



WEST AFRICA NETWORK FOR PEACEBUILDING

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

Political Insecurity in West Africa: A Call for Democratic Stability and Peaceful Elections

Analysis and Call for Immediate Action

Background

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) on behalf of its 550-member organisations spread across the 15 member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) expresses deepest concern and apprehension at the growing political insecurity that threatens democracy, peace and security in the region. The recent political dynamics in Mali, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea indicate a worrying trend that could truncate efforts towards democratic stability of West Africa in line with the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. As a peacebuilding organization that upholds the tenets of democracy and promotes dialogue and other non-violent responses to conflict, WANEP deplores the forceful takeover of power in Mali and the attempts to extend Presidential term limits in Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea beyond what is stipulated in the ECOWAS Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy. WANEP further expresses concern over tensions and violent threats to the peaceful conduct of the December 7 Presidential and Parliamentary elections of Ghana as well as the pervasiveness of violent extremism in Burkina Faso and its potential negative impact of disenfranchising many Burkinabé from the upcoming elections in November 2020.

In Mali, recent military coup d'état that overthrew the constitutionally elected government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita not only suggests a repeat of the 2012 political crisis in the country but also presents a potential opportunistic expansion and consolidation of violent extremism beyond the North and Central regions of the country. This has ramifications for national social cohesion and a contagion effect on regional peace and security, especially when weighed against the backdrop of key decisive presidential elections expected in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Ghana in the last quarter of 2020. Already, West Africa's security landscape is fraught with incidences of terrorist and violent extremist attacks, inter and intra communal armed conflicts, ethno-religious tensions and transnational organised crimes including narcotics and human trafficking as well as the proliferation of small and light weapons. The addition of political instability could provide the tipping point for widescale insecurity across the 15 countries of the region affecting an estimated population of over 360 million people.

Emerging Threats and Implications for Regional Peace and Stability

Mali is already faced with increased terrorist and violent extremist attacks, ethno-religious violence, inter and intra communal clashes as well as Tuareg separatist insurgencies, especially in the Northern provinces. The growing insecurity in the Sahel continues to have adverse impact on the country's stability. This is in addition to the economic hardship confronting its citizens and further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The uprising and demonstrations triggered by disputed parliamentary elections of March 2020, the kidnapping of Soumaila Cissé, a leader of the opposition parties and insecurity reinforced the eroded public confidence and demand for President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita to resign. Despite ECOWAS diplomatic and mediation attempts, the rejection of an inclusive government of national unity has led to the political impasse that birthed the overthrow of government by the Malian Armed Forces.

In Cote d'Ivoire, the rising political disagreement and violence as a result of the announcement of President Alassane Ouattara to run for another term in the October 2020 presidential elections is heightening polarization and potential relapse of instability in Cote d'Ivoire. Following the death of Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly, the nominated presidential candidate of the ruling coalition -RHDP, the party has pulled its weight behind President Ouattara as its candidate for the upcoming elections. This is amidst complaints by opposition parties and groups that have led to recent violent demonstrations in Gagnoa and Daoukro resulting in the death of five persons which included four security personnel. The continued exile of Guillaume Kigbafori Soro and the arrest warrant issued by the Government is another source of concern. Both Soro and former President Laurent Koudou Gbagbo have been disqualified from contesting by the Electoral Commission, an action seen by stakeholders as politically motivated. Soro's support in the army and his ability to mobilize forces within and outside the country could constitute another risk factor for the country's stability. Disagreement over the electoral processes among key political stakeholders and COVID-19 pandemic also have the potential to affect political participation and risk of ethnic violence in the lead up to the elections.

The series of violent protests witnessed in Guinea within the first half of the year 2020 are symptomatic of protracted political disagreements and tensions in the country. The move by the ruling party, Rally of the Guinea People to support a third term bid by President Alpha Conde in the October 18 2020 presidential election, following the amendment of the 2010 Constitution and a national referendum held on March 22, 2020 has been criticized by opposition parties and civil society organizations. This is likely to escalate ethnic motivated violence between the major indigenous groups comprising the Malinkés, the Peulh or the Fulanis.

In Ghana, there is mistrust and lack of confidence by the main opposition party, National Democratic Congress (NDC) and some civil society groups on the capacity of the Electoral Commission (EC) to conduct a transparent and fair election in the December 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections. This is evident in the recently concluded new voter register

exercise. Despite the ruling of the Supreme Court in favour of the EC to conduct the exercise, opposition parties and groups have accused the Commission of bias amidst reports of inter party violence at some registration centres. The hostile communication and threats are potential risks for escalation of violence during the December elections.

WANEP's Concerns on Current Situation

Given the ongoing political tensions and interplay in the region, WANEP expresses the following concerns:

1. The military coup in Mali has truncated democratic governance and heightened public insecurity thereby increasing the vulnerability of youth groups to align themselves to terrorist groups operating in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso with potential impact on the security of neighbouring countries such as Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana;
2. The potentials of mirroring the Malian crisis in Cote d'Ivoire given its chequered political history and the perceived divisions in the Ivorian military between former rebels integrated into the army and other soldiers;
3. The growing demonstrations by political parties and civil society in Cote d'Ivoire over the perceived lack of inclusivity and transparency of the Independent Electoral Commission which could set the stage for the rejection of the election results and post-election widescale ethnically motivated violence across the country;
4. The accusations of political bias of the Independent Electoral Commission of Cote d'Ivoire and the announcement of the Constitutional Court over the disqualification of key political figures including former Prime Minister, Guillaume Soro with existing convictions from Ivorian Court. Based on Soro's pedigree as a former rebel and his insistence to contest the presidential election could lead to another round of intractable conflict in Cote d'Ivoire;
5. The dwindling trust and confidence in the Guinean National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) and other key state actors by opposition parties such as the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea and the Union of Republican Forces as well as civil society coalition such as the National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (FNDC) which has manifested in public demonstrations and arrests of some opposition leaders and their supporters. This constitutes a major driver for heightened political violence in the lead up to the October 18 Presidential election especially when weighed against the backdrop of the death of about eight persons during violent demonstrations that trailed the parliamentary elections and referendum of March 22, 2020;
6. The heightened political tensions in Ghana as a result of growing hostile communication and inter party violence between the supporters of the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic Party of Ghana with potentials for aggravated violence during the elections of December 7, 2020. This could undermine the integrity of the entire election process;
7. The lack of trust and confidence on the Electoral Commission of Ghana by the National Democratic Congress to conduct a credible election which can lead to a rejection of the results and the democratic dividends of the country often referred to as the best example for democratic success and governance standard in West Africa;

8. The ability of ECOWAS to fully achieve its sanctions on Mali and reinstate a democratically elected government against the backdrop of Malians support to the coup leaders as well as ensure a level playing field for all actors in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. This also has implication to ECOWAS effort to sustain its political oversight in the region as enshrined in the 2001 protocol on democracy and good governance;
9. The limitations of ECOWAS as a supranational body with the political will and oversight required to enforce its protocols on its member states within the constraints of existing laws of national sovereignty. These limitations are being exploited as currently witnessed in Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea and could constitute further negative trends in other member states of the region;

WANEP therefore urgently calls for the following:

- ECOWAS ongoing negotiation effort with the Malian military leaders should be jointly supported by Africa Union and United Nations Office for West Africa and Sahel (UNOWAS) but mindful of the conflict sensitivities of inclusivity of all stakeholders including civil society and women groups. This will ensure the success of any transitional agreement to democratic governance in Mali;
- A technical committee comprising key influencers such as ECOWAS, UNOWAS, Africa Union and key political and civil society stakeholders in Mali to develop an inclusive roadmap that builds on the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali from the Algiers Process. The committee should also include countries with strong bilateral cooperation such as France who support the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA);
- Series of national and regional dialogues facilitated by civil society organisations with representatives of various interest groups and stakeholders including women social networks, religious organisations/associations, trade unions, youth groups, traditional authorities, academia and professionals. The dialogue will provide additional platform to identify grievances and critical social and political needs that support the resolutions and recommendations of the national technical committee developing an inclusive roadmap for Mali;
- Organized dialogue between the Independent Electoral Commission of Cote d'Ivoire and the key political stakeholders and civil society that addresses existing grievances of inclusivity and integrity of the electoral process;
- A quiet diplomacy led by the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General for West and Africa and Sahel with support from ECOWAS to discuss with the government and key opposition parties in Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Ghana in order to find amicable ways to resolve the existing political disagreements to ensure the credibility of elections in these countries;
- Civil society organisations in Guinea, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire should form a coordinated plan of action geared towards election security and preventive mechanisms for election related violence in these countries;

- A code of conduct for peaceful elections renewed and signed by major political parties in Guinea, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire facilitated by institutions and civil society organisations of influence or with institutionalized peace architectures such as the National Peace Council in Ghana;
- Platform for cooperation between Election Management Bodies, State Security and organized civil society for early warning and response to mitigate violent threats in identified hotspots in Guinea, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire;
- Cooperative platforms for debriefing and analysis between ECOWAS, UNOWAS and Civil Society Organization in Mali, Guinea, Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire to support sustained preventive diplomacy against political violence before, during and after the elections;

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