

Policy Brief

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African Democracy in Crisis

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Africa is acutely affected by the ongoing global democratic recession. In 2020, a military coup took place in Mali. In 2021, four African countries – Chad, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan - experienced military takeovers. Thus far, in 2022, two coups have occurred in Burkina Faso and an attempted one in Guinea Bissau. Yet polling data and activism on the ground shows African youth believe in and are prepared to fight for democracy.



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Analysts note that the democratic recession began around 2006.³ That year an estimated 56 countries moved towards greater democracy. In 2021, only 25 moved towards greater freedom and democracy. In the mid-2000s, roughly half of the globe's population lived in a country that Freedom House labeled “free;” nowadays, only 20 percent do, while 40% live in “partly free” states like India and another 40% live in “unfree nations” like Saudi Arabia. In Latin America, leaders have come to office through the ballot box and then proceeded to tinker with the Constitution to extend their tenure and trample on basic rights (as in El Salvador, where Nayib Bukele was voted into office in 2019.)

Similarly, in Africa in Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, and (pre-coup) Guinea, presidents have stayed on for third terms in violation of constitutional limits. “Elections, even when critically flawed, have long given authoritarian leaders a veneer of legitimacy, both at home and abroad,” Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz write in *The Freedom House* report. “As international norms shift in the direction of autocracy, however, these exercises in democratic theater have become increasingly farcical.”⁴

A recent study contends that democratization brought a range of political benefits to West Africa, even allowing leaders to end civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. ECOWAS and the African Union have even adopted norms prohibiting military coups, with the latter organization trying to make presidential term limits a norm in West Africa.⁵ Yet backsliding began due to multiple factors – economic crisis, the early effects of climate change, the effects of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the COVID pandemic.

Political Attitudes

In June of this year, the Program on African Social Research convened a workshop in Accra, Ghana, in partnership with Afrobarometer to discuss the current challenges to African democracy and popular attitudes towards democratic rule. According to Afrobarometer data, even in countries that experienced military takeovers, there's strong support for democracy - 62% Burkina Faso and 75% in Mali reject military rule, while 57% of Guineans still favor democracy. In trying to understand developments in Africa's “coup belt,”

1. https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

2. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

3. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/democracy-crisis-autocrat-rise-putin/622895/>

4. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>

5. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/west-africa/2022-07-11/west-africas-authoritarian-turn?check_logged_in=1

researcher Sully Ibrahim examines civil-military relations and discontent within the military as a causal factor rather than public disaffection with democracy. He suggests that civilian leaders could help forestall disputes within the military by avoiding political initiatives that could trigger unrest within the military's ranks.⁶ Using Mali as a case study, other analysts argued that people support that have noted that popular support for military takeover (60% in favor) is linked to poor economic performance, and highlighted how the poor in Mali, feeling unserved by the democratic government, leaned towards a takeover. As Mohamadou Tangara and Moumoun Diallou observe, "the class of the population that complains about their living conditions (feeling disappointed) registers the highest score of dissatisfaction with democracy. In contrast, those who find their living conditions acceptable are satisfied with democracy."⁷ Recent work on Benin where President Patrice Talon, has prohibited opposition parties from advancing candidates in the 2019 legislative elections, polls show that the poor are more likely to believe that a non-democratic government might improve their economic lot.

Others have proposed other causes for the growing acceptance of military takeovers, including how insurgencies and armed conflict within a state increase support for military rule. Examining Afrobarometer data on Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, along with ACLED geospatially-located data on conflict Thomas Isbell, shows how people living in less affected parts of a conflict-ridden country are more likely to accept a military coup, whereas citizens living close to the insurgency are more likely to "rally around the flag," displaying greater support for the government and military.⁸

External Shocks

Democracy in Africa also suffers because of external interventions, be it from measures imposed by international financial institutions or military intervention by France. Looking at the Sahel writ large, Yusra El Hamdaoui examines how insurgencies can affect popular attitudes towards democratic governance., And how the securitization/militarization of politics can erode democratic norms, setting the stage for a military takeover. Electoral violence can also reduce support for democratic rule. In Kenya, for instance, violence has occurred regularly during elections since 2007. This has impacted popular opinion: according to Afro barometer data, two-thirds of Kenyans say they feared violence in the lead-up to the 2012 elections. According to researcher Martin Fikri Oswald, this fear is likely to reduce electoral participation, which in turn, "undermines the legitimacy of those elections and their ability to produce political figures responsive to popular needs and demands."⁹

Political scientists have also emphasized the deleterious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Africa's democratic regimes. South Africa stands out as a noteworthy exception with recent work praising South Africa's targeted relief effort to help the poor, and the public's positive response. Vayda Megannar submits that South Africa executed "the biggest fast rollout and the fastest bigger rollout" to support poor citizens - without leading to greater autocracy. She writes, "The South African government introduced the COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) Grant in April/May of 2020 in response to the socioeconomic

6. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

7. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

8. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

9. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

hardship related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the fastest big rollout and biggest fast rollout of a social protection cash transfer in Africa thus far.”¹⁰ South Africa stands in contrast to developments elsewhere on the African continent, where the lockdown and vaccine rollout paved the way for greater surveillance and de-liberalization.

Regarding the pandemic’s political impact, Freedom House’s 2020 report noted that the global decline in democratic governance and respect for human rights accelerated in 2019. The anti-democratic turn in West Africa began before the COVID pandemic; this was the region where five of the world’s democratic declines happened. Both Benin and Senegal went from “free to “partly free,” so that today Ghana and Cabo Verde are the only “free” states in West Africa today.¹¹ This global decline accelerated during 2020 so only a fifth of the world’s world lives in entirely free countries today. -

Last year, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation’s Index of African Governance reported the first-ever decline in African governance since it began issuing its assessments in 2007. The report downgraded the freedom scores of 73 countries, not only authoritarian regimes like China, Belarus, and Venezuela but also established democracies like India and the United States because of the rise of liberal populist leaders.¹²

Damilola Agbalajobi’s recent study of Nigeria points to a political paradox, showing how the pandemic exposed African state weakness while allowing for the expansion of state power over societies. She observes that 93% of respondents polled as part of a phone survey in Lagos State declared that they had not received assistance from the government. This, she concludes, is likely to translate into a decline in support for democracy. African African regimes have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to crack down on opposition movements, promote disinformation, and surveil citizenry. Lockdowns have been violently enforced to ban political gatherings and electoral campaigns. In Ethiopia, for example, Abiy’s postponement of elections in 2020 due to COVID exacerbated tensions with the TPLF and undermined the country’s much-awaited process of democratic transition. In Tunisia and elsewhere, state elites used COVID-19 to deploy new surveillance technologies. By one account, the public health situation “created an opening for the digitization, collection, and analysis of people’s most intimate data without adequate protections against these abuses.”¹³ Ironically, a decade ago, as protests spread from Tunisia to other countries, the conventional wisdom was that the internet was a liberation technology that could help bring down dictatorships. Eleven years later, cyber-optimism has given way to cyber-pessimism, as it has become evident that digital technologies are allowing for new styles of authoritarianism. A recent report in Foreign Policy magazine on the Pegasus affair showed that African states have been eager importers of the most advanced surveillance technologies.¹⁴

The Chinese model of surveillance is also inspiring imitators. As analyst Xiao Chang recently wrote, understanding the Chinese model of digital authoritarianism “based on

10. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

11. Freedom House, “West Africa’s Democratic Progress is Slipping Away, Even as Region’s Significance Grows” <https://freedomhouse.org/article/west-africas-democratic-progress-slipping-away-even-regions-significance-grows-0>

12. Freedom House, “Democratic Trends in Africa in Four Charts,” (April 17 2020) <https://freedomhouse.org/article/democratic-trends-africa-four-charts>

13. “The Pandemic’s Digital Shadow” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow>

14. Lynsey Chutel, “Pegasus Revelations Spark Scandals Across Africa,” Foreign Policy (July 28 2021) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/28/nso-pegasus-africa-morocco-rwanda/>

“censorship propaganda and AI-driven population surveillance” can shed light on the emerging surveillance infrastructures of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁵ In the Arab world, the United Arab Emirates seems to be closely replicating the Chinese model, with comprehensive surveillance becoming “a societal norm. While highly sophisticated artificial intelligence assesses massive quantities of data to identify threats, trends, and opportunities for state action.”¹⁶

In Africa, the Chinese government has been promoting its “Digital Silk Road,” which includes fiber optic cables, mobile networks, data centers, and smart cities built by Chinese technology companies. The Chinese tech company ZTE is laying fiber optic cables and establishing networks, surveillance mapping, cloud storage, and data analysis services in cities across Ethiopia, Egypt, Nigeria, and Sudan.¹⁷ A report from May 2021 shows that between 2006 and April 2021, Huawei closed 70 cloud infrastructure and e-government transactions with 41 governments or their state-owned enterprises.¹⁸ The majority of these states are classified as “non-free (34%)” or “partially free” (43%), by Freedom House, and concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa (36%) or Asia (20%), mostly low- and middle-income countries; in other words, these are less developing countries, have “strong demand, lower barriers to entry and fewer scrutiny.” In contrast to Beijing, Moscow is exporting a different type of digital repression, selling technologies that focus primarily on disinformation campaigns that can affect election results. By some accounts, Russian surveillance tech is currently more affordable for African countries than Chinese, Israeli, American, or European technologies.

In a recent essay on the global democratic recession, Harvard scholar Yascha Mounk observed that democratic institutions are weakening in states long viewed as advanced stable Western democracies. In the developing world, however, there is a troubling “democratic despondency” - democracy is losing its appeal as authoritarian leaders gravitate towards the Beijing Consensus, and people who value wealth and stability over elections look towards China, Singapore, and the UAE as models to emulate. In Africa, as we have noted, opinion is mixed. Louis Tomavo writes in his study of Benin, “In most African countries, support for democracy remains an important element in the eyes of the average population in most countries. Beyond the continental averages, pro-democracy attitudes are widespread in some countries (Angola, South Africa, Mozambique) but dangerously sporadic in others.”¹⁹

Social Protest

Democracy in Africa is struggling, but there are also positive trends. In 2020, both Seychelles and Malawi saw a democratic transfer of power facilitated by broad cross-ethnic and cross-regional coalitions. Five African countries held elections during the pandemic -- Guinea, Mali, Benin, Burundi, and Malawi, with fairly high voter turnouts in Burundi (87.7%) and

15. Xiao Qiang, “Chinese Digital Authoritarianism and Its Global Impact,” POMEPS (August 2021) <https://pomeps.org/chinese-digital-authoritarianism-and-its-global-impact>

16. Marc Lynch “Digital Activism and Authoritarian Adaptation in the Middle East,” <https://pomeps.org/digital-activism-and-authoritarian-adaptation-in-the-middle-east> (August 2021)

17. “Chinese tech giant’s global cloud strategy may give Beijing ‘coercive leverage,’” ANI, March 29, 2021, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/chinese-tech-giants-global-cloud-strategy-may-give-beijing-coercive-leverage20210529222803/>

18. Ji Xi, “Huawei switch to the cloud, China competing with US in Asia, Africa and Latin America,” Voice of America, May 21, 2021, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/Huawei-cloud-coercive-leverage-20210520/5899020.html> cited in Qiang (August 2021)

19. https://www.pasiri.org/_files/ugd/d71c2d_cb54eed64f204d1893da620dc998d35c.pdf

Malawi (64.8%) and Guinea (58.04%).²⁰ (According to Afrobarometer, the turnout was low in Benin and Mali - the latter due not only to the pandemic but also to the insurgency in the north and inter-communal violence in the central region of the country). The elections in Malawi and Seychelles were among the success stories of the past two years. Malawi held elections in May 2019; the results were contested by opposition parties and subsequently overturned by the courts. Citizens went to the polls again in June 2020 - despite efforts by president Peter Mutharika to postpone the voting because of COVID - and Lazarus Chakwera, leader of the opposition Malawi Congress Party, won convincingly and assumed the presidency. Likewise, in Seychelles, elections held in October 2020 saw the opposition leader Wavel Ramkalanwan of the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS) opposition party ascend to the presidency.

Current backsliding notwithstanding, recent research indicates that sustained bottom-up mobilization can produce deeper forms of democracy than top-down, elite electoral engineering. The sociologists Adaner Usmani and Benjamin Bradlow concluded after a survey of 108 democratic transitions between 1950 and 2010: "One of the most consistent and powerful explanations of substantive democratization is the length of unarmed pro-democratic mobilization before a transition."²¹ Looking at west Africa, scholar Gyimah-Boadi recently observed youth activists from Senegal's Y'En A Marre to the No-Sars Campaign in Nigeria; youth are mounting impressive movements to reverse the slide to authoritarianism. These steadfast youth-driven protest movements give ample reason for optimism. Researcher Gloria Longba'am-Alli's recent study of non-violent strategic protest in Nigeria and Sudan shows how these movements have changed the discourse around "democratic fundamentals" like human rights, regime transition, and freedom of speech. She contends that non-violent resistance presents a more effective opposition to democratic and non-democratic adversaries and underlines, echoing Erica Chenoweth and others,²² that democratization is not simply about the top-down transition or elite power struggles but crucially about the civil society actors mobilizing from below.

The case of Senegal is worth keeping an eye on as the presidential elections of 2024 loom and President Mack San's maneuvering for a third term in office. Mack has, in recent years, placed restrictions on the media and limited the opposition's activities. Yet the elections of July 2022, the opposition coalition made impressive gains.²³ A recent analysis observes that this is the first time in Senegal's political history that an opposition coalition "has managed to dog the presidential coalition and impose a split parliament with no absolute majority."²⁴ This achievement is due to multiple factors - most significantly, the strategic alliance of two prominent opposition coalitions and the declining popularity of Macky Sall.

The role of internet activism in Africa is critical as well. In *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, media scholar Siva Vaidhyanathan argued that social media, notes the internet can disconnect people and platforms like Facebook can

20. Khabele Matlosa, "Elections in Africa During Covid-19: The Tenuous Balance Between Democracy and Human Security," *South African Journal of Political Studies* (April 2021) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02589346.2021.1913798>

21. Mohammad Ali Kadivar, Adaner Usmani and Benjamin Bradlow, "The Long March: Deep Democracy in Cross-National Perspective" (March 2019) <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/4r8d6/>

22. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/nonviolent-resistance-and-prevention-of-mass-killings-perkoski-chenoweth-2018-icnc.pdf>

23. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/final-senegal-legislative-vote-tally-confirms-ruling-party-lost-absolute-2022-08-12/>

24. <https://theconversation.com/senegals-presidential-poll-is-shaping-up-as-a-real-contest-with-voters-in-the-drivers-seat-189848>

serve as a surveillance machine.²⁵ Scholar Bamba Ndiaye's study of social media activism in Senegal offers an interesting take on this thesis. Focusing on the Y'En A Marre (YEM) movement born in 2011, he traces how digital technology challenges Francophone African governments, who then respond with surveillance and repression. He demonstrates how YEM, born in 2011, rapidly became a model of cyber-activism on the continent, especially in Francophone Africa, even pushing back against "the policing of the internet." As Ndiaye writes, "young Africans continue to weaponize digital platforms against their governments while acknowledging that the profound structural changes they will inevitably come from the offline confrontation."

Groups like Y'en a Marre are keenly aware that while online activism has its limits and they, online activism has its limitations and aims to find a balance between online and offline activism. The state of cyberactivism in Francophone Africa thus lends some support to Vaidyanathan's pessimism because in resorting to online mobilization efforts, movements might inadvertently exclude people who cannot read or lack internet access.

As Western commentators speak of the Global South's "democratic despondency," it's worth recalling that youth movements in Africa have brought down authoritarian leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and more recently in Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. Africa is the youngest fastest-growing continent, with an estimated 60% of the population under the age of 25 and a median age of around 20. The average age in Asia and South America is 32, while in Europe and North America, it is closer to forty. By some estimates, Africa's population may double by 2050 to approximately 2.5 billion people, so one of every four people on the planet will live in Africa.²⁶ The political disenchantment and anti-system sentiment currently expressed by African youth is rooted in the failed top-down electoral experiments of the 1990s structural adjustment programs that eviscerated state services and debilitated the health sector (desperately needed then to address the AIDS pandemic and now the COVID crisis). The market reforms decimated the left-leaning parties that had dominated, such that nowadays, it is either NGOs or, more likely ethnic movements and religious "trust networks" that perform the organizational and welfare role that party and state institutions played in the decades after independence. Western-backed austerity programs brought neither growth nor democracy.²⁷ Yet, all the current and political travails, polls and youth movements on the ground shows that African youth believe in and are prepared to fight for democracy.

25. <https://www.amazon.com/Antisocial-Media-Disconnects-Undermines-Democracy/dp/0190841168>

26. "Africa's population will double by 2050," *The Economist* (March 26 2020) <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/03/26/africas-population-will-double-by-2050>

27. Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (Zed Press 2015)

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In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's Encarta Africana project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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