

Managing Election Violence and Sustaining Peace and Security in West Africa



Published

November 2023

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Photography: Building Blocks for Peace Foundation (BBFORPEACE)

Suggested Citation: GPPAC West Africa and BBFORPEACE 2023, Managing Election
Violence and Sustaining Peace and Security in West Africa

Acknowledgements

2023 was a busy year for West African countries and Africa at large as countries held high-stakes elections. About five (5) ECOWAS countries where GPPAC member organizations are present such as Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali and Guinea, had one form of election or the other this year. Due to traditional concerns over electoral violence and insecurity, these elections were of serious concern to the GPPAC West Africa network.

These elections took place at a time when the avowed goal of entrenching democracy and sustainable peace in West Africa was being put to a stern test with the prevalence of violent extremism, shrinking civic space, radicalisation and a resurgence of coup d'etat in the ECOWAS region.

This paper titled 'Managing Election Violence and Sustaining Peace and Security in West Africa' became very important to interrogate the impact of electoral violence on the stability and the democratic trajectories of countries within the region and offer recommendations for addressing the lingering challenges associated with elections and strengthening democratic governance in West Africa.

I thank all members of the GPPAC Global Secretariat and members of GPPAC West Africa network who shared insights about this theme. Special appreciation goes to all colleagues at Building Blocks for Peace Foundation- the regional secretariat of GPPAC West Africa for the coordination of this work.

Special commendations go to our fantastic consultants Professor Charles Ukeje and Dr Wale Olusola who led the development of this outcome paper.

I hope that this paper will foster the needed actions aimed at ensuring the peace and security of ECOWAS member states.

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Managing Election Violence and Sustaining Peace and Security in West Africa

Charles Ukeje¹ and Wale Olusola²

Key Recommendations

- As of September 2023, four ECOWAS Member States - Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were under military regimes. Therefore, the first recommendation is for ECOWAS and other regional and international partners to continue to push for the earliest return to multiparty civilian rule where citizens can freely choose their leader in local and national elections.
- Central to mitigating election violence is the need to address, more proactively and frontally, festering socioeconomic problems that drive poverty and unemployment. Launching the ECO currency, and working with the AU to implement the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) would increase opportunities for the large and growing number of youth population in West Africa.
- ECOWAS should stand by the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and recommit itself to the full implementation of its spirit and letters in addition to strengthening regional mechanisms on conflict prevention; particularly early warning and early action mechanisms.
- CSOs/NGOs-led strategies aimed at promoting peace education, inclusion, and intergenerational dialogues should not be a one-off but be designed as continuous and long-term interventions which can be evaluated and re-evaluated from time to time.
- CSOs/NGOs working on democratic governance and peaceful elections at subnational, national and regional levels in West Africa should collaborate more and encourage mutual learning to be able to make the most impact in addressing the phenomenon of election violence in the region.
- Political parties should develop and implement internal reform agenda in partnership with civil society actors already working in that space, making sure to eschew conduct that reinforce existing divide along ethnic, religious or other fault-lines.
- Development partners should rethink election observation beyond just observing to understanding the contexts and dynamics that shape election violence such that the reports contain insights that speak to the realities of each election and each country yet offering wider regional outlooks and ramifications.
- Critical capacity building interventions by development partners supporting electoral bodies, the justice system, law enforcement agencies and CSOs can help improve not just their response capacity but also the quality of such responses thereby improving election process and outcomes.

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a. Introduction

Elections are not only a key component of civic engagements between the citizens and the state, they are also an integral part of democracy and democratic consolidation critical for organizing modern society around citizens' choices and expectations. The quality of elections is a very important yardstick for determining the state of democracy in societies making the often-difficult transition; from autocratic civilian or military rule into liberalized political systems. This underlines the wave of democratization that swept across Africa in the 1990s following years of harsh, arbitrary military and one-party rules. Those transitions were, in most cases, accompanied by widespread optimism and renewed hope that the emerging democratic space, with the promise of regular elections, would naturally prompt positive changes in economic governance and nation-building imperatives. By prioritizing inclusion, participation, accountability, rule of law, human rights, and civil and political liberties, the envisioned liberal order was imagined to be one capable of ushering in the 'second liberation', the first one signposted by the waves of decolonization and independence across Africa during the 1960s. Decades down the line, however, the jubilant return to democratic commitments has done very little to sustain that earlier optimism. On the converse, the current experience is that the democracy fervour is becoming dampened, with the hope of a stable, secure and prosperous continent becoming forlorn. The jubilant public reactions to recent coup d'état in Mali, Guinea and Niger attest to growing popular frustration with lack of democratic dividends³. The consensus today is that contrary to many expectations, democracy in Africa has produced very fragile and tenuous peace and, at the very best, conditions that threaten peace and stability.

One major drawback is the violence that almost permanently characterizes most elections in Africa. In West Africa, violent elections have become the order rather than the exception since the return to civil rule undermining democracy and promoting instabilities; including in countries that have enjoyed successful and uninterrupted democratic transitions for at least two decades or more in the region⁴. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), election violence involves 'acts or threats of intimidation or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition'⁵.

³ It is important to point out as indicated elsewhere in this paper that such reactions do not necessarily mean a rejection of democracy and acceptance of military but certainly, an expression of sheer despair over the lack of real impacts/opportunities despite much promise.

⁴ Nigeria, Senegal, Benin, Sierra Leone and Ghana have experienced different levels and forms of repeated election-related violence since returning to civilian rule.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2009). Elections and conflict prevention: A guide to planning and programming. New York: UNDP Democratic Governance Group, Bureau for Development Policy.



In other words, coercive actions to physically and/or psychologically abuse or injure to achieve a pre-determined electoral outcome constitute electoral violence. While the increased frequency of elections across West African countries has provided valuable insights into both the strengths and weaknesses of the electoral process, its violent nature has raised even further questions on the sustainability of peace in the region. Recurring violence before, during and soon after elections; notably in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Guinea-Bissau, and Nigeria, has become a grim pointer to how quickly the democracy project in West Africa is incubating seeds of instability at sub-national, national and regional levels.

Many accounts and events in recent times show a link between election violence and threats to peace in West Africa. This is because, fundamentally, credible elections are conceived as processes that enable and sustain peace moreso in a region of different sovereign entities with multiple and overlapping identities. In their absence or the prevalence of violence, public expectation, citizens' rights and trust diminish or disappear. Even more compelling are legitimacy questions that disruptive electoral processes raise and the exploitation of that unsettled question to rationalize recent military interventions and unconstitutional change of government as was the case in Guinea, Mali, Guinea Bissau and Burkina Faso have all vividly revealed. This trend underscores the election-security nexus, as evident in the pervasive 'risk environments' in the region. In all of these, the role of regional and continental institutions, community and religious leaders as well as youth and women-led organizations becomes even more challenging and compelling today across West Africa than at any time in the past.

b. Trends and Trajectory of Election Violence in West Africa

Historically, the phenomenon of election violence is not new to West Africa. Prior to the third wave of democratization in the 1990s, many West African countries had experienced varying forms of election violence. Some occurred in the early years of independence and intermittently between civil rule and military takeover. What is significant in a post-Cold War environment today is the widespread experiences of election violence despite widespread resort to civilian rule. Some countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Senegal, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, Liberia and Sierra Leone have witnessed back-to-back political transitions on more than one occasion since the 1990s. The region was reputed for political crises and instabilities that threatened social order before democracy was embraced again in the belief that perennial governance issues that are sources of incessant conflicts would gradually go away. It is somewhat contradicting, with this backdrop, that despite democracy, the culture of violence persists as evidenced by numerous occasions of electoral violence.

It is important to note that while there are discernible patterns and commonalities in the nature, form and scope of election violence in West Africa, there are also variations. Some countries experience low-intensity violence while others experience high frequency and intensity of violence⁶. Besides, the different phases of the electoral process witness a range of physical and psychological violence that are similar but also overlap. Pre-election violence is often characterized by threats of violence against voters and electoral officers, assassination, banning of opposition parties, incendiary propaganda/campaign, misinformation, postponement among others. Ballot box snatching and stuffing, intimidation, harassment, attack on and/or abduction of electoral officers, voters or pressmen, destruction of electoral materials, delay/manipulation of election materials, arbitrary arrest, misinformation, profiling based on religion/ethnicity/political affiliation are common manifestations of violence during elections. The post-election phase is largely shaped by reactions from the opposition to the results to be declared or already declared usually in the form of protests that are met with repressive action by security forces.

Notable Instances of Election-Related Violence in West Africa (2020-2023)

| Year | Country | Type of Election | Major Causes | Period of Violence |
|------|---------------|---------------------|---|--------------------|
| 2003 | Nigeria | General | Voter intimidation, deployment of the military, electoral malpractice | Before & During |
| 2005 | Togo | Presidential | Dissatisfaction with the regime, voter intimidation | Before & After |
| 2007 | Nigeria | General | Voter intimidation and widespread irregularities, including allegations of rigging by the ruling party, electoral malpractice, deployment of the military. | Before & During |
| 2010 | Cote d'Ivoire | Presidential | Deep-seated political and ethnic tensions between supporters of incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and his rival and eventual winner Alassane Ouattara, which escalated to full-blown violence. | During & After |
| 2010 | Guinea | Presidential | Tension between ethnic groups of political rivalries, leading to voter intimidation, repression, and protests between supporters | Before & During |
| 2011 | Nigeria | General | Inflammatory statements, electoral malpractice | After |
| 2015 | Burkina Faso | Presidential | Attempted coup, dissatisfaction with rule | Before |
| 2015 | Nigeria | General Inter-party | Clashes, Boko Haram attacks, voter intimidation | Before & During |
| 2016 | Côte d'Ivoire | Presidential | Political rivalries, identity politics | After |

⁶ Although, distinction between what constitute low or high-intensity violence can be blurred, the terms are used loosely in this paper. Low-intensity include: ballot box theft, stuffing and other fraud, assault or molestation, protest, property vandalism, attacks resulting to non-fatal injuries, arrests, intimidation etc. while high-intensity violence is used to mean violence resulting in high fatalities, widespread attack leading to breakdown of law and order, human displacement etc.

| Year | Country | Type of Election | Major Causes | Period of Violence |
|------|---------------|------------------|--|--------------------|
| 2016 | Niger | Presidential | Alleged electoral fraud, opposition claims | After |
| 2018 | Gambia | Presidential | Refusal to concede, regional intervention | After |
| 2018 | Sierra Leone | General | Voter intimidation, party clashes | During |
| 2019 | Mali | Presidential | Insurgency, ethnic tensions | Before |
| 2019 | Nigeria | General | Voter intimidation, repressive tactics by the state, ethnic and religious tension, Boko Haram insurgency, misinformation | Before & During |
| 2020 | Benin | Legislative | Opposition exclusion, constitutional changes to allow for third term | Before & After |
| 2020 | Guinea | Presidential | Constitutional amendment to pave way for a Third term | Before & After |
| 2020 | Coté d'Ivoire | Presidential | Electoral Dispute, opposition boycott | Before |

The frequency and intensity of election violence vary from country to country, but more generally the case with presidential elections where the stakes are very high as political systems and constitutional provisions concentrate enormous power at the centre. Given the fractured composition and ethnic orientation of most countries and the political parties, the desperation for state capture through the instrumentality of violence has become a recurrent issue. Incumbent parties or presidents seeking re-election often mobilize state resources and apparatus to retain power at all cost; a reality that is hardly lost on the opposition and the public that is increasingly prepared to defend their votes. Targeted disruptions by an incumbent may focus on opposition strongholds with little or no incidents in their own turfs.

The level of violence may also vary depending on the arrangement of elections by the electoral umpire. Usually, the opposition's resilience and enthusiasm may dip if it loses in the first election to the ruling party or incumbent and in a Presidential election. Notwithstanding, local elections into parliament, governorship and local council generally retain their propensity for violence primarily because the stakes are also high. For instance, between 2009 and 2019, regional elections in Ghana⁷, as well as off-cycle bye-elections in Nigeria⁸, witnessed recurrent violence. This is because such elections allow the party in power at the centre to mobilize and deploy sufficient state power (that would have been thinly distributed in a general election) to overwhelm and intimidate the opposition. In addition to these is that the rash postponement of elections at the eleventh hour end up provoking angry reactions from oppositions in ways that heat up the polity and laying the foundation for violent clashes.

With regards to targets and victims of election violence, these can be voters, polling agents, electoral officers, opposition party members, and security agents. Voters of all age groups have experienced violence but the sheer number of youth victims is high. Apart from constituting the largest number of voters in the region, they also participate in relatively large numbers to defend their votes or to make themselves available for recruitment by unscrupulous politicians to perpetrate violence. This perhaps explains why they are more exposed to electoral violence. There are also variations in urban-rural exposure to election violence.

⁷ Dumenu Yaw Mawusi and Adzraku, Edinam Mildred (2020). Electoral violence and political vigilantism in Ghana: Evidence from selected hotspots. Research paper 27, Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana).

⁸ Omotola, J. S. and Oyewole, S. (2023). Electoral violence in Nigeria: Insights from off-cycle subnational elections. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231184409>



Some electoral crimes are conveniently committed in remote rural areas, away from the prying eyes of the Press and international observer missions, but without necessarily explaining the level or intensity of violence. Rather, the tendency towards violence would be high where there is strong competition between popular/dominant parties or contestants, regardless of whether or not the contestation is happening in rural or urban areas. Nonetheless, certain dynamics may accentuate the outbreak of violence that are due to the peculiar nature of places, be they rural or urban. Urban centres such as major towns and cities or state capitals may have densely populated areas that are important, if not crucial, for a politician to emerge victorious. More often than not, more resources are committed to campaigning and mobilizing in these areas which inadvertently stir and intensify the climate of competition and the potential of violence.

While some empirical studies have observed that the inclusion of more women in the electoral process will reduce incidents of violence significantly⁹, women and girls are more likely to be caught in the web of electoral violence. Individuals employed to disrupt a voting process may consider female polling or security officers to be soft targets. In most cases, women are rarely involved in the perpetration of election violence but are likely to be at the receiving end of it. This is underscored by the violent character of democracy and the electoral process in West Africa built around frames of masculinity that emphasize physical strength, aggression, violence, risks-taking, and so on.

⁹ Page, Schneider & David, Carroll (2020). Conceptualising more inclusive elections: violence against women in elections and gendered electoral violence. *Policy Studies*, 41(2-3), 172-189, doi:10.1080/01442872.2019.1694651; Bjarnegard, Elin (2018). *Making gender visible in election violence: Strategies for data collection*. Politics and Gender, Cambridge University Press. Doi:10.1017/S1743923X18000624

The Intensity of Violence during Major Elections in West Africa: 2021-2023¹⁰

| 2021 | Violent/ Peaceful | Voter Turnout | 2022 | Violent/ Peaceful | 2023 | Violent/ Peaceful | Voter Turnout |
|-----------------------|--|------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Benin Rep.</i> | High -intensity violence | Low @39% | <i>Guinea</i> | Postponed due to insecurity | <i>Nigeria</i> | High -intensity violence | V. Low @27% |
| <i>Cabo Verde</i> | Peaceful | High @57% | <i>Mali</i> | Postponed due to insecurity | <i>Liberia</i> | Relatively peaceful | V. High @78+% |
| <i>Niger</i> | Low -intensity post -election violence | High @63% | | | <i>Sierra Leone</i> | Low -intensity violence | V. High @75+% |
| <i>The Gambia</i> | Low -intensity post -election violence | V. High @87% | | | | | |

Another critical dimension to electoral violence in West Africa is the unique challenges it imposes in societies already experiencing prolonged violence and security challenges. Some countries in the region such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria are confronted with severe internal security challenges in the form of insurgency, secessionist movement, ethnic rebellion etc. that only end up exacerbating existing security conditions before, during and after elections. Because countries in the Sahel region are particularly at risk of violence, they have been taken over in quick successions by the military while a country like Nigeria has struggled to conduct safe elections in some parts of the country where insurgents are still active and threatening. As shown in the table above, the military junta in Guinea and Mali postponed scheduled elections in 2022, blaming it on growing security. Also, countries that are just emerging from conflict find it difficult to build consensus or coalition around who gets what, when and how; the type that can quickly lead to the restoration of law and order and the birth of a new government. Liberia and Sierra Leone fit into this latter category because the memories of the bloody conflicts that tore the two nations apart continue to find subtle expressions in how political power is viewed and negotiated under democratic rule.

Overall, only a few elections in West Africa have been held without some degree of violence however little. According to the Freedom House¹¹, only Ghana and the Island of Cape Verde are ranked 'free' of the 16 countries in the region. Both countries are also classified as 'stable' and 'peaceful' and have been seen as oases of democracy in a region with multiple governance and security challenges. The rest are either 'partly free' or 'not free'. Worth noting, for instance, is that 5 of the 12 countries that have witnessed score decline is in West Africa- namely Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Nigeria. Only Senegal and Benin moved from being 'free' to 'partly free'. In a 2020-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) report, election-related violence constituted 60 percent of all forms of violence in Sierra Leone in 2018, a huge leap from 5 percent in 2012¹². Beyond these and more generally, the twists and turns of events during election period significantly determines the trend in electoral violence in West Africa. This was the case for Togo in 2005; Nigeria in 2011 and 2023; Guinea in 2010 and 2020; Coté d'Ivoire in 2010 and 2016; and Benin in 2018 and 2021, to highlight a few cases. Rather than abate, therefore, the trend in election violence is becoming a constant feature of the electoral process in West Africa.

¹⁰ Adapted by authors from multiple sources.

¹¹ Freedom House: West Africa's democratic progress is slipping away even as region's significance grows. freedomhouse.org/article/west-africas-democratic-progress-is-slipping-away-even-as-regions-significance-grows-0

¹² Kar de Bruijne (2020). When democracies breed violence: Sierra Leone 20 years after the civil war. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project.

c. Triggers and Consequences of Election Violence in West Africa

Two commonly cited causes of election violence are namely: structural and non-structural. Structural causes are referred to as root causes and they revolve around issues of marginalization, poverty, unemployment etc. while non-structural causes are immediate triggers that are mostly physical and psychological. Election violence is influenced by multiple factors, including historical legacies from colonial rule¹³ identity-based politics¹⁴, economic disparities, the quality of governance, inciting statements, militarization and repressive acts and external influences. The character of the state in Africa, being a colonial fabrication with incredible ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and complexity, has embedded within it a major source of tensions. In seasons of electoral activities, these deep-seated and historical fault-lines not only define the fragility of the political climate but are easily exploited by political actors seeking to gain and consolidate power. Since they lack or are unable to maintain fidelity to any ideological leaning, political parties are quick to resort to promoting division and fanning ethnic and religious hate thus laying the foundation for violence to win elections and consolidate ethnic patronage.

The West African region has some of the world's poorest and least developed countries; notably Sierra Leone, Mali, Togo, Liberia, the Gambia, Niger, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau.¹⁵ Conditions of poverty and unemployment are major drivers of election violence in West Africa because unemployed young people are mobilized and sponsored to create disorder and chaos during elections. Without sustainable means of livelihood, young men are easily recruited to do the 'dirty works' that politicians would not want to be associated with but would hope to benefit from. Although, many of the countries in the region are rich in resources, the opportunities that citizens can access are limited and dwindling. In 2020, according to the UN, extreme poverty rose by nearly three percent in West Africa due to Covid-19¹⁶ while average unemployment rate stood at 6.8 percent in 2022.¹⁷ Paradoxically, Nigeria tops the list of countries with the highest rate of unemployment in Africa and the world;¹⁸ and where high levels of poverty and unemployment coalesce with economic inequality, a fertile ground for political manipulation and potential violence becomes inevitable.

For the most part, also, weak democratic institutions and limited electoral reforms erode public trust and contribute to fueling violence. In some West African countries, weaknesses in governance and electoral systems are major drivers of violence because it implies lack of fidelity to the rule of law as well as the absence of transparency and accountability.

¹³ Anyika, V.O., Ani, K.J. (2022). Historical review of electoral violence in Nigeria. In: Ani, K.J., Ojajorotu, V. (eds) *Elections and Electoral Violence in Nigeria*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4652-2_3

¹⁴ Fasakin, Akinbode. (2021). The coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Experiences from Nigeria. *Third World Quarterly*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1880318>.

¹⁵ List of poorest countries in the world. wisevoter.com/country-rankings/poorest-countries-in-the-world/; All but 5 countries of the 16 countries in West Africa including those listed here are on the list of 46 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) by the UN in 2022. See: un.org/en/conferences/least-developed-countries; Niger, Mali, Guinea and Benin are in the top 10 on a list of 40 African countries in the 2023 Multidimensional Poverty Index report. See: Global multidimensional poverty index 2023: Unstacking global poverty: Data for high impact action. Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

¹⁶ West Africa: Extreme poverty rises nearly 3 percent due to covid-19. 20 January 2022. news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110192

¹⁷ Unemployment rate in western Africa from 2010 to 2023. [statista.com/statistics/1323688/unemployment-rate-in-western-africa/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1323688/unemployment-rate-in-western-africa/)

¹⁸ Daily Post: Nigeria leads countries with highest rate of unemployment. John Owen Nwachukwu. 5 May 2023. [dailypost.ng/2023/05/05/Nigeria-leads-countries-with-highest-rate-of-unemployment-see-list/](https://www.dailypost.ng/2023/05/05/Nigeria-leads-countries-with-highest-rate-of-unemployment-see-list/)



Where electoral reform reports have been submitted, leaders have demonstrated little or no political will in comprehensively implementing the resolutions. Consequently, electoral management bodies and the judiciary continue to work without sufficient independence, incentives and in a corruption-infested environment. They are thus motivated to compromise the credibility and integrity of the electoral process. In countries like Niger, Nigeria (especially at sub-national levels), Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Gambia, the electoral bodies have been alleged to perpetrate malpractice which has led to violence before, during and after elections. Invariably, as shown by Afrobarometer, citizens' belief in the ability of the electoral body to ensure a free and fair poll is on the decline.¹⁹ Likewise, when citizens perceive that their votes are manipulated or that the process is rigged, there is the likelihood of violent protests becoming rife.

Despite the growing poverty in many countries in the region, there has been a steep increase in the monetization of electoral processes. The level of monetization is, on the one hand, part of the strategy of making access to political power the exclusive preserve of the corrupt, wealthy and powerful. Huge sums are used to bribe electoral officers, thugs or security agents to undermine the process in a way that eventually raises the stakes during elections and make candidates desperate to win at all cost to secure access to state resources and power for personal benefit rather than for public good. The convergence of such interest and motivation makes electoral competition much more fiery, antagonistic and far from credible, free and fair.

More often than not, security forces promote violence through repressive conduct. The Police and other paramilitary officers are usually guilty of overreacting to citizens' peaceful expression of displeasure; and by so doing, contribute to the escalation of tensions which may lead to open confrontation with citizens. In most elections in West Africa, the military, which is supposed to respond to external threats and secure the territory from external threats are deployed to oversee what is purely a civilian exercise, often to intimidate and suppress the will and voices of voters and pressmen. While many of the countries embrace democracy in theory, what is evident in practice is that large residues of authoritarianism co-exist side-by-side with semblances of democratic activity. The heavy-handed approach that security agencies deploy, in the end, diminishes citizens' trust in the electoral process, amplifies discontent, lead to state repression and ignite violent protests.

¹⁹ Afrobarometer: AD551: Support for elections weakens among Africans; many see them as ineffective in holding leaders accountable. afrobarometer.org/publication/ad551-support-for-elections-weakens-among-africans-many-see-them-as-ineffective-in-holding-leaders-accountable/

West African countries experiencing major security challenges also have to further provide adequate security in hot spots, despite being already stretched by the war against a plethora of state and non-state armed groups. Armed groups in these countries target polling stations and create an atmosphere of fear and discourage voters from exercising their franchise. Such groups have played a significant role in igniting election violence, especially in regions already burdened by prolonged conflict and instability. Mali, Burkina Faso and Nigeria have experienced different levels of disruptions during elections.²⁰ In Nigeria, Boko Haram effectively disrupted elections in some parts and caused the displacement of several communities, highlighting the impact of non-state armed entities on election dynamics as well as outcomes. It is safe to conclude that existing armed conflicts are enablers of election-related violence.

The authoritarian inclination in many West African countries perhaps explains the growing trend in the manipulation of the constitution to extend term limits against existing provisions in the constitution. In what many have termed 'civilian coups', this action has been a major source of violence before, during and after election as witnessed most recently in Benin Republic, Guinea Conakry and Togo. In some other cases like Nigeria²¹ and Senegal,²² such attempts were strongly resisted by the Parliaments/National Assembly and/or the public despite some incumbents trying to bribe lawmakers and exploiting ethnic loyalty to tamper with the constitution in ways capable of escalating into violence. Besides this, existing constitution in some states are sources of frictions that constituent units face because it promotes a 'winner-take-all' election outcome even where these societies are multi-ethnic and multi-religious. In some of these countries, the constitution operated is still the one bequeathed by the military and there have either been no organized national dialogue to conceive and design a 'peoples' constitution' or the will to implement its resolutions. The defective structure, in turn, perpetuates a feeling of marginalization and exclusion among certain groups that sometimes feed or manifest into agitation before, during and after elections.

In recent times, social media has played a major role in encouraging discourse on and contributions to national debates, but they are most often exploited during election to promote propaganda and amplify narratives and discord which are very harmful for the mostly fragile multi-national states in West Africa. Given that it is still a largely unregulated media space, the social media can quickly become purveyors of misinformation and falsehoods that tend to widen divisions among citizens, and between citizens and the government. The 'weaponisation' of the social media to promote divisive and hate messages can have dire consequences for social cohesion, nation-building and peace in the region. The risk associated with this is particularly high for countries just emerging from conflict but also for countries already showing signs of an impending conflict. Hate messages heighten tension and creates a 'me versus them' exclusionary feeling among citizens of the same country that sometimes lead to open confrontations in the name of elections.

²⁰ UNOWAS: Elections in West Africa and the Sahel, between crisis and hope. unowas.unmissions.org/elections-in-west-africa-and-the-sahel-between-crisis-and-hope

²¹ *Premium Times*: How we aborted Obasanjo's third term agenda – Ken Nnamani. premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/491052-how-we-aborted-obasanjos-third-term-agenda-ken-nnamani.html?tztc=1

²² *VOA*: Democracy wins in Senegal as president agrees not to seek third term. voanews.com/amp/democracy-wins-in-senegal-as-president-agrees-not-to-see-third-term/7166569.html



Apart from domestic factors, concerns over or perception of external actors' involvement- state or institution- do shape election related violence. External interference, through funding, pushing of certain manipulative narratives and agenda can escalate tensions. In some African countries where non-African countries have vested interest, support for candidates or attempts to influence the electoral process in favor of a candidate are not often well received and can trigger violent opposition to a candidate or political party. In *My Transition Hours*, former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, who lost out to the opposition in 2015, wrote that external influence partly accounted for the outcome of the election in favor of the winner.²³ In other cases such as in Mali and Burkina Faso where the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is negotiating a return to civil rule through the conduct of new elections, the military junta is not showing any readiness towards restoring civil rule supervised by the regional body or even enthusiasm to play a significant role in possible transition.²⁴ Yet, notwithstanding the misgivings in some sections, the role of regional actors like ECOWAS in mediating potential conflicts may be mixed but ultimately pivotal in maintaining stability and preventing more widespread election violence.

²³ *The Source*: Jonathan fingers foreign interference in election. Oji Odu. 21 November, 2018. thesourceng.com/jonathan-fingers-foreign-interference-in-election

²⁴ *ECOWAS*, Mali reach no agreement on duration of transition before election. africanews.com/amp/2022/03/21/ecowas-mali-reach-no-agreement-on-duration-of-transition-before-election.

d. Consequences of Election Violence in West Africa

While some West African countries have managed to conduct peaceful elections, others continue to face recurrent challenges with election-related violence. These instances of post-election violence can and do have dire consequences, including loss of lives, destruction of properties, displacement of populations, and the destabilization of communities. Sometimes, it takes many years of recovery and some do not recover at all before another election cycle beckons. In addition, rural areas and regions with a history of ethnic or religious divisions remain vulnerable to election violence. Divisions can and are manipulated to garner support and escalate tensions, leading to disruptions to livelihoods, stability, and social cohesion. As the table below shows, the framing of elections as an exercise similar to going to war have produced only bloody outcomes and deep seethed toxicity that continue to threaten the already fragile fabric of the nation-states in West Africa.

Major Humanitarian Crises Occasioned by Electoral Violence in West Africa

| YEAR | COUNTRY | FATALITIES | DISPLACEMENT |
|------|----------------|------------|---------------|
| 2003 | Nigeria | 100+ | 10,000 |
| 2005 | Togo | 500 | 40,000 |
| 2007 | Nigeria | 300+ | 2000+ |
| 2010 | Coté d' Ivoire | 3,000+ | 1 million |
| 2010 | Guinea | 150+ | 1000+ |
| 2011 | Nigeria | 800/1,000+ | 65,000/45,000 |
| 2015 | Nigeria | 88+ | Less than 100 |
| 2019 | Nigeria | 626 | 1000+ |
| 2020 | Guinea | 12/20 | 500+ |
| 2023 | Nigeria | 109 | 500+ |

Compiled by Authors from multiple sources, 2023.

The impact of election violence are not confined to individual countries but sometimes, transcend national boundaries; most notably in the aftermath of refugee influx as was the case in Togo in 2005²⁵ and Coté d'Ivoire in 2010.²⁶ Cross-border issues arising from elections in one country can affect neighboring states, raise security concerns and threaten regional stability. This is moreso given the shared social and communal links of states in the West African region. For instance, ECOWAS intervened in the Gambia in 2017,²⁷ following a presidential election crisis because the crisis could easily spill-over and undermine regional stability.

²⁵ UNHCR: 40,000 have now fled post-election instability. Jennifer Pagonis. 2 August 2005. [Unhcr.org/africa/news/briefing-notes/togo-40000-have-now-fled-post-election-instability](https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/briefing-notes/togo-40000-have-now-fled-post-election-instability)

²⁶ OCHA: Refugees from Ivory Coast in limbo as election crisis remains unresolved. News and press release. reliefweb.int/report/cote-divoire/refugees-ivory-coast-limbo-election-crisis-remains-unresolved

²⁷ Hartman, C. (2017). ECOWAS and the restoration of Democracy in the Gambia. *Africa Spectrum*, 52(1), 85-99. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000203971705200104>



Due to their complex ethno-religious identities and experience of protracted conflict, countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone are highly susceptible to violence arising from misinformation, hate speech, and incitement propagated through social media. This is not exclusively a citizens' problem but also a challenge for election managers whose task are complicated as a result.

In addition, election related violence affects livelihoods as people are forced to leave their homes. In many cases, curfew is imposed preventing people from going to farms, trading and exercising their right to free movement. Most countries, particularly those in the Sahel, that are already substantially affected by prolonged conflict are food insecure; a situation only compounded by incessant election violence and the coercive response to them by the state. The perpetuation of violence during electoral periods thus contributes to a climate of fear and insecurity, hindering the region's overall development and progress. As a result, the human development records of some countries in the region are some of the poorest globally. For instance, in 2020, out of the 15 Member States of ECOWAS, 13 dropped in the 'low' category of the Human Development Index (HDI); with Niger occupying the last position on the list of 189 countries.²⁸ The impact also extends to marginalized groups, including youth and women, but also the physically challenged, who may be disproportionately affected by election violence

Ultimately, a major fallout of election violence in West Africa is the gradual loss of faith in the electoral process. Except from Sierra Leone where support for elections as a preferred mode for choosing leaders grew by 11 percent in a space of 10 years between 2011 and 2020, other countries recorded decline within the same period even though overall support is still strong.²⁹ There is also a downward trend in voter turn-out in recent elections in Nigeria³⁰, the Gambia³¹, Benin³², Ghana³³, Togo³⁴ and Coté d'Ivoire³⁵.

²⁸ UNDP: Human development report. (2020). <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report>

²⁹ Afrobarometer: AD551: Support for elections weakens among Africans; many see them as ineffective in holding leaders accountable. afrobarometer.org/publication/ad551-support-for-elections-weakens-among-africans-many-see-them-as-ineffective-in-holding-leaders-accountable/

³⁰ Premium Times: Analysis: Trend of low voter turnout continues in Nigerian elections. premiumtimesng.com/news/586193-analysis-trend-of-low-turnout-in-nigerian-elections.html

³¹ MAJAC: Gambia experiences low voter turnout in parliamentary elections. lenisa.gomez.majac.gm/news-details/gambia-experiences-low-voter-turnout-in-parliamentary-elections

³² Record low turnout at Benin polls with no opposition. france24.com/en/20190501-benin-election-record-low-turnout-no-opposition-boycott

³³ BBC: Ghana district assembly elections record low voter turnout despite 'aponkye' social media hype. bbc.com/pidgin/tori-50825019.amp

³⁴ ALJAZEERA: Low turnout in Togo after boycott call. aljazeera.com/amp/videos/2018/12/21/low-turnout-in-togo-after-boycott-call

³⁵ *The Independent*: Election observers cite low turnout in Ivory Coast poll. the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/election-observers-cite-low-turnout-in-ivory-coast-laurent-gbagbo-country-voter-turnout-turnout-b1533349.html

The state of institutions in the region has implications for the democratic process and governance in West Africa as a whole. The first victim of electoral violence, especially one perpetrated on a large scale, is democracy itself because the oxygen it needs through credible elections is arbitrarily cut short. Apart from leading to further militarization of the states in West Africa, the impunity with which civil and political liberties are violated undermines the democratization project and diminishes the hope of democratic consolidation. So long as violence continues to impede citizens' right to freely exercise their right to vote and be voted for, the democracy project would see little tangible and real progress. At a much broader perspective, violence is a threat to peace and peaceful coexistence which is what democracy through regular elections promises.

Election violence also raises legitimacy questions that not only sometimes, make governing difficult domestically but creates image problems for any country. Local and international observers can, for instance, call to question the credibility of the electoral process and outcomes which further sow seeds of doubt about the legitimacy of the elected leader. Mistrust in the system can discourage citizens from participating in future elections, stifling the growth of a healthy and vibrant democracy where everyone has a voice and can participate.

Furthermore, nation-building, long prioritized by West African political leaders, at least, in some form, is further undermined by repeated violence in every election cycle in many countries in the region. A sense of community and belonging is vanishing while political affiliations and identity-based politics are amplified. In addition, the economic security of nations in the region is compromised as violence disrupts economic activities and stability. Countries in West Africa such as Cabo Verde, Ghana and recently, the Gambia, with minimal or no election violence cases, fare significantly better in terms of fostering nation-building, maintaining social cohesion and cultivating public confidence. Their democratic systems tend to be more stable and trusted, enabling citizens to engage more actively and peacefully in political processes. In contrast, countries grappling with high incidences of election violence experience a range of negative outcomes that hinder their development and democratic progress.

e. Major Initiatives Towards Managing Election Violence and promoting Peace in West Africa

At different levels and phases of the electoral cycle, non-state actors and organizations in West Africa including members of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) have played a crucial role in promoting credible elections and peace by implementing initiatives that focus on building democratic processes, fostering inclusivity, and preventing election-related violence. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), regional bodies like ECOWAS, as well as women and youth groups, have been at the forefront of these efforts, contributing to the advancement of democratic governance and stability in the region. Several CSOs have undertaken diverse initiatives aimed at enhancing the transparency and fairness of electoral processes. One such example is the work of Goree Institute, a Senegal-based independent, Pan-African public interest organization (PIO) promoting electoral reform and peacebuilding in Africa. Since 2009, Goree has been training CSOs in West Africa in various aspects of electoral management and peacebuilding.

Another worthy example is West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), which operates across the region to promote conflict prevention and peacebuilding. WANEP has facilitated training and capacity-building programs for civil society actors, election monitors, and journalists to monitor elections and report incidents of violence. Their efforts contribute to ensuring that election-related violence is documented, analyzed, and addressed promptly. By working to create a culture of peaceful participation.



ECOWAS, a regional organization, has been instrumental in mediating conflicts and supporting electoral processes in West Africa. The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) provides a comprehensive approach to addressing the root causes of conflict and instability, including those associated with elections. ECOWAS has deployed election observer missions to monitor electoral processes and support democratic transitions. For instance, ECOWAS played a significant role in mediating the post-election crisis in Gambia in 2017, helping to ensure a peaceful transfer of power. The regional body's diplomatic interventions and election monitoring efforts demonstrate its commitment to fostering peace and stability during crucial electoral moments.

Women and youth groups have also made crucial contributions to promoting peaceful elections and democratic governance. In Liberia, for instance, the Women Situation Room (WSR) initiative has been successful in mobilizing women to advocate for peaceful elections and conflict resolution. The WSR provides a platform for women to engage in dialogue, mediation, and advocacy to prevent election violence. Similarly, youth-led and youth-focused organizations like the Building Blocks for Peace Foundation, Angel Support Foundation and Children and Young People Living for Peace (CYPLP) in Nigeria have engaged in voter education campaigns, capacity building against hate speech, dialogues, promoting civic participation and peaceful political engagement among young people. These initiatives empower women and youth to play active roles in shaping the electoral environment and fostering peaceful coexistence.

However, while these groups (CSOs, ECOWAS, women, and youth groups) have made commendable efforts, challenges remain in achieving their goals. Despite the presence of observer missions, for example, instances of electoral violence still occur, indicating that more comprehensive conflict prevention strategies are needed. Additionally, the effectiveness of these initiatives can be hampered by a lack of resources and limited capacity. Sustaining their impact requires consistent funding, training, and collaboration among various stakeholders. Moreover, achieving lasting peace and credible elections requires addressing deeper structural issues, such as economic inequalities, identity-based politics, and weak governance, which these initiatives often aim to mitigate indirectly.

Some Multi-Level Actors Promoting Democracy and Peace in West Africa

| ACTOR | INITIATIVE(S)/FOCUS | IMPACT | SCOPE |
|--|---|--|--------------------------|
| African Union | Promotes unity and cooperation among member states; striving to resolve conflict and enhance economic growth and good governance across the continent. | Boosting trade and stability; fostering a stronger African identity through joint peacekeeping missions and African Continental Free Trade Area. | Continental |
| ECOWAS | Election observer missions; Conflict mediation | Facilitating peaceful transitions; Diplomatic interventions; Conflict prevention | Regional and Continental |
| Women Groups | Women Situation Room; Peace advocacy and mediation | Advocating for peaceful elections; Conflict resolution; Empowering women | National and Regional |
| YIAGA Africa | Ballot and Beyond; Civic education projects | Enhancing youth engagement; Promoting transparent elections | National and Regional |
| WACSI | Strengthening the capacity of civil societies in West Africa through training, resources, and networking opportunities | Contributing to building a more robust and capable civil society sector in West Africa; improving organizational management and advocacy skills through training programs and workshops. | National |
| West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) | Mobilizes, coordinates, and leverages the power of civil societies across West Africa to defend and reinvigorate democracy; promotes democratic reforms for stable and prosperous governance. | Deepening inclusion and the spirit of connectedness. | Regional |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|----------|
| West Africa Bar Association | Promoting the rule of law; protecting human rights; facilitating legal education and training; fostering professional collaboration among lawyers in West Africa. | Impact can be seen in its contribution to legal development, cross-border legal cooperation, and the advancement of legal standards within West Africa. | Regional |
| Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), West Africa | Conflict prevention and peacebuilding through locally-led peacebuilding action, women and youth inclusion etc. strengthening the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework | Contributed to preventing and mitigating impact of violent extremism through the development of early warning indicators on extremism and establishing strong relationship with ECOWAS to develop school curriculum on violent extremism. | Regional |
| Children and Young People Living for Peace (CYPLP), Nigeria | Youth-focused movement promoting inclusion by empowering disadvantaged local communities etc. | Successfully drawn attention to issues of access, gender inequality and rights etc affecting youths in particularly vulnerable spaces. | National |
| Goree Institute, Senegal | Promoting open and self-reliant societies, electoral reform and peacebuilding, strengthening political dialogue for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and contributing to democratic consolidation of democratic processes and institutions in Africa. | Has contributed to capacity building of West Africa CSOs working on electoral processes through the Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections (BRIDGE) training course. It has also taken part in election monitoring in the region. | Regional |
| Women Situation Room (WSR), Liberia | Engaging women as leading force in promoting peace and ensuring there is no violence before, during and after elections. | Was able to record and resolve hundreds of election related reports in real time during the 2011 elections in Liberia. WSR has been replicated in Kenya, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Nigeria due to its effectiveness in preventing and mitigating election-related violence. | National |

| | | | |
|--|--|--|-----------------------|
| Center for Democratic Development (CDD), Ghana | Promoting democracy, good governance, and development in Ghana and other West African countries; Conducting research and providing policy recommendations to strengthen democracy institutions. | Impact can be seen in its contributions to informed policy decisions, citizen engagement, and the enhancement democratic processes in Ghana and neighboring countries. | National and Regional |
| CDD, West Africa | Capacity building; civic engagement to promote democratic governance, human rights, and sustainable development in Nigeria and West Africa. | Contributed to public discourse and made a significant impact on democratic practices and governance in Nigeria and West Africa. | Regional |
| Media Foundation for West Africa, (MFWA) Ghana | Promoting and defending media freedom, freedom of expression, and the rights of journalists in West Africa; Monitoring media violations; Advocating for legal reforms; Providing training and capacity building for journalists. | Has created an enabling environment for independent media; raised awareness about media rights; contributed to a more transparent democratic society in West Africa. | Regional |
| West Africa Network for Peace-building (WANEP) | Promoting human security in West Africa through research, advocacy, and community engagement. | Has contributed immensely to reducing violence, fostering dialogue, and promoting sustainable peace and development. | Regional |
| Citizens' Observatory on Governance and Security, Mali | | Has enhanced transparency in governance; empowered citizens to participate in decision-making processes. | National, Regional |
| Institut Malien de Recherche Action pour la Paix (IMRAP) | Strengthening of bonds of trust between defense and security forces and civilian populations in Mali. | Improved civil military relations and citizens participation and social cohesion in Mali. | National, Regional |
| | | | |

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|--|---|---|-----------------------|
| Campaign for Good Governance (CGG), Sierra Leone | Promoting sustainable and transparent democracy; advocating for active participation of citizens in the political process, voter education, and human rights. | Improved governance and ensured protection of human rights. | National and Regional |
| Naymote Partners for Democratic Development, Liberia | Promoting democratic governance, civic education, youth engagement, and women's empowerment in Liberia. | Has educated citizens about their rights and contributed to the development of a more transparent and accountable democratic system in Liberia. | National |
| Building Blocks for Peace Foundation, Nigeria | Working to counter violent extremism, address shrinking civic space Advocating for inclusivity and engagement of youths in the peacebuilding process. | Has recorded significant reduction in violence; Enlightened youths on the need to protect and maintain security. | National, Regional |
| Africtivistes/ Sahel Activistes, Senegal | Raising awareness and advocating for social and political change through social media and digital tools. | Has amplified voices and brought the citizen's attention to essential social and political issues; Has shaped public discourse and encouraged civic participation in Senegal and the Sahel region by extension. | National, Regional |
| Vision Spring Initiatives, Nigeria | Promoting and protecting women rights through advocacy and capacity building; Raising awareness on issues, such as gender-based violence and reproductive rights; Advocating for policy changes that support women. | Its effort has empowered women and challenged discriminatory practices, contributing to the advancement of gender equality in Nigeria. | National |
| Gender Mobile, Nigeria | Building a strong platform to drive education and enlighten all genders about violence and rights. | Created a place where women can learn more about their rights. | National |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|-----------------------|
| Penplusbytes, Ghana | Promoting good governance, transparency, and accountability through digital media and technology; Digital advocacy; Bridging the gap between citizens and government through technology | Has fostered a culture of accountability; Encouraged citizen engagement in sustaining democracy in Ghana. | National |
| The Tattaunawa Roundtable Initiative (TRICentre)- Jos, Nigeria | Supporting campaigns using media for various causes and reforms; Raising awareness about local and national issues; Engaging decision-makers to drive change. | Has amplified the voices of Nigerians; Supported their efforts in bringing important issues to the government. | National |
| Open Society Africa | Supports efforts to advance democratic governance across the African continent; Promoting transparency, accountability, and human rights. | Promoted social justice and fostered an environment of openness and inclusivity across Africa. | Continental |
| European Union | Fosters economic cooperation among its member states; promotes peace and stability; drives climate change policies and security cooperation. | Contributed to the economic growth of its member states; facilitated cross-border trade; Promoted democratic values. | Regional |
| LEAP Africa, Nigeria | Equipping young people with the skills, knowledge, and networks to become effective leaders; | Nurtured a new generation of leaders that has contributed to positive social and economic development in Nigeria and Africa. | National, Continental |
| OSF Africa, Senegal | Promotes democratic governance and social justice; Supporting initiatives and projects in various African countries to strengthen democratic institutions and promote human rights. | Contributed to strengthening civil society; Promoted greater inclusion and justice. | Continental |
| Fund for Human Rights, Nigeria | Protects democratic values; Promoting human rights and relations of people of various cultures; Enlightening citizens on their fundamental rights. | Has had a profound effect in making the people understand their civil and political rights. | National |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|--------------------|
| CLEEN Foundation, Nigeria | Promotes public safety, security, and justice in Nigeria and West Africa; Engages community to improve policy standards and enhance accountability. | Has effectively bridged the gap between citizens and law enforcement; contributed to the improvement of public safety and security in Nigeria and West Africa. | National, November |
| Parliamentary Network Africa, Ghana | Encourages active participatory democracy; Increasing citizens' confidence in their legislators through enlightenment programmes. | Succeeded in transforming citizens' mindset to become more active in governance to control corruption. | Regional |

The above list is by no means exhaustive, as there is a plethora of civil society actors working to advance democracy and peaceful society in West Africa. While some of the actors identified here may not have initiatives exclusively or directly focused on elections, they often contribute to promoting peace through broader peace-building programs that should be encouraged. These initiatives organized or promoted before, during, and after elections, play a vital role in creating an environment conducive to peaceful electoral processes. By addressing underlying social tensions, fostering dialogue, and empowering marginalized groups, they contribute to reducing the risk of election-related violence and enhancing overall societal cohesion. Their efforts extend beyond the electoral cycle, aiming to build lasting peace and stability in West Africa.

f. Recommendations

Addressing the state of election violence in West Africa has a lot of implications for peace, democratic consolidation and security at sub-national, national and regional levels. Given the multi-faceted nature of the drivers of election-related violence, any serious and targeted intervention would require a more robust and holistic approach in the short, medium and long-terms. At the same time, critical stakeholders can play targeted but complementary roles to promote peaceful elections in the region.

ECOWAS and Member States

- As at the time of publication, four ECOWAS member states - Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are currently under military regimes. The first recommendation is therefore for ECOWAS and other regional and international partners to continue to push for the earliest return to democratic rule where citizens can freely choose their leader in local and national elections.
- Central to mitigating election violence is the need to address, more frontally, festering socioeconomic problems that drive poverty and unemployment. What this implies, also, both individually and collectively, is that countries in the region must address root problems that give rise to citizens' frustration and despair. At the regional level, ECOWAS and Member States should seize the opportunity of the current situation (poverty, unemployment, insecurity etc) in the region to accelerate measures towards deepening economic integration by launching the ECO currency and working with the AU to, at the earliest time possible, operationalize/implement the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and continental economic initiatives, must be embraced and faithfully implemented to increase opportunities for the large and growing number of youth population in West Africa.

This has the potential of also addressing the motivations for violence in all its forms such that communities can coexist in peace and their livelihoods are not threatened. It is only by addressing underlying issues that trust and confidence can be built and peace sustained.

- ECOWAS must do more than establishing protocols and conventions; it should have a clear agenda to support member states in addressing underlying issues that have become sources of destabilization in the region, including those instigated by incumbent administrations and regimes. The shift from an 'ECOWAS of institutions' to an 'ECOWAS of people' has not materialized, precisely because the interest and well-being of West African citizens is secondary in the scheme of things for politicians and the governing elite in many countries.
- ECOWAS and Member States should abide by the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and recommit to the full implementation of its spirit and letters. In addition to this, the AU Africa Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) should be reinvigorated to promote accountability and responsiveness in all spheres of governance.
- Paying more attention to strengthening ECOWAS mechanisms on conflict prevention would be important in achieving effective intervention at the regional level. The ECOWAS Early Warning systems, ECOWARN, needs to be rejuvenated and better resourced to improve its capacity to generate timely data, undertake detailed conflict analysis that are rooted in the local context, and recommend conflict mitigation measures in electoral processes.
- There should also be better, more nuanced synergy between ECOWARN and other early warning systems at continental, national and sub-national levels so that institutions can leverage on their expertise and resources to provide reliable data and insights on election violence before they occur. More civil society organisations need to be welcomed to help in designing and implementing ECOWAS agenda for a violent-free election and peaceful region. Bridging the gap between early warning and early response/action, especially at the regional level, has assumed greater imperative now than at any time in the history of ECOWAS. Yet, the Community cannot remain relevant by being just reactionary when, with the support of CSOs and partners, pragmatic steps can be taken to address the root causes of election violence that undermine democracy and peace in the region. It must therefore be assertive on critical matters of governance that often fuel citizen's grievances in the spirit of frank and open discussion that mechanisms such as the APRM promises.

Civil Society Actors

- As succinctly put by the Nordic African Institute, 'the benefits of winning elections and the disadvantages of losing them must be reduced'.³⁶ In other words, understanding the motivations for violence during elections invariably would lead to better, informed and tailored solutions that discourage violence and other negative impulses, including minimizing or stopping the current monetization of elections. The public should be constantly educated through grassroots campaign against financial inducement that are reproduced on media platforms and in varying languages targeting wide range of audience.
- CSOs/NGOs-led strategies aimed at promoting peace education should neither be a one-off nor should they be reserved only for election seasons as is often the case in many countries in the region. Rather, civic and voter education should be designed as continuous and long term interventions which can be evaluated and re-evaluated from time to time.
- CSOs/NGOs working on democratic governance and peaceful election at subnational, national and regional levels in West Africa should collaborate more, share expertise and ideas, encourage mutual learning to be able to make the most impact in addressing the phenomenon of election violence in the region.
- Established CSOs should support younger ones and help build their capacities for impact through constant training, mentoring and intergenerational dialogues.
- Using a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach, civil society actors should engage relevant state and non-state entities including political parties, electoral bodies, security agencies more frequently. They could assist in developing a code of conduct for politicians, security actors and communicate it widely to the public as done by the *Citizens' Goodwill Task Force* in Guinea Bissau in 2005.³⁷
- CSOs should increase advocacy on gender inclusion in all facet of the electoral processes in West Africa. Some studies have also shown that election violence can be reduced when women are given equal access and opportunities in the electoral process. Using micro-level data from the sixth waves of Afrobarometer survey covering 30 African countries, Rasmane and Idrissa³⁸ concluded that gender equality and equal opportunity can reduce incidents of electoral violence in Africa. The challenge, for now, is not to relent in pushing for the removal of all barriers to women participation in the electoral process.

³⁶The Nordic African Institute: Five ways to prevent violence in African elections. The Nordic Africa Institute. nai.uu.se/news-and-events/news/2018-11-13-five-ways-to-prevent-violence-in-african-elections.html

³⁷Hoffman, Evan (2009). Preventing election violence in Guinea-Bissau: The role of Citizens' Goodwill Task Force. ResearchGate.

³⁸Rasmane Ouedraogo and Idrissa Ouedraogo (2019). Gender equality and electoral violence in Africa: unlocking the peacemaking potential of women. IMF working paper. WP/19/174

- In many ways, political parties are important elements in the broad spectrum of multi-party democracy. Training and retraining of political party representatives/leaders in rural and urban spaces including encouraging inter-party dialogue would help replace the culture of violence with culture of peace in the long run. The practice of signing peace accords/pact by major aspirants should be sustained and encouraged, even in countries that are yet to adopt such initiative.

Development Partners

- Development partners should rethink the current limited frame of election observation. It should go beyond just observing to understanding the contexts and dynamics that shape election violence such that the reports contain insights that speak to the realities of each election and each country yet offering wider regional ramifications.
- Development partners such as the EU and UN entities sponsoring projects and programmes that have real life impacts and can help bolster the capacity of ECOWAS and Member States to deliver on their promise.
- Development partners should prioritize support to women, youth and youth/women-led groups in both rural and urban centres in the region. They should be supported and engaged on capacity building, development issues, digital and other creative spaces, civic activities and advocacy agenda. Some rural youth have often been ignored in such campaigns which are then exploited by politicians during elections.
- Critical interventions by development partners in supporting key institutions such as the electoral body, the justice system and the Police Force can help improve not just their response capacity but also the quality of such responses thereby improving state-society relations. Existing capacity building programmes where international partners are already involved can be expanded to have a wider reach and impact as such capacity building projects are capable of enhancing the capacity of CSOs to play their watchdog roles more effectively.
- Development partners should have more conversations on elections and governance with key actors in the civic space and let the outcome of such frank and open conversation inform the area of interventions to improve elections and eliminate violence.

Political Parties

- Political parties should engage in cross border interaction where conversations are underpinned by democratic norms and values and experience on what works is shared with the intent of strengthening multi-party democracy.
- Political parties should encourage inter-party dialogues with a view to re-interrogating their roles in strengthening democratic elections and jointly denouncing and refusing to instigate, aid or participate in electoral violence.
- Political parties should develop and implement internal reform agenda in partnership with civil society actors already working in that space. The purpose is to strengthen internal democracy and mechanisms that reflect democratic ideals and deepen the culture of peace.
- Political parties should support, subscribe to and identify with national electoral reforms and peace initiatives such as the signing of peace accords towards ensuring peaceful elections.
- Political parties should not just in theory but in practice, make intentional effort to promote inclusion by encouraging more women and youth participation in party affairs and elections that parties may reflect broad based ownership rather than a recycling of same people.
- Political parties should eschew actions, conduct and representations that reinforce existing divide along ethnicity, religion or any other fault-lines and build parties that mirror all constituencies and accommodate diverse interests. Over time, this has the potential of fostering positive perceptions, sense of belonging and reducing tensions during elections in the region.

g. Conclusion

Until recent major drawbacks arising from the unconstitutional change of government in at least four countries in the region, West Africa has made some progress during the prior two decades towards political liberalization. However, election-related violence as a result of deep structural and underlying social and economic challenges continue to undermine democratic consolidation in the region. Since it is established that physical, psychological and structural forms of electoral violence have implications for peace at national and regional levels, this think-piece showed that weak and corrupt governance institutions, a winner-take-all political system, identity-based patronage politics, and repressive response by the state towards protests and demonstrations, to name a few, combine to fuel violence before, during and after elections in West Africa. Thus, whereas countries such as Cape Verde, Ghana and Senegal have enjoyed relative stability and demonstrated ability to largely manage their elections several others in the Sahel and elsewhere in the region, have had their elections compounded by a protracted conflicts and violence. All of these have made the task of nation building much more arduous as citizens continue to lose confidence in democratic and public institutions.

It is obvious, from all the above, that the consequences of election violence in West Africa are far-reaching, and can easily wipe off the gains of political liberalization gained over the last two decades. Indeed, it is persuasive to insist that civil society-led initiatives though insufficient, may have prevented a worst-case scenario in terms of election processes and outcomes than is currently the case. The identified gaps require both immediate and long-term interventions to make elections violence-free and restore public confidence in democratic institutions. Stakeholders must leave the comfort zone of ensuring elections are conducted to enabling the conditions that ensure that credible, free and fair elections that reflect the will of the people are conducted. There is a compelling need and urgency to move beyond counting the costs to counting the gains of peaceful electoral processes that is inclusive and accountable in sustaining peace and stability in West Africa.



**A Network of People
Building Peace**

About GPPAC West Africa

The Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) is a global network led by civil society organizations (CSOs) actively working to prevent violent conflict and build more peaceful societies.

The network consists of 15 regional networks, with priorities and agendas specific to their environment.

The **Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC)** West Africa network is a network of over sixty (60) members including civil society organizations and researchers working on peace and security in the region.

GPPAC West Africa Regional network is currently hosted and coordinated by Building Blocks for Peace Foundation - a non governmental organization working on conflict prevention and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

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**Managing Election Violence and
Sustaining Peace and Security
in West Africa**