



Regional Report
West and Central Africa
Autocracies on the Rise

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Regional Report

West and Central Africa

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by Charlotte Heyl*

Overview of the transformation processes in Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo



This regional report analyzes the results of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index BTI 2022 in the review period from February 1, 2019, to January 31, 2021. Further information can be found at www.bti-project.org.

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Introduction

In this year's edition of the Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI), the region of West and Central Africa has recorded setbacks in all three of the survey's analytic dimensions. This trend is most pronounced in the area of political transformation as four of the region's countries are now classified as autocracies. These autocratic tendencies are also reflected in the diminished quality of governance, especially in Guinea and Mali. At the same time, economic transformation has suffered only somewhat, a development largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has hit countries whose economies rely heavily on oil exports especially hard.

West and Central Africa is a heterogeneous region in which a variety of political and economic development trajectories can be observed. In recent decades, the subregion of Central Africa has been shaped by protracted violent conflicts, oil-exporting economies and authoritarian rule. In the 1990s, for example, the Democratic Republic of Congo became the stage for various conflicts in which neighboring countries, including Rwanda and Uganda, have become deeply embroiled. Despite the various peace agreements reached in the 2000s as well as the 2006 constitutional reform and elections, armed conflicts continue to simmer in the east of the country. Civil war has flared up periodically in the Central African Republic since the early 2000s, and the conflict escalated again in late 2020.

The economies of Central Africa are heavily dependent on the export of natural resources, particularly oil. Revenues from exports make it easier for those in power in the region to consolidate their authoritarian rule. Indeed, the wave of democratization of the early 1990s had little impact on Central African states. Several of the longest-serving presidents on the African continent live in Central Africa: Teodoro Obiang has ruled Equatorial Guinea for 43 years, and Paul Biya has been in power in Cameroon for 39 years. As such, the April 2021 death of Idriss Déby, the president of Chad, is almost of symbolic importance for the region. After 30 years in power, Déby died unexpectedly at the age of 68 during a visit with the troops. The prompt subsequent installation of Déby's son Mahamat as interim president was an act in blatant disregard for the constitution's provisions related to succession.

In terms of democratization and economic development, developments in West Africa are more heterogeneous and feature a greater number of bright spots. The wave of democratization in the early 1990s had a much more lasting effect here. Ghana and Senegal, for example, have now become relatively stable democracies. Sierra Leone and Liberia, which suffered from civil wars in the 1990s, have also become democracies in recent years despite challenges like the Ebola crisis. For years, Benin has stood as an example of democracy taking root despite having to face adverse conditions of low socioeconomic development and a legacy of political instability. In recent years, however, contentious reforms have threatened these achievements.

One of the greatest challenges faced by the region in the past decade has been the spread of Islamist terrorist groups and the massive deterioration of the security situation in the Sahel region. Following the collapse of the Gadhafi regime in Libya in 2011 and the military coup in Mali in 2012, these groups have been able to spread across the Sahel and forge alliances with local groups. Interventions, including those of the United Nations, the French and the G5 Sahel troops have thus far failed to deliver any lasting relief for the security situation. Tensions and conflicts in Mali have taken a drastic turn for the worse since 2017 and have spilled over into neighboring countries Burkina Faso and Niger.

However, in terms of responding to the coronavirus health crisis, West and Central Africa weathered the first year of the pandemic better than initially presumed. At the beginning of the pandemic, many predicted it would have devastating consequences across the continent, fueling the flare-up of new conflicts

and major famines. It was estimated that Burkino Faso would have a mere 11 respirators available for a population of 20 million people. Such estimates raised fears that health care systems would be pushed to the brink. In late February 2020, Nigeria recorded the first COVID-19 case in the region, and infections in other countries followed. However, as of March 2021, only 412,178 people had been infected with COVID-19, and 5,363 people had died from it, according to official data. Still, these figures need to be viewed cautiously given that testing strategies vary across the region and deaths are recorded incompletely.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that both infection and mortality rates in the region are lower than expected. This is attributed, among other factors, to the much lower average age of the population and a lower prevalence of risk factors such as cardiovascular disease and obesity. Furthermore, the region had a head start in its experience in dealing with epidemics. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, 28,625 people contracted the disease, and there were 11,325 deaths. Since 2018, the Democratic Republic of Congo has also seen repeated outbreaks of Ebola. This experience has led most countries in the region to quickly adopt preventative measures such as the suspension of international air travel, restrictions on public gatherings or school closures. The Ebola epidemic also led to the establishment of institutional structures at the level of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union to facilitate coordination during the pandemic. The health ministers of all 15 ECOWAS nations met as early as mid-February 2020 to discuss a joint approach and activate potential funding sources for the measures.

However, the economic consequences of the pandemic can still be felt in West and Central Africa. Global effects like the drop in oil prices and the decline in tourism have had a negative impact on economic growth in the region. Unemployment in the Global North has resulted in declining remittance payments from migrants living there. Most of the population in West and Central Africa works in the informal sector and has little to cushion it from the economic impacts of COVID-19 prevention measures.

Political transformation

A clear trend toward autocratic rule can be observed in West and Central Africa. Four West African countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali and Nigeria – became moderate autocracies during the review period. This means that most of the region's countries (13 out of 22) are now autocracies. The overall average quality of democracy in the region has not been this low since that recorded in the 2010 BTI. More worryingly, democracy in one of the region's most democratic countries, Benin, is eroding as the quality of elections, in particular, has deteriorated.

Tab. 1: State of political transformation

consolidating democracies Score 10 to 8	defective democracies Score < 8 to 6	highly defective democracies Score < 6	moderate autocracies Score ≥ 4	hard-line autocracies Score < 4
Ghana ▲	Gambia	Niger ▼	Togo	Congo, DR ●
	Benin	Burkina Faso ▼	Guinea ▼	Cameroon
	Senegal	Guinea-Bissau ▼	Côte d'Ivoire ▼	Central African Republic ●
	Liberia		Gabon	Congo, Rep.
	Sierra Leone		Mauritania	Chad
			Mali ▼	Equatorial Guinea
			Nigeria ▼	

The table follows the BTI 2022 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their system categorization and respective score in political transformation status assessment. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2020, dots mark failing states.

Autocratization in West and Central Africa is evident both in the classic guise of military coups and in the slower process of dwindling respect for democratic institutions and rights. Mali has once again fallen into the grips of autocracy following a military coup in August 2020 that was preceded by months of protests. Initially directed at inconsistencies in the results of parliamentary elections, over the course of several months, the protests escalated into demands for the resignation of then-President Ibrahim Bou-bacar Keïta. In addition to corruption and nepotism, he was accused above all of failing to provide a solution to the worsening security crisis. Under pressure from ECOWAS, the putschists ceded power to a transitional government tasked with organizing new elections. However, a second coup in May 2021 removed the transitional government from power.

Contested elections and circumventions of presidential term limits have driven autocratization trends in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Nigeria. The parliamentary elections in 2019 in Benin and the general election that year in Nigeria were both highly contested for different reasons. In Benin, President Patrice Talon initiated a reform of the election code that set high fees for registration in the election and steep hurdles for parties and party alliances to enter parliament. This involved requiring parties to win at least 10% of the vote to obtain seats in parliament. The new rules created major challenges for Benin's fragmented party landscape, and opposition parties ultimately boycotted the parliamentary elections in protest. That step resulted in a "monochromatic" parliament that supported President Talon without opposition. Ahead of the April 2021 presidential election, several promising opposition candidates were disqualified from the ballot and Talon won his second term with 86% of the vote, despite his original promise to govern for only one term.

In Nigeria, events in the run-up to the elections also fueled citizens' mistrust in the electoral process. President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the removal of the country's chief justice just a few weeks before the election. The move was problematic because the Supreme Court rules on election challenges. In addition, elections were postponed unexpectedly by a week just hours before the planned election day. The opposition viewed the move as a blatant attempt to manipulate the elections and also criticized the strong presence of security officers on election day, which they believe contributed to voter intimidation. Buhari won the election in the end, but challenger Atiku Abubakar refused to recognize the outcome.

The October 2020 presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea were also highly contested. This time, another democratic rule was at the center of that controversy: presidential term limits. In theory, limiting the number of terms allowed in a presidency is intended as a way of promoting political competition. Incumbents have an advantage in the fact that they are still in office, and changes in power become more likely when they do not stand for re-election. The intention is also to prevent the personalization of power, since more frequent changes in the presidency prevent personal power networks from growing and deepening unchecked.

Most countries in West and Central Africa moved to limit the number of presidential terms to two in their constitutions in the 1990s. Since then, the suspense tends to mount when presidents get close to the end of their second terms. There are, however, some positive examples in the region where term limits are being respected – in Liberia, Mali, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, for example. This has already happened several times in Benin and Ghana. But there are also many countries in which term limits have been abolished again or circumvented, as seen in Burkina Faso, Chad and Gabon. At the same time, most countries have reintroduced term limits over time, with only three countries in the region – Cameroon, Gabon and Gambia – not limiting their presidents' terms as of 2021. Most recently, Togo reintroduced term limits in 2019 after months of protests by the opposition and civil society. For now, this will be of no consequence to incumbent President Faure Gnassingbé, who has ruled the country since 2005 and can, thanks to a transition clause, still govern for two more terms.

Alassane Ouattara and Alpha Condé, the respective incumbents in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, ran for third terms in 2020. Condé had been preparing to take that step for some time, but it looked like Ouattara

would be stepping down. However, three months before the election, the designated presidential candidate of Ouattara's party, Amadou Gon Coulibaly, died unexpectedly, and Ouattara then announced he would run in the election after all. Term limits weren't officially eliminated in either country, but the presidents, with the backing of the courts, argued that they had not yet exhausted their maximum number of terms because of prior constitutional amendments.

The opposition and civil society reacted to the decisions by Ouattara and Condé to run for third terms with vocal protests. In Côte d'Ivoire, the government attempted to largely ban the protests, citing restrictions on freedom of assembly under COVID-19 rules. In Guinea, the protests had already begun in October 2019, and the security forces in the country often responded with violence. Between October 2019 and March 2020, security forces killed at least 36 protesters.

During the review period, two countries observed presidential term limits for the first time: Mauritania and Niger. In Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou refrained from running for a third term in December 2020, and his designated successor, Mohamed Bazoum, won the election during the second round of voting in February 2021. Issoufou was then awarded the Ibrahim Prize for excellence in African leadership. The honor is rarely ever awarded precisely because demonstrating respect for term limits is an essential condition that is all too infrequently met. In Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz had already ceded the field to his successor Mohamed Ould Ghazouani during the 2019 election. For a moderate autocracy like Mauritania, this is a remarkable development considering how, in the past, the country's highest office was always obtained through coups and not elections. However, Ghazouani has maintained a tradition in Mauritania that grants high-ranking military officers control over the presidency. Both Mauritania and Niger got new presidents after the previous presidents had served two terms in office, but the respective ruling parties still remained in power. A scenario could develop that is similar to that of Mozambique or Tanzania, where the president always changes after two terms, but the same party remains firmly anchored in power. In Mauritania, President Ghazouani has since successfully emancipated himself from his successor. The governing party has set up an investigative commission that has revealed Aziz's deep entanglement in corruption scandals involving fishing and land deals. Aziz was arrested and a separate court was set up to conduct the trial against him. It is therefore questionable whether Ghazouani would expose himself to a similar threat in the future by stepping down after two terms as stipulated by the constitution.

Events in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea have already shown that the waning commitment to democratic institutions has been accompanied by a deterioration of political rights in the region. This is particularly visible in the areas of freedom of association and assembly, freedom of the press and freedom of expression and civil rights. Temporary restrictions on the freedom of assembly have also been imposed in West and Central Africa to prevent COVID-19 infections. However, the drop in BTI scores in the area is largely due to developments that had already taken root before the pandemic. In Chad, for example, a trend toward the systematic prevention of opposition gatherings has been observed for some time. In Mali, protests against the government took place between April and August 2020 despite the pandemic, and the security forces conducted severe crackdowns. In July 2020, they fired on protesters, killing 14 and injuring around 100 others. At the same time, the pandemic served as a pretext for the governments in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea to limit protests over the third terms.

The range of freedom of the press and freedom of expression is very wide in West and Central Africa. It spans from a largely independent media landscape in Ghana, where opinions can be freely expressed, to severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Chad. Reporters there have been arrested frequently, the country passed a law in July 2020 with stipulations for hiring journalists, and the internet was shut down more frequently in 2020. Further deteriorations of the freedom of press and freedom of expression are partly due to developments that began before COVID-19. But the pandemic has also led to an intensification of these developments. In Niger, for example, restrictions on freedom of expression had been increasing for some time under former President Issoufou; and in Guinea-Bissau, attacks on

journalists have increased since President Sissoco Embaló took power in February 2020. In Burkina Faso, a 2019 law that criminalized the act of demoralizing state security authorities also restricted freedom of expression. Still, the impact of the pandemic is also visible. For instance, individuals and organizations critical of the government have been under pressure more frequently in Nigeria since the beginning of 2019. Repressive measures of that nature have continued to mount since the start of the pandemic. At the same time, it has been difficult for independent media to obtain reliable information on the course of the pandemic in Nigeria. In Guinea, repression against free media also intensified during the protests against Condé's third term in office, and the internet was shut down during the presidential election in October 2020. The pandemic was also used as a pretext to place several journalists under house arrest in March 2020, just before the constitutional referendum.

Economic transformation

The state of economic transformation in West and Central Africa is still the lowest relative to the other six BTI regions. According to BTI data, the level of development of economic transformation is very limited or rudimentary in 17 of the region's 22 countries. Economically, the region has been hard hit by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been little mitigation of the social consequences for the populace.

Tab. 2: State of economic transformation

highly advanced Score 10 to 8	advanced Score < 8 to 7	limited Score < 7 to 5	very limited Score < 5 to 3	rudimentary Score < 3
		Ghana	Gambia	Central African Republic ▼
		Benin	Togo	Congo, DR
		Senegal	Cameroon	
		Côte d'Ivoire	Burkina Faso	
		Gabon	Guinea	
			Mali	
			Guinea-Bissau	
			Mauritania	
			Sierra Leone	
			Liberia	
			Niger	
			Nigeria	
			Congo, Rep.	
			Equatorial Guinea	
			Chad	

The table follows the BTI 2022 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in economic transformation status assessment. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2020.

Countries in West and Central Africa face high socioeconomic hurdles. In 2019, countries in West and Central Africa accounted for six of the lowest 10 rankings on the United Nations Human Development Index. Chad, the Central African Republic and Niger featured at the bottom of the list. In Sierra Leone, also one of the 10 lowest-ranked countries, three-quarters of the population lived below the poverty line of \$3.20 in 2018. In Gabon, one of the countries with the highest levels of socioeconomic development in the region, that figure was 11% in 2017. In surveys, however, around half of the Gabonese population describes itself as being poor, an indicator of a high level of dissatisfaction with living conditions. What the countries in the region have in common is that poverty is more common in rural areas, where a large share of the population works in agriculture.

After years of economic growth, the economic performance of countries in West and Central Africa plummeted in 2020. This is due in particular to the various effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. But not all countries in the region have been affected equally. Although all the countries took early action to contain COVID-19, such as closing borders and implementing curfews, this did not translate into a slide into recession for all countries. Whereas the region as a whole experienced economic decline in 2020, only 10 countries actually saw their economies shrink, according to World Bank figures, and again to varying degrees. GDP stagnated in two countries (the Central African Republic and Gambia). The extent to which the economy got hit depended primarily on two factors: the structure of the national economy and economic development in the preceding years.

Economic output in oil-exporting countries fell particularly sharply in 2020 due to low oil prices on the global market in the wake of the pandemic. In the Republic of Congo, for example, gross domestic product contracted by -7.9% and in Equatorial Guinea by -4.9%. However, Equatorial Guinea's economy, with its strong focus on oil exports, had been suffering from the trend toward lower oil prices for some time. In 2020, the country's economy contracted for the eighth consecutive year. During the 2000s, oil exports still accounted for around 80% of GDP. That share has since dropped to 40%.

More diversified economies also suffered the consequences of the pandemic, but the impact was less severe, as evidenced in Ghana. The export of raw materials is an important pillar of the Ghanaian economy, and oil is now Ghana's second most important export commodity. Ghana's other two top exports, cocoa beans and gold, did not see a drop in global market prices in 2020. Ghana's economic growth slowed from 6.5% in 2019 to 0.4% in 2020, but it didn't stall. The situation is similar in Côte d'Ivoire, whose economy has grown by an average of 8% annually since 2012, making it one of the most stable economies in the region. The country's growth fell to 1.8% in 2020, but the overall economic situation remained positive.

The region's rudimentary social safety nets provide little room for cushioning the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a rule, only people working in formal employment have access to health and pension insurance. Workers in the public sector have the best coverage comparably, but the majority of the population works in the informal sector. The exact size of that informal sector can only be estimated, and current estimates are not available for all the countries in the region. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that over 85% of sub-Saharan Africa's workforce is informally employed. For Senegal, the ILO estimates that 95% of Senegalese businesses are in the informal sector. It estimates a figure of 65% for Nigeria. For other countries in the region, it estimates that between 75 and 90% of the working population is employed in the informal sector. Some countries have started to open their social insurance systems to workers in the informal sector. In Cameroon, these workers have been allowed to pay voluntary contributions to the government social insurance fund since 2014. Senegal introduced universal health insurance with voluntary contributions in 2013, but there has been little uptake so far. For the vast majority of people in the region, family, neighborhood and religious networks as well as services provided by internationally financed non-governmental organizations continue to be of great importance when it comes to providing social protection.

The gaps in the existing social insurance systems are indicative of the limited capacity they have for cushioning the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. A greater number of COVID-19-targeted measures have been introduced in the more advanced economies in the region with stronger social safety nets. The government of Côte d'Ivoire, for example, launched a COVID-19 solidarity fund that provided direct financial transfers to 113,000 vulnerable people up until August 2020. Senegal established a similar fund, as did the economically weaker Democratic Republic of Congo, which specifically solicited funds from its citizens living abroad and international donors. Gambia and Guinea engaged in a direct partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations' World Food Programme (UNWFP), respectively, to provide food to highly vulnerable households. Several countries waived or deferred water and electricity bills for their citizens in March and April 2020. But

in some cases, the promises were greater than the aid measures actually implemented. In Gabon, President Ali Bongo pledged that the government would cover the costs of water, electricity and transport and that it would also distribute food to the poorest. The implementation of these measures, however, was only partly effective. Poorer countries like Niger had fewer options available to help cushion the blow of the measures taken to stop the spread of COVID-19. Current poverty data are not yet available, but it is highly likely that the pandemic has contributed to rising socioeconomic barriers in West and Central Africa.

The West and Central Africa region faces major environmental problems. Although African countries have hardly played any role in anthropogenic global warming, its consequences have been felt in the region for years. For example, in many countries in West and Central Africa, rainfall has increased in recent years, leading to repeated flooding. The International Organization for Migration estimates that 28,000 people lost their homes in the Central African Republic in November 2019; and Burkina Faso's national emergency response agency reported that floods and storms affected 106,228 people in 2020. The West African coastlines are also threatened by the effects of erosion. A World Bank report found that 56% of the coasts in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Togo are eroding by an average of 1.8 meters each year. The threats created by climate change are further exacerbated by environmental pressures caused by the depletion of natural resources. In Guinea, for example, civil society organizations are critical of high consumption of water, emissions of environmental toxins and the destruction of farmland and forests through the mining of bauxite and gold.

But environmental protection and efforts to mitigate the impacts of climate change are not among the political priorities in any of the countries in West and Central Africa. To varying degrees, all have laws and institutional structures to protect the environment, but there is a lack of political will when it comes to the actual implementation. No country in the region improved in this area during the review period. This is in part attributable to the fact that the content of legal frameworks and programs are strongly influenced by international partners who sometimes do not take local knowledge and customs sufficiently into account. In addition, problems such as poverty or security are considered far more urgent in the region than environmental protection. In countries plagued by conflicts like Mali and Burkina Faso, the tense security situation also made it difficult to implement environmental protection programs.

Governance

The quality of governance deteriorated slightly in West and Central Africa in 2019 and 2020. According to the BTI Governance Index, quality is moderate to weak in most countries in the region. Each country in the region does in fact, continue to face major structural challenges such as poverty, patchy infrastructures or difficult climate conditions. Ongoing conflicts also increase the need for good governance. At the same time, it is possible to observe how autocratic tendencies in the region impair governance performance because the focus on maintaining power consumes a large part of the will to shape policy in the countries in question.

Violent conflicts and attacks by terrorist groups pose a major challenge to the governments of the affected states. In seven countries – Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali and Niger – violent conflicts continued or escalated in 2019 and 2020. Cameroon is the only country with an ongoing violent conflict that saw a slight improvement and fewer victims. In Nigeria, violent conflicts persist in several parts of the country. In the northeast, Islamist rebel groups continue to wage terror, violence and organized crime are on the rise in the center of the country, and nationalist movements are gaining new support in the southeast. This is compounded by the inflamed political conflicts surrounding the elections and the brutality of the security forces mentioned earlier. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, armed rebel groups continue to operate in the eastern provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu, where they are enriching themselves through the illegal extraction of

raw materials. Meanwhile, the security situation in the Central African Republic has further deteriorated. Attempts initiated in 2019 by President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to integrate rebel groups in the government after the Khartoum and Addis Ababa peace accords failed in late 2020. In January 2021, the new alliance of rebel groups, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), failed to capture the capital city of Bangui, but they still had 80% of the country under their control by the end of the month.

Tab. 3: Quality of governance

very good	good	moderate	weak	failed
Score 10 to 7	Score < 7 to 5.6	Score < 5.6 to 4.3	Score < 4.3 to 3	Score < 3
	Senegal	Côte d'Ivoire	Mauritania	Congo, Rep.
	Ghana	Burkina Faso	Cameroon	Congo, DR
	Benin	Niger	Nigeria	Chad
	Gambia	Guinea ▼	Central African Republic	
		Liberia	Equatorial Guinea	
		Togo		
		Sierra Leone		
		Mali		
		Gabon		
		Guinea-Bissau		

The table follows the BTI 2022 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in the Governance Index. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2020.

The security situation in the Sahel region has also deteriorated. In Mali, the conflict with Islamist groups escalated once again. Moreover, violent conflicts have spread from the north to the center of the country in recent years. Local conflicts between various groups have also intensified and become entangled with the conflict between the Malian state and Islamist groups. In 2020, terrorist attacks as well as clashes between armed groups claimed the greatest number of lives since the conflict began in 2011, with 2,845 deaths according to the conflict database ACLED. The conflicts in Mali are also spilling over into neighboring countries. Terrorist attacks by Islamist groups, but also local ethnic conflicts, have increased in Burkina Faso in particular. Niger, meanwhile, is encircled between three conflict-ridden countries – Libya, Mali and Nigeria – and each of those conflicts has spilled over into Nigerien territory. Although the Nigerien government has prevented the various Islamist groups from establishing permanent bases in the country and has done a much better job of containing armed conflict compared to neighboring countries, the number of victims of conflicts still more than doubled from 506 to 1,114 between 2018 and 2020, according to ACLED.

The escalating violence, however, is not matched by any increased capacity and, in some cases, will on the part of these governments to manage the conflicts. In seven countries – Benin, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and the Central African Republic – conflict management has even deteriorated. Benin and Guinea are two examples of governments that have contributed to the deterioration of the social climate in the pursuit of their political goals. A polarization of politics began in Benin under former President Boni Yayi (2006-2016), with regression to ethnoregional identity in some cases. Those tensions initially subsided under his successor, President Talon. But then Talon risked escalating conflicts with the opposition by introducing changes to the electoral law and the constitution. Violence, in some cases leading to deaths, erupted ahead of both the 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2021 presidential elections. For Benin, it was an extraordinary level of election-related violence. Guinean President Condé showed an even greater alacrity to accept a surge in violence and social polarization to secure a third term. Security forces repeatedly responded with violence to demonstrators protesting against the constitutional referendum and his renewed candidacy.

Setbacks in governance performance in West and Central Africa are most evident in the implementation of reforms and the learning capacity of the government apparatus. The implementation of reforms stalled in nine countries in 2019 and 2020: Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. The most common obstacles are a lack of political will, a singular focus on maintaining political power and corruption.

The example of Gambia is illustrative of how political power plays can paralyze democratic reforms. After Adama Barrow ousted authoritarian ruler Yahya Jammeh in 2016/2017, he and his United Democratic Party (UDP) promised sweeping democratic reforms, including a new constitution. In numerous consultations with the public, a commission drew up a new draft constitution, which, among other things, would have strengthened parliament's power vis-à-vis the executive and introduced presidential term limits. But supporters of President Barrow in parliament halted the commission's work. Constitutional reform has been on hold ever since.

In Guinea, President Condé's quest for a third term has overshadowed all else and stalled other reforms. In Niger, a mix of a paucity of political will and corruption is impeding implementation of reforms. Although the government maintains good relations with international partners and is adept at leveraging the country's strategic importance for migration movements to Europe and security in the Sahel to attract international funding, the extent to which that money actually translates into projects remains unclear to observers. In 2020, for example, investigative journalists revealed that nearly 40% of a \$312 million budget for military equipment had been siphoned off.

Corruption is widespread in West and Central Africa, and virtually no progress has been made in 2019 and 2020 in the institutional fight against it. The only significant development came in Sierra Leone, where a special commission set up by President Julius Maada Bio released its report in March 2020 revealing the embezzlement of hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars. However, it must be noted that the commission's work focused on political opponents from the previous government. In addition, the state Anti-Corruption Commission has been bolstered and it has stepped up its work. In other countries, anti-corruption efforts have either stagnated or weakened. This is explicable by the fact that corruption and clientelism remain popular means of securing power. Liberia's President George Weah, for example, used his years in office to provide his confidants with government jobs and other access to state money. In the process, existing anti-corruption institutions have also been systematically weakened. Repeat corruption scandals have been uncovered in Gabon, with the most recent Operation Scorpion culminating in the December 2019 arrest of Brice Laccruche Alihanga, who at the time had been chief of staff to the president. However, these are more likely maneuvers aimed at diverting attention from the misappropriation of government funds by the Bongo family and securing the family's power. Transparency requirements for the purpose of fighting corruption, like those in the law on public procurement, exist only on paper. Given the marginal progress in the institutional fight against corruption, it will persist as an obstacle to socioeconomic development in the future.

Outlook

Developments in the region of West and Central Africa in 2019 and 2020 were characterized by a tendency toward autocratization and the economic challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with a declining quality in governance. It is likely that these trends will persist in the coming years, especially considering that the processes of autocratization in the region are also accompanied by a deterioration in government performance. Ultimately, the development of the region will largely hinge on how the respective governments deal with three key challenges.

The first is the rift between the younger generation and the aging political elites. Most of the population of West and Central Africa is young. According to the United Nations, the median age of the population

in 2020 was 18.8 years. The political elite, on the other hand, is far older, with 66 as the average age for presidents. Still, their advanced respective ages of 82 and 78 prevented neither Condé nor Ouattara from staying in office. Young people across the region have not been integrated into their country's political systems, and they face dismal economic prospects. Youth unemployment in 2019 was at 35.5% in Gabon, 17.7% in Nigeria and 21% in Mauritania. In structurally weak areas like the Sahel or in economies that are almost exclusively based on oil exports, creating enough jobs is a huge and long-term challenge. Frustration within the young population is growing, as demonstrated, for example, by the protests in Nigeria against the brutality of the security forces or in Guinea against Condé's third term in office. Increasingly, their patience for aging rulers who use the resources available to them to maintain their own power rather than to develop their countries appears to be running out. The future of political leadership will therefore depend on the extent to which these countries are able to facilitate a generational shift in which young people are granted power to shape the future. Should this project fail, it could in turn exacerbate political instabilities. But instability can also open up opportunities to deepen democratization processes.

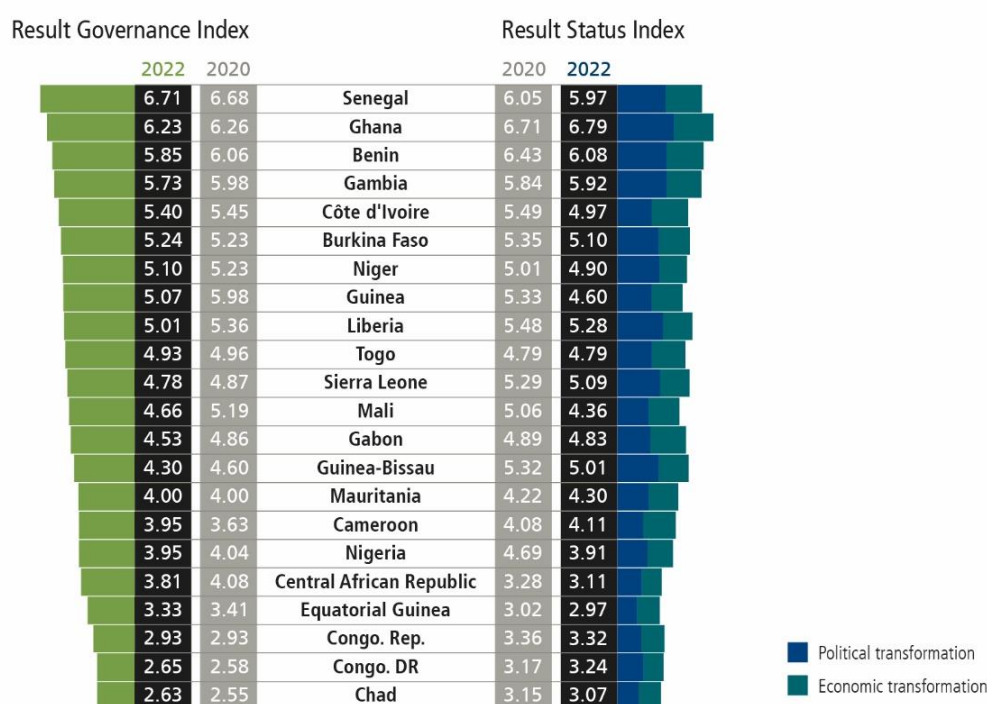
The second challenge is that of stemming the violence and terror in the Sahel and launching a sustainable peace process in Mali and its neighboring countries. France's announcement that it will end Operation Barkhane and scale back its military involvement in the Sahel will also trigger a reconfiguration of international and regional engagement. On the one hand, this represents an opportunity given that previous interventions have not succeeded in contributing to a sustainable solution to the problems and that, particularly, the French involvement is viewed very critically by the population in the region. On the other, it is clear that the armies of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are not capable of containing the threat on their own. To move closer to peace, it will also be necessary to negotiate with other groups. The Malian government has made inroads into negotiating with Islamist groups in the past and will need to continue to seek support for this approach from international stakeholders. Beyond that, it is important that peace talks be held at the local level in Mali and in neighboring states to pacify the local conflicts that have flared up in recent years. That, however, is contingent on a return to democratic order in Mali in the near future. Doubts about whether that will happen have been growing since the most recent coup in May 2021 and the installment of coup leader Assimi Goïta as interim president. Regional organization ECOWAS will have to continue exerting pressure on Goïta and the transitional government, but its actual influence on the crisis in Mali and its acceptance by Malian actors has proven limited in the past.

The third challenge is dealing with the direct and indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. West and Central Africa were spared severe COVID-19 outbreaks, and as of July 2021, it remained the least affected region on the continent. But that may not be the case in the future. Given the low supply of vaccines there, the pandemic is likely to last longest on the African continent. The Delta variant of the virus already triggered a third wave of infection in the Democratic Republic of Congo in June 2021. In July 2021, Ghana and Senegal also experienced third waves, according to Johns Hopkins University, with respective seven-day incidences per 100,000 people of 4.3 and 16.6.

Wide-scale vaccination campaigns could cushion the direct impact of the pandemic. And here the region faces three tasks: securing the supply of vaccines, organizing their distribution and gaining the trust of the population. Existing global inequities are also evident in the distribution of the vaccines. According to figures from the UN Development Programme, around half of the population in high-income countries had been vaccinated as of August 2021, compared to only 1.36% in low-income countries. African countries are having difficulty buying contingents of the scarce doses of vaccine on the open market because they lack the financial resources. The international COVAX vaccine initiative, established to ensure fair global distribution of vaccine doses, has so far fallen short of its commitments. With 8.3% of its population fully vaccinated as of early July 2021, Equatorial Guinea is the vaccination front runner in West and Central Africa. But the country is relying entirely on immunizations using China's Sinopharm vaccine. Less than 1% of the population has been vaccinated in most other countries in the region. In addition to access to vaccine supplies, the vaccinations themselves are proving to be an administrative challenge.

In Chad, only about 10% of the delivered vaccine has been administered so far. In Senegal and Guinea, around half of the vaccine on hand had still been unused as of July 2021. There are also examples of the opposite – countries like Ghana, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, which have administered most of their supplies. Another task in the regional vaccination campaigns will be convincing the population. As in Western countries, the pandemic has fueled a boom in conspiracy theories and misinformation that have the potential to significantly dampen people's willingness to get vaccinated. Working together with civil society and religious organizations, governments will need to increase people's confidence that it makes sense to get vaccinated.

If the duration of the pandemic is prolonged in the region, it could have even deeper consequences for the local economy and lead to renewed growth in poverty given that workers in the informal sector have almost nothing to buffer them from the effects. The structural challenges of governance performance are likely to increase in the coming years as a result of the pandemic. At the same time, international aid and foreign direct investment could fall in the next few years because OECD countries will have to compensate for the high expenditures in their own countries during the pandemic. If that happens, it would also mean the region would have fewer resources available for addressing major structural problems. In addition, if the economies of the Global North enter into a prolonged economic crisis because of the pandemic, this could also have a stronger impact on the level of remittances sent by migrants living there. This, in turn, would also disrupt more informal forms of social safety nets.



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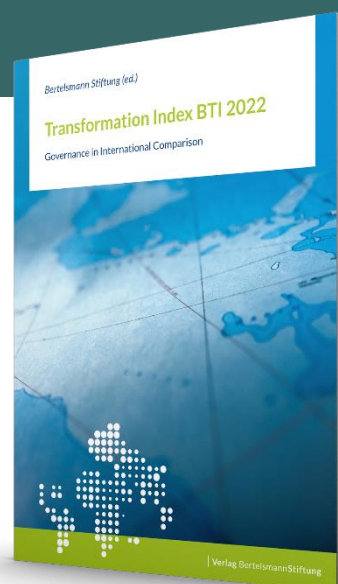
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