate pursuit of social welfare. Insofar as the primary reason that young Africans are voting with their feet and seeking to start new lives in other parts of the world is the poverty of physical infrastructure to support job creation across the region, African governments must invest heavily in such infrastructure (schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, electricity, etc.) as a strategy of retaining and nourishing the continent's best brains.

Neither of these worthwhile goals can be achieved without a commitment to the rule of law, particularly the idea that both leaders and citizens are civic equals held to the same standards and expectations.

Africans desperately want to trust their governments. In return, African governments need to demonstrate that they can be trusted.

# Addressing and preventing coups in Africa: What the United States can do

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As coups d'état have swept West Africa and may expand into the Great Lakes Region and East Africa, U.S. policy responses have struggled. Economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation by the West have proven insufficient to reverse the power takeovers. With U.S. foreign policy focused primarily on great power competition with China and Russia and motivated by a strong desire to extricate the United States from internal conflicts, the United States does not have the will to reverse the coups militarily. Washington will thus increasingly face tough dilemmas of upholding its democratic commitments while losing strategic and economic access or accommodating in some ways to authoritarian governments. Only once the current tilt toward authoritarianism proves itself unable to deliver better security and governance will the United States have a strong capacity to encourage democratic reforms in countries that have fallen into authoritarian hands. But Washington can and should do more to prevent coups *before* they happen, and even in the authoritarian regimes, it should seek to strengthen democratic forces and moderate power abuses.

From Mali in 2020 to Niger and Gabon in 2023, overthrows of power have been driven predominantly by internal issues, including poor civilian control over the military. The internal governance and institutional deficiencies have often taken place amidst unabating jihadi militancy despite U.S. and other Western military assistance. Moreover, across Africa, citizens have been deeply frustrated with the lack of economic opportunities, high unemployment, and poor public services, all compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as decades-long corruption, nepotism, and parochialism. The cry that one can't eat elections or democracy has become common across the continent. And in various African countries, democracy has merely consisted of (troubled) elections overlaying poor governance.

The coups in West Africa, however, also reflect the current zeitgeist and precedent—a global tilt toward rightist politics and the ability of West Africa's putschists to get away with the coups. Their countries may have become poorer under resulting Western sanctions, but China's and Russia's ready embrace of the authoritarian regimes has provided a cushion for their hold onto power. Thus, while the economic sanctions of the Economic Community of West African Countries (ECOWAS) have compounded the hardship of the already struggling people of Niger (and created blowback across borders, including in Nigeria), they have not restored democracy.<sup>43</sup> And ECOWAS military interventions now rings hollow and embarrassing.

43 Obasi, Nnamdi. 2023. "ECOWAS, Nigeria and the Niger Coup Sanctions: Time to Recalibrate." International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/ecowas-nigeria-and-niger-coup-sanctions-time-recalibrate>.

Russia has also provided a military cushion—in the form of direct Russian military assistance, such as in Niger after the 2023 coup, or through its proxy the Wagner Group, such as in Mali.<sup>44</sup> The Russian advisors and mercenaries are not a silver bullet against jihadists: In Mali, the security situation has deteriorated significantly in 2023, with the jihadists threatening to take Timbuktu, Gao, and Menaka. In 2024, the country may see the establishment of an ISIS-linked and a separate al-Qaeda-linked Islamist “protostates.” But despite their counterinsurgency brutality and ineffectiveness, the Russian forces also serve as a praetorian guard to those in power.

U.S. tools to counter these negative trends have become blunt. For the sake of counterterrorism operations and local assistance in stemming refugee flows, the United States and Western Europe had for years closed their eyes to the election-covered misgovernance in countries like Niger, Mali, and Chad. When they could have pushed hard for better governance, they did not. Now, countering the coups often means losing access as the United States is legally-mandated to sever all non-humanitarian assistance to countries where it identifies a coup d’état.

Unfortunately, that means that to preserve at least its key interests in strategic countries where coups have taken place or may yet—such as important counterterrorism bases, strategic economic resources, or a platform for countering Russia and China, the United States will need to be inconsistent in when it calls a coup a coup. Or the United States may have to deploy a national security override of the legislative restrictions. With good reason, the Biden administration tried to be creative with its wording after the coup in Niger in August 2023.<sup>45</sup> Hypocrisy carries costs for U.S. foreign policy. But in cases of important interests, it may be necessary to pay this price.

**Nonetheless, in engaging with both authoritarian governments or electorally-legitimated ones, Washington should be willing to push for better governance.**

Nonetheless, in engaging with both authoritarian governments or electorally-legitimated ones, Washington should be willing to push for better governance. In more permissive environments, it should encourage stronger civilian control measures through tools beyond giving African officers human rights and civ-mil training. The United States should develop tracking mechanisms and intelligence assets to detect coup preparation and provide early warning to governing authorities.

But Washington should also get far tougher with elected officials about checks and balances, truly free and representative elections, institutional and civil service strengthening, and independent empowered justice systems. When the elected government’s inclinations are parochial, Washington should push against them, encouraging instead economic and social policies that generate resources and opportunities for the African people.

44 Asadu, Chinedu. 2023. “Niger’s junta revokes key security agreements with EU and turns to Russia for defense partnership.” AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/niger-junta-eu-russia-security-73e8ed801478fa65b01818dd53df0c0e>.

45 Felbab-Brown, Vanda. 2023. “How the Niger coup unfolded.” The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-niger-coup-unfolded/>.

Ironically, after years of giving African governments, such as in Uganda, the sense that for the sake of counterterrorism Washington will ignore internal misgovernance, the coups now provide Washington with leverage to warn governments that without reforms and better governance they too may fall to a putsch.

Even with authoritarian rulers and putschists, Washington can push for better governance. When strategic calculations drive it to engage with them, the United States does not have to do it in a blank check manner—the specter of Russia or China displacing the U.S. in the country notwithstanding. Washington can draw and enforce redlines against massive ethnic discrimination or extensive repression of the opposition, for example. It can dial down its engagement. It can create portfolios of influence and pressure tools against individual authorities.

These latter measures are unlikely to reverse coups when they take place. But the United States can seek to at least limit the authoritarian power abuses and encourage more equitable social and economic policies.

# Rich state, poor state

## GREG MILLS

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Over the past 60 years, Africa has changed dramatically. It is imperative to end our business-as-usual approach to development. The demographic circumstances of Africa—where the continent will double its population over the next 25 years—demands that we strike out on a new, reformist path that will deliver higher growth and more opportunities, especially for this young cohort. If we fail to do so, it is reasonable to expect mass migration, political instability, and widespread state failure.

And yet there are a variety of different opinions about why Africa is comparatively poor: For the donors, in general, the problems are about governance and a lack of opportunity more generally, and their solution is thus to try and provide a more enabling environment. Everyone has a different view about the solution: Africans, and especially their governments, are commonly externalist in their diagnosis, that change in the continent demands altering terms of trade and more inclusive systems of global financing and governance. The academic community finds itself caught between aid as the solution and the problem itself, while their diagnosis does not explain why countries go from being extractive to inclusive. The business community tends to pay lip service to democratic and governance niceties, since they have seldom found a government that they did not like, preferring stronger, big-man style leadership which offers expedited decision-making and ease of entry and exit of capital. And the NGO community unsurprisingly prefers aid as the solution, along with spending benchmarks and greater volumes.

**We have learned a number of key lessons from development success stories and failures. For instance, difficult geography, climate, or types of religion is not a consistent predictor, neither is colonialism or its particular type, as terrible as this inheritance may have been.**

While of course one cannot crudely lift a development template from one situation and apply it to the next, there are critical and key tenets which are consistent between the reformers studied in the book “Rich State, Poor State.”

None of the reformers in “Rich State, Poor State” had any particular advantages over their counterparts at their moment of independence. So what has made the difference between Singapore and Swaziland, or Spain and South Africa or, to take a comparative African success, Mauritius and Comoros? We have learned a number of key lessons from development success stories and failures. For instance, difficult geography, climate, or types of religion is not a consistent predictor, neither is colonialism or its particular type, as terrible as this inheritance may have been. Rather the challenge is to not be a prisoner of your past. Also, while wars of liberation may have been costly, and stability can itself offer great opportunities, this is not a reason for failure, as Vietnam illustrates. And nor is the imperative of political stability an excuse for slow reforms, viz the experience of the Baltics.

Rather, the answer lies in the search for constants: leadership (including vision, prioritization, attention to detail, astute diplomacy, deployment of political capital, institutional efficiencies) and building policy and relationships internal and external conducive to growth, along with stamina and the recognition of the need to shift away from a political-economy of insiders and outsiders. Overall, the answer does not lie in the technocratic details of reform—since these are comparatively easy to identify and specify—but rather the choices that lie behind development, and the leadership and relationships that drive those choices. Just like the problem is not the cost of competition and globalization, to the contrary, also the answer lies in more and improved systems of democracy.