SILENCING THE GUNS, STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND PEACEFUL ELECTIONS IN WEST AFRICA

JUNE 2021

SILENCING THE GUNS, STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND PEACEFUL ELECTIONS IN WEST AFRICA

JUNE 2021

INTRODUCTION

Democratic governance in West Africa has been fragilized over the past decades by violent conflicts manifesting in the form of civil wars, coups d'états, ethnic, chieftaincy, religious and communal clashes. Added to this dire situation is the resurgence of violent extremism in the Sahel and Nigeria, with devastating consequences on the populations. Poor management of electoral processes coupled with existing socio-economic divides have further led to unprecedented violence with grave implications on regional stability.

Although, many countries in the region are currently experiencing relative peace, the proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) remains a concern. It is estimated that out of the 640 million SALW in circulation globally, about 100 million are located in Africa, with 30 million in sub-Saharan Africa[1]. In response to this emerging issue, the African Union, initiated in 2015 the ''Youth Silencing the Guns Campaign'' in support of the continental and regional frameworks on SALW regulations. The campaign, which was officially launched in July 2020, recognizes the critical role youth could play in preventing conflict on the continent[2]. It aims to achieve a conflict-free Africa, prevent genocide, make peace a reality for all and rid the continent of wars, violent conflicts, human rights violations, and humanitarian disasters[3].

In light of this development, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) organized a webinar under its Youth, Peace and Security Program on the theme: **Silencing the Guns, Strengthening Democratic Governance and Peaceful Elections in West Africa.** The session, which is part of the 'Youth Perspectives Webinar Series', provided a platform for youth to deepen reflections around peace and security matter in the region. It specifically aimed at:
- Sharing youth views on strategies to strengthen democratic governance to ensure peace and stability in the region;
- Raising awareness among youth on their active involvement and contribution to 'silencing the Guns' for a peaceful conduct of elections in West Africa.

The meeting was held over a two-day period on October 5th 2020, for Francophone participants and October 6th 2020 for Anglophone participants, bringing together eight (8) panelists with proven expertise in governance, youth, peace and security. About seventy-five (75) participants, mostly young people from civil society organizations and academia across the region, were in attendance. Key questions addressed included:
- Q1: What is needed for a strengthened democratic governance in West Africa to guarantee peace and stability in the region?
- Q2: How can youth contribute to the effectiveness of the 'Silencing the Guns Campaign' in the context of elections in West Africa?
- Q3: What role do youth CSOs or youth groups play to facilitate a positive contribution of their peers to peaceful elections in West Africa? What main challenges are they facing? How can their role be enhanced?
- Q4: What good practices exist to leverage on, for youth meaningful participation towards peaceful elections in West Africa?

This bulletin provides a summary of participants' discussions and deliberations on the questions.

---

[1] https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/african-small-arms-control
[2] The campaign aligns with ECOWAS Convention on small arms and light weapons, adopted in June 2006, the African Union Strategy on the Control of Illicit Proliferation, Circulation adopted in 2011, the 2063 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goal 16.
[3] https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/december-2019-march-2020/silencing-guns-campaign-kicks-2020#:~:text=The%20AU's%20campaign%20on%20E2%80%9CSilencing,rights%20violations%2C%20and%20humanitarian%20disasters.

Participants of the webinar provided an overview of the current democratic governance and shared their views on strategies to strengthen democratic practices in the region.

OVERVIEW OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICA

Democratic governance was defined as the system of governance characterized by the legitimation of governmental power through elections, legitimation of governmental politics through transparency, participation and accountability, and legitimation of governmental work through results[4]. From the participants' perspectives, this definition of democratic governance seems to be far from the reality of political governance in many States in West Africa. Over the years, democratic governance in the region, according to them, has suffered, among others, from weak institutions, improper political transitions and elections management, lack of democratic culture among citizens, leading to violence and lack of inclusion.

Weak institutions

Despite the existence of national, regional and international principles of democracy and human rights, many West African States, according to the participants, continue to face challenges, applying those principles. The recurrent political instability has exposed the limited implementation of democratic principles, compounded by the lack of strong and independent national institutions to support their realizations. The separation of powers which is a fundamental principle of democracy is still not a perfect reality in many States. The interference of political actors in the judiciary and legislative domains remains a cause for concern and does not guarantee the rule of law, justice, transparency and accountability. The demand for democracy has therefore been impelled by a vast resistance movement by the population, in reaction to the deterioration of their living conditions. Equally, the rise of sectarianism and regionalism to access position within those institutions, further question their credibility and reliability, resulting in weakening their strength and capability to entrench democratic practices and peaceful political transitions in the region.

Improper political transitions and poor election management

The participants noted with concern the phenomenon of presidential third term which has become another threat to peaceful political transitions in the region. Attempts to modify dispositions of constitution during the second term is a new strategy to prolong tenure in office by incumbent power-holders. This practice is a violation of ECOWAS 1999 Protocol relating to the mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Good Governance and democracy of 2001 that stipulates that ''every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections''. The wave of violence, recently witnessed in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea due to constitutional changes for a third term, in the opinion of the participants, should be a call for reflection on the implication of third term agendas in the short, medium and long term on democracy and stability of the region.

Elections have been identified by participants as another trigger of violence in the region. The inability of electoral bodies to follow due electoral processes and ensure fair, inclusive and transparent elections has heightened among opposition parties, the sentiments of exclusion and the lack of confidence in the process, resulting in violent demonstrations and contestation of election results.

---

[4] Democratic Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa, *Walter Eberlei, Faculty of Social Science and Cultural Studies, University of Applied Science Dusseldorf, Germany*

Lack of democratic culture and tolerance

Widespread perception of democracy in West Africa, according to participants, is that governments and institutions are the only maker of democracy, ignoring the important role citizens play in strengthening democratic governance in the region. They stressed that citizens have the responsibility to exercise their civic rights and control on the way various institutions and actors carry out their roles in respect of democratic principles. Citizens have equally the obligation to obey laws and comply to public order.

Another missing gap in the democratic governance in the region, that emerged from the discussions, was the lack of culture of peace, tolerance, and non-violence to solve issues. Violence has been the weapon used by many groups to express grievances on political and governance issues. This contributed to the spread of Small Arms and Light Weapons, threatening peace and stability in the region.
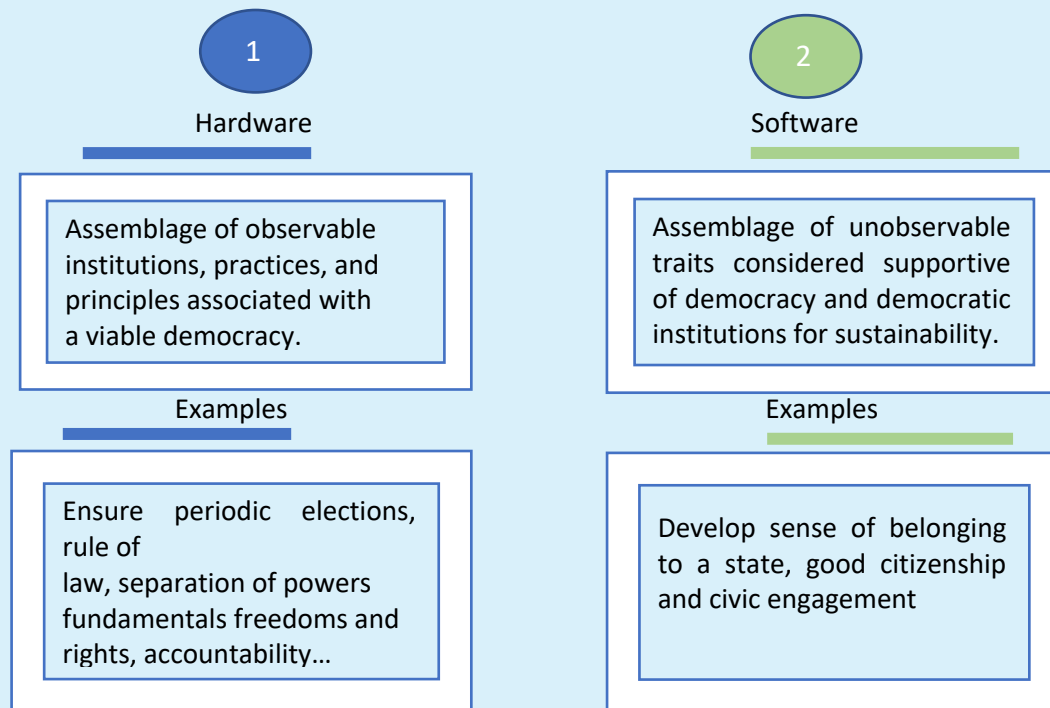
lack of inclusion in governance

Youth can be mentioned among groups that face social exclusion the most in West Africa. Participants noted with regret the continuous marginalization of youth from governance, despite member states' commitments towards their inclusion in decision making processes at all levels. Young people are not adequately consulted, nor involved in the policy development and implementation processes. This could result in a wrong appreciation by policy makers of their specific needs and priorities to be taken into consideration. When included, youth do not participate meaningfully to decision making. Their perspectives are not fully considered, which causes frustration among them, and has the potential of leading to some adverse effects regarding their contribution to the socio-political dividend.

Accessing leadership position in governance remains another challenge to youth participation. The lack of a binding legal framework and the inexistence of structures to ensure youth inclusion in governance are factors that impede on their participation.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN WEST AFRICA

Participants shared diverse opinions that emerge when it comes to developing strategies to strengthen democratic governance in West Africa. These can be categorized into three main dimensions: institutional, socio-economic, and political. While majority of people believe that a strong democracy will require strong technocratic, accountable and legitimate institutions, others are of the view that having technocratic institutions is not enough. They need to be associated with a provision of socio-economic needs, and civils and political rights. This is essential to reduce people's vulnerability to violence as poverty, inequalities and discriminations are some drivers of conflicts that destabilize democracy in the region. Another category of people believe that strengthening democratic governance in west Africa is a shared responsibility of governments, institutions and citizens. These perspectives further speak to the concept of hardware and software in democracy, according to participants.

Hardware vs sofware in democratic governance

1	2
Hardware	**Software**
Assemblage of observable institutions, practices, and principles associated with a viable democracy.	Assemblage of unobservable traits considered supportive of democracy and democratic institutions for sustainability.
Examples	**Examples**
Ensure periodic elections, rule of law, separation of powers fundamentals freedoms and rights, accountability…	Develop sense of belonging to a state, good citizenship and civic engagement

The 'hardware' approach to democratic governance focuses on building strong institutions. In contrast, the 'software' approach looks at developing the mindset and moral values of citizens.

Acting on structures, mechanisms and human being
In this section, participants suggested a holistic approach to strengthen democratic governance in West Africa. These include acting on structures/mechanisms and human being dimension

Structures and mechanisms
Specific intervention areas to improve governance structures and mechanisms need to focus on:

- Elaborating ambiguity-free Constitutions to avoid any manipulations by politicians;
- Establishing strong institutions with strict respect of the principle of separation of powers;
- Establishing transparent electoral rules and strengthening the mechanisms to promote transparent and inclusive elections;
- Establishing independent and financially autonomous Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to reduce risks of dependency on external actors and guarantee free and democratic elections.;
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation systems to assess and improve on governance;
- Moving away from the culture of policy improvisation to reflect the real aspiration and needs of the populations.

Human being (citizens)
Acting on the human being is equally important to strengthen democratic governance. They need to:

- Be educated in respect of democratic principles and established rules emanating from Constitutions and Laws;
- Be involved in promoting civic education to reinforce citizens' contribution to democratic governance;
- Promote African values of forgiveness, tolerance and living together, joking kinship, as a strategy to strengthen peaceful coexistence;
- Develop and instill the notion of "peoples" as enshrined in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

Addressing governance issues

Issues related to poverty, inequalities, violation of human rights and perceptions of marginalization, unemployment, underdevelopment, mismanagement of resources have resulted in many States facing social unrest and violence, mainly triggered by a loss of trust in governments institutions.

These vulnerability factors, according to participants, have more impact on young people, who represent about 53% of the overall West Africa population of 412,453,951 million[5] people. Often subject to manipulations due especially to their jobless condition, youth have played a key role in deadly wars that plagued the region in the 1990s. This speaks to the need of addressing structural issues that contribute to increase vulnerabilities to violence, especially, youth violence. Participants recognized that these structural issues could be overcome if strategic measures and remedies are identified and applied.

YOUTH CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACEFUL ELECTIONS IN WEST AFRICA

HOW CAN YOUTH CONTRIBUTE TO SILENCING THE GUNS DURING THE ELECTORAL PERIOD?

In May 2013, the African Union (AU), during the celebration of its 50th anniversary, adopted a solemn declaration, pledging to rid the continent of violent conflicts by 'Silencing the Guns (STG) by 2020'. To advance the STG agenda, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) developed in 2016, the AU Master Road map (AUMR) on practical steps to STG and acknowledged the crucial role youth could play in that regard. Participants underscored that the contribution of youth in silencing the guns is more relevant, especially during elections to help reduce electoral violence and its impact on regional peace and stability.

Three levels of youth engagement have been identified.

Election-Day
- Encourage and promote orderliness at polling stations;
- Discourage acts of potential violence
- Election observation - Mobilize ahead of polls for youth-led citizen election
- observation to verification of vote

Pre-Elections
- Civic and voter education/sensitization on electoral processes
- Advocacy for youth participation in the polls as candidates and electorates;
- Advocacy & support for peaceful election dispute management;
- Promote issue-based campaigns;
- Election monitoring; and
- Interventions to promote peace throughout the electioneering process

Post-Election
- Sensitization on non-violent actions pending announcement of election results
- Advocacy for use of peaceful/legal means to seek redress over contested results or allegations of irregularities

---

[5] https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/western-africa-population

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE GOOD PRACTICES OF YOUTH POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO PEACEFUL ELECTIONS?

Many good practices, from the participants views, could be leveraged for youth contributions to peaceful elections in the region. These include:

- *Involving youth in electoral management bodies*

A good example of youth involvement in electoral management bodies is the youth corps members in Nigeria. These are youth identified through a recruitment process and trained to support the management of the electoral process, mainly as registration and polling staff[6]. As a result, the professional conduct and patriotism exhibited by the youth corps members has improved the integrity of elections in Nigeria and contributed to the decline in post-election litigation[7]. As an example, there were 611 election related petitions in 2015, as opposed to 1,290 in 2007 and 732 in 2011. This strategy, beyond promoting youth participation in election management, instills values of volunteerism and active citizenship that are essential to build youth confidence and leadership.

- *Harnessing youth potential in technology for electoral violence mitigation*

In many countries, youth have employed their creativity and potential in technology and social media to positively contribute to peaceful elections. In Nigeria, the Zabe mobile application[8], was developed by the Centre for Civic, Citizen's Welfare and Community (CWCD Africa), a not-for profit organization, as a civic and election monitoring tool. Through this application, 10,000 citizen election observers comprising about 87% youth, were deployed across the country during the 2019 elections, crowd-sourcing the application with credible information on incidents, events, and results on the electoral process to help prevent violent conflict.

In Ghana, Penplusbytes, another non-governmental organization partners with youth, using the new technologies to strengthen governance, prevent misinformation and fake news during elections that could lead to electoral violence. By using software programmed with keywords to track what people are posting online during the polling process, young people have been able to identify problems on the ground and get them resolved quickly. During the 2012 elections in Ghana, when Penplusbytes used the software for the first time, it logged nearly 350 incidents[9].

On its part, WANEP has been engaging with young people in 14 ECOWAS Member States, as community monitors to feed its early warning system aiming at identifying risks of electoral violence to enable necessary preventive actions. Through its Election Monitoring Analysis and Mitigation project (EMAM), WANEP has built capacity of youth groups for online and social media monitoring to track any incidence or dysfunctions during elections that could degenerate into electoral violence.

- *Youth peaceful activism and participation in electoral debates*

Increasingly, youth organizations are taking an active part in the electoral debate and the organization of polls. They are creating networks, building capacity of their peers and leveraging on technology to mobilize support for social and political change. In some countries, civil society organizations, including youth organizations have been able to mobilize and take action against manipulations of constitutions

---

[6] http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/em/elections-and-youth/the-case-of-nigeria
[7] Idem
[8] http://www.osiwa.org/newsroom/how-are-young-africans-engaging-electoral-processes-lessons-from-nigeria-and-senegal/
[9] https://www.dw.com/en/using-social-media-for-good-during-ghanas-elections/a-36646065

and electoral time tables. In Senegal in 2011, under popular pressure of the social movement, dubbed ''Y'en a mare''[10], President Abdoulaye Ward was forced to abandon his attempt to change the constitution to lower from 50% to 25%, the proportion of votes needed to win the election in the first round. In Burkina Faso, young people played a key role in the demonstrations dubbed ''balai citoyen''[11], that led to the return to the constitutional order, after the attempt to change the number of terms by President Blaise Compaoré. In Nigeria, the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA) has played a key role in mobilizing youth and stakeholders to address the age issue, succeeding in getting the law changed to promote youth participation in the political life.

This resulted to, *"in total, 1,515 youth candidates, representing 23% of all the candidates, contesting for seats in the National Assembly; Ten candidates or 14% of the Presidential candidates aged between 35–40 years; Eleven or 15% of political parties fielding candidates for the Vice Presidential position that were aged between 35–40 years; and Youth candidacy increasing from 18% in the 2015 House of Representatives election to 27.4% in the 2019 House of Representatives elections."*[12]

CONCLUSION

The webinar generated rich critical and constructive discussions. Participants represented a cross-section of youth activists, youth from civil society organizations and academia across ECOWAS Member States. During the conversation, participants examined and outlined some of the main barriers to non-violent, peaceful and democratic governance in West Africa, including weak institutions, inadequate election management and governance transitions, poor democratic culture among citizens and lack of inclusion. As a result, participants outlined some solutions and formulated recommendations to strengthening democratic governance through non-violent youth participation.

The webinar underlined the importance of democracy as a collective good that requires participation from government, institutions and citizens alike. Achieving significant gains in the process involves establishing strong and inclusive governance mechanisms, building context-relevant and appropriate electoral systems and mechanisms, and nurturing fundamental democratic values and mindsets among citizens, leveraging the 'Silencing The Guns' campaign.

Lastly, participants observed that young people could contribute to peaceful and democratic processes in West Africa through their citizen control, peaceful activism, peace education and non-violent participation in electoral processes, harnessing their skills in technology to mitigate electoral violence

[10] https://sites.clas.ufl.edu/africanquarterly/files/Volume-14-Issue-3.pdf
[11] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Balai_Citoyen
[12] https://www.yiaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Factsheet-on-youth-and-the-2019-elections-in-Nigeria.pdf

ANNEX: MODERATORS AND SPEAKERS OF THE ENGLISH & FRENCH SPEAKING AUDIENCES

Moderators:
- **Mrs. Josiane Sombo**, Youth and Peace Education Program Officer, WANEP Regional Office
- **Mr. Kennedy Zaro Barissa**, Head of Division, Youth Sports and Employment, Department of Social Affairs and Gender, ECOWAS Commission
- **Mr. Constant Gnacadja**, ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Program Officer, Directorate of Political Affairs, ECOWAS Commission

Speakers:
Topic 1:   What is needed for a strengthened democratic governance in West Africa to guarantee peace and stability in the region?

- **Mr. Moctar Kane**, African Youth Ambassador for Peace, West Africa
- **Mr. Ibrahima A. MAIGA**, Teacher / Researcher, Secretary General of the National Network for Democratic and Patriotic Awakening, Mali
- **Dr. Alex Mayeul LAGAUD**, PhD in Public Law, Human Rights Activist, Côte d'Ivoire

Topic 2:   How can youth contribute to the effectiveness of the 'Silencing the Guns Campaign' in the context of elections in West Africa?

- **Ms. Mfrekeobong Ukpanah**, Early Warning Officer/Youth4Peace Africa Program Peace and Security Department, African Union Commission
- **Ms. Mensah Dede Edwige P**., Coordinator - WANEP Capacity Building Support Program for the African Union

Topic 3:   What role do youth CSOs or youth groups play to facilitate a positive contribution of their peers to peaceful elections in West Africa? What main challenges are they facing? How can their role be enhanced?

- **Mr. Mohammed Insuah Jackson**, President of the Northern Regional Youth Network, Ghana
- **Mr. Sylla Abdourahamane**, Rapportor of the Youth Ambassadors for Peace, Matoto, Guinée

Topic 4:   What good practices exist to leverage on for youth meaningful participation towards peaceful elections in West Africa?

- **Mr. Oluwafemi Michael Emmanuel**, Student in Peace Studies and Conflict Management & Support Staff of WANEP Nigeria
- **Mrs. AMANA-AMOUSSOU Laure**, in charge of the Youth and Peace Education Program WANEP-TOGO

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES

ELECTRONIC BULLETIN

West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP)

Trinity Avenue, Off Mile 7 Road, Achimota, Accra

P.O. Box CT4434, Cantonments, Accra-Ghana

Tel: +233 302 411638 I 302 406340 I 302 426004 I 302 408224

Email: wanep@wanep.org I Website: www.wanep.org