

REGIONAL SECURITY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN WEST AFRICA

¹**John Danfulani, Ph.D**
johndanfulani@gmail.com
+2347082622012

&

²**Kabiru Zubairu, PhD**
zubairukabiru@rocketmail.com
+2348065506060

^{1&2}Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Social Sciences (FSMS),
Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT), Kaduna, Kaduna State

Abstract

West Africa's post-Cold War democratization trajectory has unfolded alongside entrenched regional security challenges, including armed conflicts, terrorism, military coups, and transnational organized crime. These threats have systematically undermined state institutions, eroded public confidence in democratic governance, and perpetuated cycles of instability. Simultaneously, fragile democratic systems characterized by weak rule of law, pervasive electoral irregularities, corruption, and poor governance have significantly contributed to escalating insecurity across the sub-region. Regional bodies, particularly the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have strategically sought to integrate security management with democratic consolidation through proactive conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations, and targeted sanctions against unconstitutional changes of government. This study examines how terrorism, insurgencies, and instability hinder democratic consolidation, spotlighting crises in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger. Grounded in security-democracy theory stressing peace-institution-governance interdependence, it uses qualitative comparative analysis to evaluate ECOWAS's role in conflict resolution and peacekeeping. The findings confirm ECOWAS's proactive stabilization of fragile states and democratic support, limited by resource shortages, uneven member-state commitment, and sovereignty tensions. Recommendations include bolstering ECOWAS's capacity and enforcement; fostering national-regional security collaboration; prioritizing inclusive governance and socio-economic development for sustainable security-democracy synergy; and deploying robust early-warning systems with preventive diplomacy to shift from reactive to proactive interventions.

Key Words: Democracy, security, regional, political, peace

Introduction

The relationship between regional security and democratic consolidation has emerged as a critical issue in West Africa's post-Cold War political development. Following the third wave of democratization in the early 1990s, most West African countries adopted multiparty political systems and constitutional governance, raising expectations of democratic stability (Diamond, 1999). However, the consolidation of democracy in the sub-region has remained unstable, largely due to persistent insecurity, weak state institutions, and persistent undemocratic changes of government (Lindberg, 2006). West Africa region faces complex and transnational security threats, including armed insurgency, violent extremism, organized crime, illicit arms trafficking,

maritime insecurity, and porous borders (Obi, 2015). These threats have significantly undermined state capacity, weakened the rule of law, and eroded citizens' trust in democratic institutions (Jackson, 2018). Insecurity has also provided some level of justification for military intervention in politics, as demonstrated by the resurgence of coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which have reversed democratic gains and disrupted constitutional order (Dossou & Foucher, 2023).

The renaissance of military rule highlights the cyclical relationship between insecurity and democratic fragility in West Africa. Weak democratic governance characterized by corruption, exclusionary politics, electoral malpractice, and poor service delivery often fuels public displeasure and to some degree legitimizes authoritarian changes, including military interventions (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). On the contrary, military regimes tend to weaken democratic institutions further, restrict civil liberties, and adopt coercive security approaches that exacerbate instability rather than resolve it (Luckham & Ni Aolain, 2016). At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has sought to institutionalize the nexus between security and democracy. Through mechanisms such as the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999) and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), the organization formally linked regional security to constitutional rule, electoral legitimacy, and zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government (Hartmann, 2017). While ECOWAS has achieved notable successes in conflict management and democratic norm promotion, its recent struggles to respond effectively to military interventions have exposed limitations related to enforcement capacity, political consensus, and popular legitimacy.

Scholars have increasingly argued on the sustainability peace and democratic consolidation in West Africa which require a shift from state-centric and militarized security approaches toward inclusive governance and human-centered security frameworks (Paris, 2004). From this perspective, democracy and security are mutually reinforcing democratic accountability enhances legitimate security and good-governance, while effective and rights-based security institutions create the conditions necessary for democratic consolidation (Nathan, 2007). The objective of this study is to critically examine how regional security challenges such as terrorism, insurgencies, and political instability influence the process of democratic consolidation in West Africa, with a focus on understanding the ways insecurity undermines governance, weakens institutions, and limits citizen participation, while also exploring the role of regional organizations, cooperative mechanisms, and policy frameworks in strengthening both peace and democracy across the sub-region. It will also, evaluate the regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa, the interplay between regional security dynamics and democratic consolidation in West Africa with particular attention to recent military interventions within the sub-region. It also, interrogates how evolving security threats, regional responses (by ECOWAS), and government practices shape democratic sustainability, and assesses the effectiveness of regional mechanisms in promoting both democratic stability and resilience in the sub-region.

Literature Review

The study of regional security has developed into a central analytical framework within international relations, particularly since the end of the Cold War. Early security scholarship largely privileged national and systemic levels of analysis, focusing on superpower rivalry and global strategic competition. However, as the bipolar order receded, scholars began to observe that most security challenges were clustered within geographically bounded spaces rather than spanning the international system. This shift in analytical emphasis led to the emergence of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), articulated principally by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver of the Copenhagen School (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) argues that states do not function as isolated security actors but form regional security

complexes configurations of states whose security perceptions and policy responses are strongly interlinked due to proximity, historical ties, and shared threat perceptions (Acharya, 2001). The theory also broadened the conceptual landscape of security by emphasizing that threats may arise across different sectors military, political, economic, environmental, and societal thus advancing the field beyond state-centric and militarized paradigms (Buzan, Wæver & De Wilde, 1998).

Peter Katzenstein further deepened this perspective by reframing regions not simply as geographic entities, but as socially constructed political spaces shaped by history, norms, and institutional practices. His analysis demonstrated that regional security outcomes vary because regional cultures, strategic traditions and shared identities mediate the way states understand threats and respond to crises. Katzenstein's contribution marked a major shift away from treating regions as passive containers toward viewing them as analytically autonomous communities of security practice (Katzenstein, 2005). The literature also expanded by interrogating the role of regional institutions in fostering stability and mitigating conflict. Hurrell (2007) also, examined how regionalism, particularly in the Global South, has emerged as a response to shared vulnerabilities rather than great-power design. Hurrell argued that regional organizations, even when weak, can help states manage interdependence, reduce transaction costs, and create frameworks for crisis resolution. Louise Fawcett's edited works reinforced this institutionalist turn, demonstrating that regional bodies from the Arab League to Mercosur shape security politics by articulating collective norms, even where formal enforcement capacity is limited (Fawcett, 2013).

A complementary set of contributions focused on regional conflict management and security governance. Nye (2000) emphasized the role of institutions and complex interdependence in preventing conflict escalation, particularly in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Job (1992) shaped thinking on "insecurity dilemmas" in the developing world, arguing that weak states common across Africa and Asia face internal threats that spill across borders, making regional security management more complicated and fragile. Similarly, Lemke (2002) applied power transition theory to regional scales, demonstrating that instability often emerges when rising regional powers challenge dominant neighbours a dynamic visible in places such as South Asia and the Horn of Africa (Lemke, 2002).

Classical scholarship on democracy is anchored in the minimalist or procedural tradition, most famously associated with Joseph Schumpeter. Schumpeter (1943) rejected romantic views of democratic rule as the expression of a unified "will of the people," arguing instead that democracy is best understood as a competitive struggle for political leadership. He defined democracy as an institutional mechanism whereby individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive electoral contest. This procedural approach reframes democracy not as a broad normative ideal but as a rule-bound method for selecting leaders. Dahl expanded this perspective by developing the notion of oligarchy, a real-world approximation of democratic practice characterized by high levels of contestation and participation. Dahl argued that no democracy fully realizes ideal conditions of inclusiveness, yet some political systems come closer by allowing robust competition and broad citizen engagement. Proceduralists therefore ground democracy in formal institutions elections, suffrage, party competition, and civil liberties and treat democratic quality as measurable along institutional dimensions rather than moral or cultural criteria (Dahl, 1971).

A second strand of literature conceptualizes democracy not merely as electoral machinery but as a system of active civic engagement and shared decision-making. Carole Pateman (1970) advanced the participatory democratic thesis, arguing that democratic legitimacy rests on the direct involvement of citizens in political decision processes, both within and beyond state institutions. Participation, for Pateman, is not simply an input mechanism but a transformative practice that cultivates civic virtues, political efficacy and social equality. Deliberative democracy theorists such as Jurgen Habermas (1996) further strengthened this tradition by asserting that

democracy requires communicative engagement in which citizens collectively deliberate to shape public norms and preferences. He emphasizes the public sphere as a normative space for rational discourse where justification and persuasion, rather than power or coercion, determine legitimate outcomes. This body of work therefore views democracy as a discursive and participatory project, rooted in inclusion, pluralism and communicative rationality, rather than being limited to institutional mechanics (Habermas, 1996).

A third influential tradition conceptualizes democracy as a substantive political order linked to social justice, rights protections and development outcomes. Amartya Sen (1999) argues that democracy must be understood not only as a system of elections but as a process of enhancing individual freedom, political capability, and public accountability. According to Sen, democratic institutions are valuable both instrumentally by preventing famine, corruption and authoritarian abuse and intrinsically, by enabling citizens to shape their own destinies. Complementing Sen, Diamond (1999) articulates a substantive definition of liberal democracy, contending that democratic rule requires more than electoral competition; it must include rule of law, protection of civil liberties, accountable governance, and a culture of pluralism. These perspectives challenge the sufficiency of minimal definitions by emphasizing that democracy's legitimacy lies in the substantive outcomes it yields expanded freedoms, social inclusion, and protection against the arbitrary exercise of power (Diamond, 1999).

One of the foundational strands in the literature explains democratic consolidation as the process by which democratic regimes become stable, institutionalized, and unlikely to collapse. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that democratic consolidation entails more than holding elections; it requires the normalization of democratic rules across arenas of political life, including civil society, political society, and rule of law, state bureaucracy, and economic institutions. They propose that democracy is consolidated when actors see democratic procedures as the only legitimate means of gaining power, rendering authoritarian alternatives unthinkable. This structural approach therefore emphasizes institutional depth, routinization of procedures, and elimination of veto players capable of reversing democratic gains. O'Donnell (1994) deepened this perspective through the idea of "horizontal accountability," contending that democracy cannot be consolidated without functioning oversight institutions capable of restraining executive power. From this view, consolidation is achieved when institutions become robust, predictable, and resistant to authoritarian backsliding (O'Donnell, 1994).

A second major approach conceptualizes consolidation through citizens and political actors rather than formal institutions. Diamond (1999) argues that consolidation occurs when democracy becomes "the only game in town," meaning that elites and citizens internalize democratic values deeply enough that attempts to subvert the constitutional order lose legitimacy. Diamond highlights three reinforcing dimensions: widespread commitment to democratic norms, willingness of elites to resolve conflicts peacefully, and strong civil society engagement. Gunther, et al (1995) similarly contend that democratic consolidation involves behavioural changes among political actors, particularly elites, who must abandon zero-sum logics and cultivate consensus-driven politics. This perspective thus locates consolidation within cultural and normative transformations democratic political culture, tolerant citizenship, and value internalization rather than state structures alone. Where institutionalization creates democratic rules, attitudinal consolidation ensures that those rules are accepted and reproduced by society.

A third body of scholarship views democratic consolidation as contingent on regime performance and socioeconomic outcomes. Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, and Limongi, (2000) argue that democracy survives when it manages economic crises and delivers acceptable outcomes to citizens; consolidated democracies demonstrate resilience by weathering political and economic shocks. From this perspective, consolidation is closely linked to economic development, welfare provision, and distributive justice. Samuel Huntington's "two-turnover test" (1991) similarly identifies performance criteria, suggesting that democracy is consolidated when it survives at least

two peaceful transfers of power through elections. More recent scholars in this tradition emphasize that democracies endure when they generate legitimacy, effectiveness and state capacity failure to deliver security, jobs or welfare can undermine consolidation and fuel democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Thus, consolidation is not solely a normative or institutional milestone but a performance-driven process that stabilizes democracy by meeting citizen expectations.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative desk analysis (documentary research) design to examine the nexus between regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa. Desk analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources of data, involving the systematic collection, review, and interpretation of documented evidence relevant to the themes under investigation. This methodological choice is appropriate for subjects situated within broad political and institutional contexts where credible and publicly available materials already exist, and where field-based primary data collection is constrained by geographical scope, cost, insecurity, or time. The analysis draws upon scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, think-tank publications, newspaper reports, and official documents from regional institutions such as ECOWAS, the African Union, and the United Nations. Key scholarly databases including JSTOR, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Google Scholar serve as primary sources of academic literature. In addition, reports from reputable global governance and security organisations including the International Crisis Group, the Institute for Security Studies, and the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), and regional civil society networks are included to enrich perspectives on emergent security challenges such as terrorism, violent extremism, trafficking, and unconstitutional changes of government. Data collection is guided by thematic relevance rather than exhaustive coverage. Material selection focuses on three central dimensions: (a) the evolution of security threats in West Africa, (b) institutional responses by regional organisations and national governments, and (c) democratic trajectories across the region, particularly regarding electoral integrity, civil–military relations, constitutionalism, and governance legitimacy. Documents are evaluated for credibility, methodological soundness, decency, and conceptual clarity, ensuring that only authoritative sources inform the argument.

Following data collection, the analysis employs qualitative content and thematic analysis. This involves identifying emerging concepts, dominant arguments, areas of scholarly consensus, and points of contention across the reviewed literature. The method enables the synthesis of disparate evidence to construct an integrated understanding of how security dynamics influence democratic processes and vice versa. Rather than testing hypotheses statistically, the study interprets patterns and linkages between security fragility, governance performance, and the institutional robustness of democracy in West Africa. The desk analysis approach is particularly suited to the current study because regional security and democratic consolidation are multi-scalar phenomena shaped by long-term political, social, and economic forces. Documentary sources provide longitudinal insights into past policy decisions, shifting institutional capacities, and evolving regional norms perspectives not easily captured through cross-sectional field surveys. The study recognises the limitations inherent in secondary data research, including potential bias in published sources and uneven data quality across West African states. To mitigate these weaknesses, the analysis triangulates information from academic research, policy reports, and official government documents to validate interpretations.

ECOWAS and Regional Security

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has evolved from a regional economic bloc into one of Africa's most assertive security actors. Established in 1975 to promote regional economic cooperation, ECOWAS gradually expanded its mandate in response to persistent conflicts, internal instability and weak governance structures across the sub-region

(Adebajo, 2002; Bah, 2010). The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone exposed the inadequacy of purely economic cooperation and compelled the organisation to assume a proactive role in regional peacekeeping (Francis, 2001). The creation of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) marked a turning point in African regional security governance. ECOMOG's interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau represented the first instance of an African sub-regional organisation deploying peacekeeping forces without United Nations authorisation, signalling a shift from non-intervention to collective security enforcement (Aning, 2014). These missions reinforced the emerging norm that domestic conflicts constitute regional threats and that sovereignty may be subordinated to collective peace and stability (Olonisakin, 2008).

Institutional development has since deepened ECOWAS' security architecture. The adoption of the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance provided the legal basis for peace enforcement, sanctions, conflict mediation and democratic oversight (Okeke, 2020). Through instruments such as the ECOWAS Standby Force, the Mediation and Security Council, and the Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), ECOWAS has institutionalised preventive diplomacy, conflict monitoring and multilateral security action (Bah & Aning, 2015). Contemporary threats have broadened the organisation's scope beyond post-conflict stabilisation. Violent extremism in the Sahel, maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, human trafficking, transnational organised crime and unconstitutional changes of government have placed new pressures on regional cooperation (International Crisis Group, 2021). These dynamics have driven ECOWAS to collaborate with the African Union, the United Nations and extra-regional partners, embedding West Africa in wider global security frameworks (Aning & Lartey, 2023). Despite its achievements, ECOWAS faces persistent structural limitations. Financial constraints, uneven political commitment among member states, domestic sovereignty sensitivities and institutional fragility constrain implementation capacity. Recent military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger demonstrate the fragility of democratic norms and underscore tensions between regional rules and national political realities (Dossou, 2023). Divergent interests and legitimacy crises have further delayed decisive enforcement in some cases (Adetula, 2022). Nevertheless, ECOWAS remains Africa's most proactive regional security body. Its interventions reflect an understanding that democracy and security are mutually reinforcing without political stability, economic integration is impossible, while authoritarian relapse and governance breakdown worsen insecurity (Francis, 2021). ECOWAS therefore continues to serve as a critical institutional mechanism for security cooperation, peace enforcement and democratic protection in West Africa, even as it struggles to respond to evolving geopolitical and governance challenges.

ECOWAS and Democratic Consolidation

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has become a central actor in promoting and safeguarding democracy within the West African sub-region. Originally established in 1975 to foster economic cooperation among member states, ECOWAS gradually expanded its mandate to include political governance, conflict prevention, and democratic consolidation, recognizing that political instability directly undermines economic and social development (Dossou, 2023). The organisation's evolution reflects the practical realities of a region historically affected by coups, electoral disputes, civil wars, and weak state institutions, which collectively threatened both domestic governance and regional stability (Diamond, 1999). One of the most significant milestones in ECOWAS' democratic agenda was the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which established clear norms for civilian rule, periodic elections, respect for constitutional order, and non-acceptance of power seizure through unconstitutional means (Okeke, 2020). This protocol institutionalised ECOWAS' commitment to democratic consolidation by providing both normative and operational

mechanisms to monitor elections, sanction violators, and mediate political crises. It operationalizes the principle that democratic governance is not merely a domestic concern but a regional public good, critical to the sub-region's security and development. ECOWAS has demonstrated its commitment to democratic consolidation through both preventive and corrective interventions. Preventively, the organisation deploys electoral observation missions, facilitates dialogue between governments and opposition parties, and encourages constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening checks and balances (Bah & Aning, 2015). Correctively, ECOWAS has applied sanctions, suspended member states, and in extreme cases authorised the deployment of regional forces to restore democratic order, as witnessed in The Gambia (2016) following President Yahya Jammeh's refusal to cede power (Aning & Lartey, 2023). These interventions reflect a recognition that democratic backsliding in one state can generate political instability across borders, threatening both governance and regional security.

The interaction between ECOWAS' security and democratic mandates highlights a critical linkage, democratic consolidation is contingent upon a stable and secure political environment, while regional security is reinforced by the institutionalisation of democratic norms. Unconstitutional power seizures, weak institutions, and contested elections exacerbate insecurity, including civil unrest and the proliferation of extremist groups, which in turn destabilize neighboring countries (Obi, 2009). Conversely, ECOWAS' mediation, preventive diplomacy, and norm-setting mechanisms create conditions conducive to the entrenchment of democratic institutions, political accountability, and civilian control of governance structures (Francis, 2021). Despite these achievements, ECOWAS faces persistent challenges in consolidating democracy across the region. Financial constraints, political resistance from powerful member states, and limited enforcement capacity undermine the organisation's ability to uniformly apply democratic norms (Souare, 2018). Recent military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger underscore the fragility of democratic consolidation and the limitations of ECOWAS' coercive or diplomatic influence (Adetula, 2022). Moreover, the tension between respecting national sovereignty and enforcing regional democratic standards continues to shape debates about the organisation's legitimacy and operational effectiveness. ECOWAS has established itself as a pivotal actor in West Africa's democratic consolidation process, employing a combination of normative frameworks, preventive diplomacy, election monitoring, and corrective interventions. Its efforts underscore the principle that democracy and regional security are mutually reinforcing durable democratic institutions reduce the risk of instability and conflict, while regional mechanisms for enforcing democratic norms bolster governance resilience across the sub-region (Bah, 2010).

Regional Security and Democratic Consolidation in West Africa the Nexus

The relationship between regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa is both intricate and mutually reinforcing. Security and democracy are often conceptualized as two sides of the same coin: the stability of political institutions facilitates democratic deepening, while the consolidation of democracy promotes predictability, rule of law, and peaceful conflict resolution, thereby enhancing regional security (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Equally, insecurity, weak governance, and unconstitutional changes of government undermine democratic consolidation, creating a cycle of fragility that extends beyond national borders (Dossou, 2023). In West Africa, this interdependence has been particularly evident due to recurrent political instability, coups, civil wars, and transnational threats such as terrorism and organized crime. ECOWAS has emerged as a central actor mediating this nexus. Its dual mandate of security management and democratic oversight reflects an understanding that political and security stability are inseparable. Through instruments such as the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), and institutions like ECOWARN and the Mediation and Security Council, the organisation operationalizes the principle that threats to democracy are inherently threats to regional security

(Bah & Aning, 2015). For example, ECOWAS' intervention in The Gambia in 2016 to ensure the transfer of power from Yahya Jammeh underscored that defending democratic norms directly contributes to stabilizing the sub-region, preventing political crises from spilling across borders (Aning & Lartey, 2023). Theoretical perspectives on the nexus emphasize that democratic consolidation cannot occur in a vacuum. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that democracy is consolidated when it becomes the "only game in town," a condition that presupposes institutional stability, civilian control of the military, and resilient legal frameworks all of which require a secure environment. Security challenges, whether from insurgencies in the Sahel, maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea, or internal unrest, weaken institutional capacities, hinder electoral processes, and erode citizen trust in governance, thereby obstructing democratic consolidation (Obi, 2009). At the same time, unsteady democratic systems exacerbate insecurity: coups, contested elections, and governance vacuums create opportunities for armed groups, smuggling networks, and political violence to flourish, highlighting the cyclical interdependence between security and democracy (Francis, 2021).

Empirical evidence from West Africa demonstrates that effective regional governance mechanisms can mitigate this vicious cycle. ECOWAS' proactive peacekeeping in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s, its election monitoring missions in Ghana, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, and its enforcement of sanctions against unconstitutional regimes collectively illustrate the organisation's role in reinforcing both security and democratic norms (Bah, 2010). These interventions show that the consolidation of democracy requires more than national commitment; it demands supportive regional frameworks capable of both normative guidance and, where necessary, coercive enforcement. Nonetheless, challenges persist. Political will among member states remains uneven, enforcement mechanisms are constrained by financial and operational limitations, and recurrent military coups highlight the fragility of democratic consolidation (Adetula, 2022). Furthermore, transnational threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and cross-border insurgency intensify the security-democracy dilemma, requiring integrated approaches that combine military, governance, and developmental strategies (Aning & Lartey, 2023). Despite these limitations, the West African experience illustrates a critical principle: sustainable democratic consolidation and regional security are mutually dependent, with progress in one domain reinforcing the other. The nexus between regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa is both theoretical and practical. It reflects an interdependent relationship in which democratic institutions provide legitimacy, conflict resolution mechanisms, and rule-based governance, thereby reducing insecurity, while effective regional security governance stabilizes the environment necessary for democratic deepening. ECOWAS stands at the center of this interplay, acting as both a norm setter and an operational enforcer, highlighting the essential role of regional institutions in sustaining democratic governance and peace in West Africa (Dossou, 2023).

Pillars of Regional Security in West Africa

Regional security in West Africa is shaped by a complex set of interconnected drivers/pillars that collectively influence the region's stability. A primary force shaping the security environment is the persistence of transnational threats such as terrorism, human trafficking, and organised crime among others. The Sahel/Lake Chad corridor has become a hub for violent extremist movements including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Al-Qaeda linked groups. These organisations exploit weak state authority and societal frustrations, while their operations spill across national boundaries, making security a regional rather than national challenge. Their activities intersect with criminal economies built around narcotics movement, human trafficking, arms circulation, and illicit financial flows, further eroding state legitimacy and resilience (Okeke, 2020). Another significant driver is the fragility of governance structures across the sub-region. Many post-colonial states still grapple with inadequate political institutions, corruption, and

limited administrative capacity. Weak security sectors, under-resourced policing structures, and inconsistent rule of law create openings for armed groups and illegal networks. This governance fragility is aggravated by the reality of porous borders, most of which were created without consideration for ethnic and socio-cultural continuities. These borders are difficult to control, enabling the movement of fighters, weapons, and contraband with minimal resistance. Socio-economic pressures contribute substantially to the region's security dynamics. Widespread poverty, unemployment especially among young people and unequal access to state services create grievances that extremist groups leverage for recruitment (Diamond, 1999).

Similarly, political instability remains a recurring concern, with unconstitutional changes of government and contested electoral processes generating insecurity and sometimes eroding confidence in democratic transitions. Coup-induced policy inconsistencies also disrupt regional cooperation and invite diplomatic tensions within ECOWAS (Souare, 2018).

Environmental stress further heightens the already fragile security conditions. Climate change, manifesting through desertification, erratic rainfall, and diminishing agricultural productivity, fuels competition over land and water resources. This is visible in escalating farmer–herder conflicts in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Nigeria. As livelihoods deteriorate, communities are more prone to conflict, displacement, and survival strategies that link them to criminal networks. However, West Africa's security landscape is influenced by external geopolitical interests. Foreign military intervention, shifting alliances, and competition among global powers for natural resources including gas, gold, and uranium shape domestic and regional policy choices. These external engagements can either reinforce security reforms or deepen divisions, depending on alignment with local priorities. Taken together, these forces demonstrate that regional security in West Africa is not driven by a single factor but by structural governance weaknesses, socio-economic distress, environmental pressures, and cross-border threats interacting across national spaces (Adebajo, 2002).

Pillars of Democratic Consolidations in West Africa

Democratic consolidation in West Africa is driven by a combination of institutional, socio-political, and normative forces that strengthen the durability and legitimacy of democratic governance. A central driver is the quality of state institutions, particularly constitutional design, judicial independence, and the competence of electoral bodies. Scholars argue that democracies consolidate when institutions restrain executive power, safeguard civil liberties, and ensure accountability (Lindberg, 2006). In contexts where constitutional rules are respected and electoral commissions conduct credible elections, democratic norms become embedded; however, weak institutions and personalist leadership patterns often obstruct consolidation (Adebaniwi & Obadare, 2010). The behavior and organisation of political elites and parties constitute another decisive influence. Programmatic and internally democratic parties sustain meaningful competition and policy continuity, while factional, ethnic, or patronage-based parties undermine stability (Basedau & Erdmann, 2007). Elite acceptance of democratic rules especially peaceful transitions and respect for term limits helps entrench constitutionalism (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Cases such as Ghana and Cape Verde illustrate how elite consensus can entrench political norms, whereas the manipulation of institutions by incumbents in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates the reverse pattern (Bleck & van de Walle, 2019). Civil society and the media play a critical watchdog and mobilisation role in this trajectory. Robust civic organisations, labour movements, women's groups, and free media expand participation, demand accountability, and help institutionalise democratic values at the societal level. Through advocacy, monitoring, and civic education, these actors restrain executive excess and sustain pressure for reform, provided that civic space remains open. Socio-economic development also shapes democratic consolidation outcomes. Although democracy can emerge under poverty, sustained democratic survival correlates with improvements in living standards, reduced inequality, and economic inclusiveness

(Gyimah-Boadi, 2007). Economic stagnation, unemployment, and widespread poverty weaken democratic legitimacy and heighten support for authoritarian alternatives, while development strengthens state capacity and public trust (Nwokora & Pelizzo, 2022).

Electoral credibility remains particularly vital in the West African context. Regular, free, and competitive elections deepen democratic legitimacy and reinforce citizen commitment to constitutional procedures (Lindberg, 2009). When elections are perceived as transparent, citizens accept outcomes and democratic norms gain resilience; however, manipulated or violent contests as seen in some Nigerian and Ivorian elections have fuelled crises and reversed gains (Omeje & Adebani, 2019). External and regional influences have significantly shaped democratic pathways. International democracy promotion efforts, election observation, and development cooperation reinforce local initiatives, while ECOWAS and the African Union have emerged as norm entrepreneurs imposing sanctions, mediating crises, and opposing unconstitutional changes of government. Such regional pressures have helped deter coups in some cases, even though recent military takeovers demonstrate the limits of normative enforcement. Democratic consolidation in West Africa is sustained where institutional strength, elite commitment, civic engagement, socio-economic progress, and regional norms align and reinforce one another. Although progress remains uneven and reversals continue, these drivers provide the essential foundations upon which democratic durability rests in the sub-region (Ekiyor, 2021).

Challenges of Regional Security and Democratic Consolidation in West Africa

Regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa face multiple, overlapping challenges rooted in historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, and evolving geopolitical dynamics. One of the most persistent constraints is the fragility of state institutions, which frequently lack the capacity and professionalism to enforce the rule of law or manage internal conflicts effectively. Scholars argue that weak governance, corruption, and prebendal political cultures undermine accountability and erode democratic norms across the region (Adebani & Obadare, 2010). These institutional deficiencies weaken public trust in government and obstruct the consolidation of democracy while simultaneously limiting the effectiveness of national security systems (Diamond, 1999). Closely tied to institutional fragility is the prevalence of political instability and irregular leadership transitions. Although multiparty elections have become more common since the 1990s, frequent electoral disputes, constitutional manipulations, and recent military coups highlight the fragility of democratic gains. Elite behaviour often driven by personal power retention rather than national service continues to undermine elections and weaken democratic legitimacy (Basedau & Erdmann, 2007). Practices such as third-term amendments in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea exemplify how constitutional norms are contested and how democratic consolidation can be reversed (Lynch & Crawford, 2020).

Security threats themselves impose profound obstacles to democratic development. The rise and persistence of violent extremist groups including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and JNIM have destabilised large parts of the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, overwhelming state institutions and restricting civic and political participation (Onapajo, 2017). These insurgencies are sustained by socioeconomic marginalisation and governance failures that provide fertile support bases (Thurston, 2017). In addition to terrorism, transnational organised crime including illicit arms flows, drug trafficking, and artisanal resource extraction fuels violence and finances armed networks, further weakening states already stretched thin (Aning, 2010).

Socio-economic deprivation remains a central challenge to both security and democracy. Studies consistently demonstrate that poverty, youth unemployment, and inequality undermine citizens' faith in democratic systems and create conditions conducive to unrest or anti-system politics (Nwokora & Pelizzo, 2022). Where states fail to provide economic opportunities or public services, democratic legitimacy deteriorates, leaving space for illiberal actors including juntas, populists, and insurgent movements to capitalise on frustration. Environmental pressures resulting

from climate change intensify these vulnerabilities by exacerbating resource competition and generating displacement, particularly through recurring farmer–herder clashes. Ethno-religious and identity tensions further complicate stability. West Africa’s diversity often becomes politicized during electoral competition, resulting in exclusion, polarization, and sometimes violence (Mustapha, 2006). Political entrepreneurs frequently mobilize ethnic or religious identities to win power, reinforcing cleavages that weaken national cohesion and impede democratic governance (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019). Regional responses to insecurity and democratic setbacks have also encountered significant limitations. ECOWAS has historically been proactive in peacekeeping and defending constitutional order, yet it increasingly struggles with resource constraints, inconsistent enforcement, and divergent political interests among member states. The recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea have exposed a crisis of legitimacy in regional governance norms, while the withdrawal of Western forces and the rise of alternative actors such as Russia and the Wagner Group have generated fragmented security environments (Charbonneau, 2021). Weak institutions and governance deficits create openings for terrorism and conflict, while insecurity erodes democratic legitimacy and stalls reform. As long as these structural vulnerabilities persist, regional security and democratic consolidation are likely to remain elusive goals (Lindberg, 2006).

Results and Discussions

The findings of this paper reveal that West Africa’s regional security and democratic consolidation trajectories are deeply interconnected, and neither can be understood in isolation from the other. The first major discussion point concerns the centrality of state capacity and institutional strength. Weak institutions have been shown to undermine both security governance and democratic practice. When state agencies are unable to enforce the rule of law, regulate borders, or manage political competition, they leave vacuums that are exploited by armed groups, criminal networks, and illiberal political actors. Thus, institutional reform and professionalisation emerge not simply as technical necessities, but as foundational requirements for both stability and democratic deepening. A second important theme is the persistent fragility of democratic processes, especially in relation to electoral politics and leadership transitions. The evidence suggests that elections have become regularised, but not necessarily legitimate or transformative. Manipulated electoral systems, executive overreach, constitutional tampering, and the resurgence of coups illustrate how democracy remains shallow, often failing to achieve broad-based legitimacy. This raises debates around whether the region’s challenge is one of transition or consolidation, and whether the prevailing political culture supports democratic norms or merely imitates them. Third, the findings highlight how insecurity is both a product and driver of democratic weakness. Violent extremism, insurgency, and transnational crime flourish in states where governance is poor and public trust is low. Conversely, persistent insecurity erodes public confidence in democratic regimes, legitimises militarised responses, diverts resources from development, and creates conditions where authoritarian narratives gain traction.

This circular dynamic supports the argument that without enhanced security provision, democracy cannot consolidate, and without democratic accountability, security interventions risk becoming predatory or ineffective. Another discussion point concerns the role of socio-economic conditions in shaping political stability. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and inequality weaken the social foundations of democracy. Citizens who feel excluded from economic opportunities become more vulnerable to recruitment by insurgent groups or more supportive of anti-democratic actors promising order, security, or populist alternatives. This reinforces the long-standing development-democracy debate and suggests that economic justice and inclusive growth are critical not peripheral to democratic survival. Ethno-religious diversity emerges as another major discussion strand. The findings demonstrate that identity cleavages while not inherently conflictual are easily weaponised in contexts of weak cohesion and elite manipulation. Where

political parties and power struggles mobilise identity lines, both democracy and security become unstable. Consequently, nation-building, inclusive citizenship, and depoliticization of ethnicity are crucial for reducing conflict triggers. ECOWAS and external actors have played high-profile roles in peacekeeping and sanctioning unconstitutional acts, but their effectiveness is diminishing amid geopolitical realignments and nationalist resistance. The withdrawal of traditional security partners (such as France) and the entrance of new players (notably Russia) complicate regional coherence, suggesting that **the security architecture itself is undergoing an uncertain transformation**. This discussion opens debates about agency, sovereignty, and the future of collective security norms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of regional security and democratic consolidation in West Africa demonstrates that the two are mutually reinforcing processes whose outcomes are shaped by deep structural, institutional and societal dynamics. The persistence of weak governance systems, fragile state institutions and politicised elite behaviour undermines both democratic legitimacy and national capacities to manage complex security threats. Insecurity in the form of violent extremism, insurgency, transnational organised crime and communal conflicts creates environments of fear and instability that weaken citizen trust in democratic governance and embolden military and authoritarian actors. At the same time, the uneven delivery of public goods, limited economic opportunities and entrenched inequality further erode confidence in democratic systems and fuel social grievances that often spill into violence. Despite these challenges, the region is not without positive trajectories. Moments of peaceful political transition, the resilience of civil society, incremental electoral reforms and evolving regional norms continue to signal democratic potential. However, the interplay between insecurity, governance deficits and socio-economic hardship reveals that democratic consolidation cannot be sustained without addressing foundational issues of state capacity and citizen welfare. Ultimately, the prospects for stability and democratic deepening in West Africa depend on whether states can institutionalise accountable governance, provide security equitably and cultivate societal inclusion in ways that dampen conflict triggers and reinforce public confidence. A number of recommendations emerge from the findings that may strengthen both regional security responses and democratic consolidation.

- a. There is a need for deliberate investment in state institution building, including judicial strengthening, professionalisation of public administration, and enhanced autonomy and credibility of electoral management bodies. Without robust institutions, democratic norms remain vulnerable to manipulation and security responses lack legitimacy.
- b. Political reforms must prioritise accountability and the rule of law. This involves enforcing constitutional term limits, curbing executive overreach and reforming political party systems in ways that reduce patronage and ethnic mobilisation. Elite commitment to democratic norms remains crucial to sustaining legitimacy and preventing reversals.
- c. Regional governments must strengthen integrated security approaches that combine military responses with developmental and governance strategies. Countering terrorism and organised crime cannot rely solely on force; it requires addressing underlying grievances, expanding access to justice, and restoring state presence in marginalised areas. Regional collaboration through ECOWAS, intelligence sharing and joint border operations should also be revitalised, but anchored in shared political will and adequate resourcing.
- d. Socio-economic development should be treated as a central pillar of political stability. Expanding employment opportunities, particularly for youth, reducing income inequalities and improving access to education and social services are essential to weakening the appeal of extremist and anti-democratic narratives.
- e. Governments must widen civic space by protecting freedom of speech, association and media independence. Civil society organisations, traditional leaders and community

groups are vital partners in conflict prevention, accountability oversight and civic education roles that cannot be substituted by formal institutions alone.

- f. External partners and regional bodies should recalibrate their engagement to reflect local ownership, sustainability and democratic norms. ECOWAS should improve consistency in enforcing anti-coup protocols and mediating crises, while international actors must support capacity development rather than impose prescriptive models.

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