

# Understanding the Gains and Challenges of Democratization Process in Sub-Saharan Africa: Is Democratic Progress Under Threat?

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**Abstract:** The aim of this research is to examine the achievements and challenges of the democratization process in Sub-Saharan Africa and to answer whether democratic progress is under threat. Focusing on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger—countries with regional and historical similarities—the research seeks to understand the common dynamics of democratic development in these countries. The research employs a comparative framework to analyze their democratization processes. The findings of the research highlight two main conclusions: First, all the three countries have experienced a significant increase in voter participation, stronger public support for democracy and electoral processes and a notable opposition to one-man and one-party rule. Second, the democratization processes are frequently interrupted by military coups, authoritarian tendencies of leaders and electoral violence. While the research acknowledges the substantial progress made, it also emphasizes that significant challenges persist, which continues to weaken political institutions and processes. These challenges continue to hinder the full realization of democratic governance in these three countries and lead to regime changes.

**Keywords:** Democratization, Sub-Saharan Africa, Democratic Transition, Authoritarianism, Democratic Backsliding.

**Öz:** Bu araştırmanın amacı, Sahra Altı Afrika'daki demokratikleşme sürecinin kazanımlarını ve zorluklarını incelemek ve demokratik ilerlemenin tehdit altında olup olmadığı sorusuna cevap vermektir. Bölgesel ve tarihsel benzerliklere sahip ülkeler olan Burkina Faso, Mali ve Nijer'e odaklanan araştırma, bu ülkelerdeki demokratik gelişimin ortak dinamiklerini anlamaya çalışmaktadır. Araştırma, demokratikleşme süreçlerini analiz etmek için karşılaştırmalı bir çerçeve kullanmaktadır. Araştırmanın bulguları iki ana sonuca dikkat çekmektedir: Birincisi, üç ülke de seçmen katılımında önemli bir artış, demokrasiye ve seçim süreçlerine yönelik daha güçlü bir kamuoyu desteği ve tek adam ve tek parti yönetimine karşı önemli bir muhalefet deneyimlemiştir. İkincisi, demokratikleşme süreçleri sıklıkla askeri darbeler, liderlerin otoriter eğilimleri ve seçim şiddeti tarafından kesintiye uğramaktadır. Araştırma, kaydedilen önemli ilerlemeyi kabul ederken, siyasi kurumları ve süreçleri zayıflatmaya devam eden önemli zorlukların da devam ettiğini vurgulamaktadır. Bu zorluklar, bu üç ülkede demokratik yönetimin tam anlamıyla gerçekleşmesini engellemeye devam etmekte ve rejim değişimlerine yol açmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Demokratikleşme, Sahra Altı Afrika, Demokratik Geçiş, Otoriterleşme, Demokratik Gerileme.

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## Introduction

Since the collapse of the bipolar system, a broad consensus on the value and the desirability of democracy has emerged, which has remained the “only game in town” (Linz, 1990) in the absence of an alternative regime to challenge it. Due to the impact of internal and external factors, sub-Saharan African leaders have also taken significant steps towards democratization, willingly or unwillingly. African democratization movements gained significant momentum in parallel with global changes as African countries were transitioning from one-party or military regimes to multi-party systems. While numerous democratic gains have been achieved, it is worth noting that there are a number of issues that are severely impacting them. The uniqueness of this region in making rapid democratic progress while at the same time creating conditions that erode these gains requires close monitoring of the democratic process. In current studies on the democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa, it is seen that significant issues such as military coups (Mendy and Mendy, 2024; Akinola and Makombe, 2024), authoritarian tendencies of political leaders (Cassani, 2020) or electoral violations (Fjelde and Höglund, 2016; Bekoe and Burchard, 2017; von Borzyskowski et al., 2022) are handled separately and independently. This research examines the democratization process in a more holistic way compared to previous studies considering these three factors together. It also has a strong emphasis on its historical context. For a more comprehensive analysis of the process, the political and economic developments that took place from independence to the onset of the Third Wave of Democratization should also be considered.

The aim of this research is to examine the achievements and challenges of the democratization process in Sub-Saharan Africa and to answer whether democratic progress is under threat, specifically focusing on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. These countries were selected due to their similar historical and regional contexts. The research employs a comparative framework to analyze their democratization processes. The study was conducted thorough a review of primary and secondary sources, including government documents, policy papers, and academic literature, to trace the evolution of democracy in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study consists of four parts. The first part deals with the regime preferences of post-independence governments. Also, it focuses on why democratic systems could not be built during this period. In the second part, this process is tackled emphasizing the internal and external factors that accelerate the democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa. The third part outlines the gains of the democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa and finally, the fourth part discusses the primary challenges to African democratic consolidation and the threats that weaken the democratic gains

and tries to answer whether democratic progress is under threat. While the research acknowledges the substantial progress made, it also emphasizes that significant challenges persist, which continues to weaken political institutions and processes. These challenges continue to hinder the full realization of democratic governance in these three countries and lead to regime changes.

## **Understanding the Post-Independence Political Regime Preferences of Sub-Saharan Africa**

Following World War II, sub-Saharan Africa experienced a wave of political change, with most countries gaining independence and the political map being redrawn. New constitutions were adopted to establish political institutions and define their functions. Often referred to as “second-hand” constitutions, these were modelled after the systems of former colonial powers. British colonies adopted parliamentary systems based on the Westminster model, while former French colonies followed the executive-dominant structure of France’s 1958 Fifth Republic Constitution (Decalo, 1992). For example, Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali each adopted their first constitutions after gaining independence from France in 1960, reflecting both their unique contexts and colonial legacies. Burkina Faso’s constitution created a semi-presidential system, Niger’s established a parliamentary system with a powerful president and Mali’s set up a presidential system with a strong executive.

However, the struggle for independence did not have a liberal character. Political leaders transformed popular support for the anti-colonial struggle into a means of authoritarianism. Soon after independence, almost all new governments turned to authoritarianism (Brown and Kaiser, 2007). The young and independent sub-Saharan African states faced two other major political challenges such as maintaining the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups and national integration. Thus, in order to find solutions to these issues, they first had to decide which form of government they would adopt (Decalo, 1992). After the independence of sub-Saharan African countries, two key political developments emerged. One was the rise of one-party systems across the continent. Some leaders argued that a one-party system with its concentrated power was the best way to ensure peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnic and religious groups and to promote national integration. They also asserted that it was the best choice for achieving economic growth and poverty eradication in developing societies (Prempeh, 2007; Decalo, 1992; Legum, 1990).

It was claimed that party politics would exacerbate ethnic conflicts and lead to violence and thus hinder growth and development. Consequently, competitive politics with more than one party was regarded as a means of accelerating ethnic,

religious and other social divisions and politicizing these groups and was rejected. Based on this viewpoint, the representation of the people and their participation in government, namely democracy, could only be realized through a one-party state (Prempeh, 2007; Decalo, 1992; Legum, 1990). As Ikome (2007) points out, many post-independence leaders deemed dissenting views and alternative ideologies as potentially destabilizing for the fragile new states. Therefore, the new political system shaped by this approach led to the restrictions on citizens' rights and freedoms, the low citizen participation in political life, the depoliticization of the people, the prohibition of opposition parties from operating and the absolute control of political power by a small elite group in these states (Teshome-Bahiru, 2008). The second striking political development was the frequency of military coups. By 1986, two-thirds of Africa's 49 independent countries had been under military rule or had experienced multiple coups after independence (Wanyande, 1987). In the first 30 years following independence, African states experienced numerous successful and unsuccessful military coups (Lynch and Crawford, 2011).

In Mali, after independence, President Modibo Keita established a one-party socialist state, but was overthrown in a 1968 coup by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who created a military regime and a one-party system. In Niger, President Hamani Diori created a one-party system in 1960, which continued until the 1974 coup by General Seyni Kountché (Higgott and Fuglestad, 1975), who introduced political and economic reforms. However, he maintained a one-party system with the Democratic Centralist Party until 1991 (Baudais, 2021). The military's influence on politics hindered the development of civil politics, paving the path for authoritarian and totalitarian regimes to take root. Political instability resulting from the coups became the most obvious feature of these states (Ihonybere, 1997).

### **Understanding the Third Wave of Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Most sub-Saharan African countries gained independence through a multi-party system (Brown and Kaiser, 2007). When the colonial period ended in the 1950s and 1960s, it was expected that independent sub-Saharan African countries would transition to some form of democracy. But several forms of autocracy came up (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984). Crowder (1987) argued that the rapid collapse of democracy after independence was inevitable due to the anti-democratic nature of African states and leaders' use of democracy for personal gain. The masses soon realized that the new leaders had no intention of fulfilling their nationalist promises. Most 1960s nationalists sought "political kingship" but failed to improve political, economic, social, or cultural conditions. Oppression, corruption, economic collapse and inequality became widespread, leading people to view independence as a burden.

As Ihonvbere (1996) noted, “nationalists of yesterday became ruthless dictators.” Patrimonialism, where personal power blurred public and private spheres, became the norm in African states.

African countries experienced a deep economic bottleneck due to the global economic crisis caused by the oil crisis of the 1970s. African countries, which were economically hit, were forced to join a massive debt quagmire in order to survive the crisis. The economic crisis, which intensified in the 1980s, was reflected in the political arena and critical political issues such as deterioration of political institutions, abuse of civil liberties, increase in crime and lawlessness, ineffectiveness and inefficiency of bureaucratic structures, widespread corruption, increase in social conflicts and political instability emerged following this economic crisis. The crisis led to the alienation of citizens from governments and institutions and governments began to lose their legitimacy one by one towards the end of the 1980s (Prempeh, 2007; Ihonybere, 1997).

These developments resulted in the central authority being severely weakened, the emergence of armed rebels challenging the state, civil wars and the bankruptcy of states. The governments that lacked alternative source of credit were forced to request emergency loans from financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Structural adjustment programs were implemented and a series of reforms were adopted. However, austerity measures led to high unemployment, drastic cuts in public services and high price rises for consumer products and services. Thus, riots and protests erupted throughout countries (Prempeh, 2007; Ellis, 2000). In February 1990, students at the University of Niamey in Niger protested the cuts in education funding mandated by structural adjustment programs (SAPs). During peaceful demonstrations, the police opened fire killing 3 according to official sources and 14 according to students, with many others injured. In Burkina Faso, SAPs in the early 1990s led to public spending cuts and the privatization of state-owned firms, causing rising unemployment and declining wages (Education International, 2009).

The legitimacy crisis was compounded by the transfer of power of domestic economic policy and administration to external entities. Opponents of the regime and civil society took action during this period, calling for regime change or democratic and constitutional reforms to re-establish legitimacy (Prempeh, 2007; Ellis, 2000). Thus, orthodox structural adjustment programs implemented by governments with weak legitimacy not only dragged African economies into a wider crisis, but also led to riots and uprisings, deepening the crisis of legitimacy. The demonstrations and uprisings against structural adjustment programs also strengthened the opposition

and pro-democracy movements. Citizens began to see the state, which remained indifferent to their problems, as a dangerous, evil institution to be avoided, challenged, deceived and, if possible, destroyed (Ihonvbere, 1996).

Nzongola-Ntalaja (2006) sees this democracy movement as a social protest against the failure of the post-colonial state to meet people's expectations. Indeed, in the late 1980s, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) spoke of a "lost decade". Social and economic conditions reached unprecedented levels: Hunger, poverty, unemployment, inflation, food shortages, crime, prostitution, disease, crumbling infrastructures, schools without teachers, hospitals without doctors and medicine and hopelessness were the words that best described this period (Ihonvbere, 1996). Accordingly, the most important pressure for democratic reform came from civil society. Various parts of society came together as a strong social opposition defending democracy. Internal actors such as churches, trade unions, associations, women's organizations, professional associations, farmer cooperatives, community groups and finally political parties played a key role in Africa's "second liberation" (Thomson, 2010).

External actors, including donors, lenders and NGOs shaped Africa's political change imposing conditions for more financial support and requiring commitment to democracy and human rights (Haynes, 2004). The World Bank's 1989 report (World Bank, 1989), *Sub-Saharan Africa: Sustainable Growth from the Crisis*, explained Africa's post-independence crisis and proposed a roadmap to recovery. While structural adjustment programs showed some progress, the report stressed that economic reforms alone were insufficient. It emphasized the need to address governance, human capacity, institutions and citizen involvement in development programs. The World Bank concluded that poor economic performance was due not only to bad policies but also to a governance crisis, urging African governments to reform both political systems and economic policies (Ellis, 2000).

The fall of the Berlin Wall, which resulted in the collapse of the one-party nations in Eastern Europe, was another significant event that expedited the path to democratization in Africa. The Third Wave began following the decline in authoritarian regimes, particularly in Southern Europe and Latin America. In Africa, this wave was characterized by the end of colonialism and the subsequent rise of military and single-party regimes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many of these regimes faced pressure for reform, leading to increasing calls for democratization. For Harsch (1993), "The language of the 1990s is quite different. It is now a time of "transition to democracy," not only in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but in Africa and some other parts of the Third World as well."

The emergence of Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and the 1989 revolution in Eastern Europe changed fundamentally both the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. As the Soviet Union's strength weakened, civil society in Moscow's satellite governments began to protest in a domino effect. When the Union disintegrated, the old command economies ceased to be a source of aid and ideological inspiration to African states. Thus, the "people's power" overthrew the communist governments in the east. Events in Eastern Europe in 1989 showed strikingly that one-party regimes could be overthrown (Riley, 1992; Thomson, 2010). In the late 1980s, the overthrow of the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceausescu impressed African leaders. Ceausescu strongly opposed the freedoms of Glasnost and Perestroika reforms and resisted giving the people a voice, particularly in governance. As a result, African countries faced increasing pressure to initiate constitutional reforms to lay the legal and institutional institutions for democratic governance, following the wave of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe (Mulikita, 2003). As Omar Bongo, the former President of Gabon, affirmed at the La Baule Francophone African Summit, "winds from the East were shaking the coconut trees" (Wiseman, 1996). Thus, the changing global environment at the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought about an international environment that provided a less supportive context for authoritarianism (Wiseman, 1995).

As the global order shifted, Western governments and international institutions increased their influence on Africa, making political reform a key part of African governments' agendas. Since the early 1990s, political reform has been regarded as a condition for additional aid. In 1990, French President François Mitterrand announced at the La Baule summit that France would prioritize aid for promoting freedom and democracy. The importance of political conditionality was further emphasized at the 1991 Harare Commonwealth Summit and by the European Community, which stated that future aid was contingent on improvements in human rights, democracy and press freedom (Gillies, 1996; Riley, 1992). As a result, African leaders regarded the transition to multi-party elections as a requirement for continued aid, as the donor community insisted on meeting "democratic" conditions. Thus, democracy was viewed by African rulers as a means of securing financial assistance, rather than a path to development (Chabal, 2002). Thomson (2010) argues that this transition cannot not be considered as a situation desired by authoritarian leaders. It was more of a concession they had to make reluctantly. Many believed that they could maintain their power and control the pace of reform thanks to this concession. Therefore, they believed that by manipulating the process, they could achieve their goals. These ultimate survival strategies of the ruling elite bore fruit to some extent.

## Gains of the Democratization Process in Sub-Saharan Africa

In some sub-Saharan African countries, there was a transition period between the end of the old regime and the establishment of a new democratic regime. The most influential body in the process of creating new institutions was the National Conference (Nzouankeu, 1993). First, following the example of Benin, national conferences were held in Congo, Togo, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Zaire and Chad. African leaders understood that elites from non-governmental groups could meet in a public national forum via national conferences to offer solutions to a state's political and economic crisis. The national conferences that took place in 11 countries between 1990 and 1993 were largely previous French colonies. A similar set of constitutional reforms was implemented one after the other in almost all African countries (Höglund, 2009).

In response, many sub-Saharan African countries have revised or created new constitutions, implementing democratic reforms. Modern African constitutions have legalized opposition parties, limited presidential terms, authorized independent courts for constitutional review and guaranteed civil and political freedoms. Agreements on a return to multi-party politics between governments and opposition were made, marking unprecedented liberal concessions in post-colonial African history (Hessebon, 2014). Thus, although the process differed between countries, mass uprisings and demonstrations were chronologically followed by national conferences, referendums on the new constitution establishing multi-party politics, ratification of multi-party constitutions and holding multi-party elections (Yoon, 2001). Reformers aimed to establish the separation of powers, with ruling parties recognizing the need to separate the state from political parties and removing provisions granting party supremacy. New constitutions legalized opposition parties and provided parliaments with more powers to challenge the president (Mulikita, 2003).

Brown and Kaiser (2007) argue that respect for presidential term limits adopted as part of the democratization process is a simple barometer of the internalization of democratic rules. A growing number of African presidents successfully ended their terms thanks to presidential term limits, particularly with more recent revisions. They thereby established the framework for a new political succession tradition (Hessebon, 2014). Burkina Faso's constitution, adopted in 1991, initially allowed for two terms in power while Mali's 1992 constitution established a two-term limit for the presidency. Niger's constitution, adopted in 2010, established a two-term limit for the presidency. Mahamadou Issoufou, the first president elected under this constitution, respected the term limit and stepped down in 2021 after two terms. Limiting presidential powers in Africa was seen as a major step forward in African constitutionalism. Constitutional

reforms prompted reluctant African autocrats to act and by the late 1980s, single-party legislatures, military juntas, and presidents with indefinite terms were no longer dominant across the continent (Prempeh, 2007).

The 1990s saw a transition in African elections from one-party systems to constitutional reforms that supported political pluralism, one of the significant democratic principles. While the pace of change varied, nearly all the sub-Saharan African countries adopted multi-party systems during this period (Prempeh, 2007). The repeal of the constitutional provision granting monopoly status to a single ruling party and reforms legalizing opposition parties, led to a surge in political parties across Africa. The average number of registered parties in sub-Saharan Africa rose from 1.9 in 1975 to 15.9 in 1993. Meanwhile, public demand for political reform and international pressure forced many ruling parties to hold elections, resulting in the ousting of long-ruling leaders through the ballot box (Mulikita, 2003). The re-emergence of multi-party governance in Africa was viewed as a solution to the crisis of authority. For leaders, there was no better antidote to the crisis of authority than the re-legitimation of the state through multi-party elections (Thomson, 2010).

Competitive multi-party elections surged in Africa during the 1990s. Before 1989, only Mauritius and Botswana held regular multi-party elections, but most African nations held them for the first time. By the end of the 20th century, there were twice as many elections in Africa in the 1990s as in the previous three decades. Over time, multi-party elections became the norm in practically all the sub-Saharan African states. While 29 African states were ruled by a one-party constitution in 1989 and one-party rule became a form of government, there was no single one-party state until 1994 (Prempeh, 2007). For example, Mali embraced multi-party democracy after a popular uprising in 1991 and the first multi-party elections were held in 1992. Niger established a multi-party system in the 1990s following a transition from military rule, and the first multi-party elections were held in 1993.

Thus, tremendous progress has been made in adopting multi-party politics since the 1990s, especially following the end of the Cold War. This progress is considered not only as a result of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, but also as a direct response to internal public pressures against dictatorial regimes, which were mostly military dictatorships. Multi-party and competitive elections are a commonplace feature of political systems in most of these countries. However, in face of global and regional changes in the normative and institutional framework, it has become increasingly impossible to sustain political governance through other means and methods (Matlosa and Zounmenou, 2011: 93).

One of the most important indicators of democratic processes is voter turnout. Participation in elections reflects the democratic maturity of a country, citizens' involvement in governance and the acceptance of the electoral process by the public. In this context, examining how voter turnout changed in the West African countries Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from the 1990s to the 2020s is crucial for understanding the democratic developments in the region. In this sense, the comparison between the first multi-party parliamentary elections of the 1990s and the last parliamentary elections of the 2000s in the African Francophone countries reveals that the most significant increase in voter turnout over an average 30-year period is in Niger (33.07%-76.96%) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021).

In Burkina Faso, voter turnout in the 1991 presidential elections was 35.25%, whereas it rose to 50.79% in the 2020 presidential elections. Similarly, voter turnout in the 1992 parliamentary elections was 33.80%, while it increased to 50.70% in the 2020 parliamentary elections (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, n.d.). This increase can be regarded as part of Burkina Faso's democratization process. The 1991 elections reflected the public's desire to participate in the political process after many years of authoritarian rule. By 2020, voter participation had reached a higher level, indicating a trend of growing trust in democratic governance, political stability and voter awareness. A similar development is observed in Niger. In the 1993 presidential elections, voter turnout was 32.55%, whereas it rose to 62.91% in the 2021 presidential elections. Additionally, in the 1993 parliamentary elections, voter turnout was 33.05%, while it increased to 76.96% in the 2020 parliamentary elections (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, n.d.). This significant increase in Niger can be seen as a result of the steps taken in the democratization process, particularly since the early 2000s. The increasing participation in elections is parallel to the establishment of democratic norms and the public's growing desire to engage in governance more. In particular, the 76.96% turnout in the 2020 parliamentary elections is a strong indicator of the public's keen interest in political processes. In Mali, voter turnout remained relatively low compared to the other two countries. In the 1992 parliamentary elections, voter turnout was 21.09%, while it increased to 35.58% in the 2020 parliamentary elections. In the 1997 presidential elections, turnout was 28.83% and in the 2018 presidential elections, it rose to 34.42% (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, n.d.). The increase in turnout in the 2020s can still be seen as part of an effort to restore public trust in democratic processes and an expectation of improvement in democratic participation.

The increases in voter turnout in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali are significant indicators of progress in the democratization processes in these countries. The

significant increases in Burkina Faso and Niger show that public participation in the democratic process has grown and the desire for a greater role in governance has strengthened. In contrast, Mali has shown limited increases due to political instability and security issues. Nonetheless, the rise in voter turnout across all the three countries signals to the growing trust in democratic values and an increasing awareness of the importance of participation. In conclusion, the changes in voter turnout in these countries can be seen not only as a reflection of the electoral processes but also an indicator of the public's growing confidence in democratic governance and their desire to be involved. These countries, having made significant strides in democratization, have the potential to develop stronger democratic structures and achieve higher levels of participation in the future.

**Table 1**

*Support for Democracy, 2011-2023 (Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?)*

<b>Country - Total</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<b>Mali</b>	<b>Niger</b>
It doesn't matter what kind of government we have	15,6%	16,4%	18,9%
Sometimes non-democratic preferable	13,1%	22,0%	11,4%
Democracy preferable	68,2%	60,9%	66,3%
No answer; Refused	0,001%	-	0,0%
Don't know	3,1%	0,6%	3,4%
(N)	6,000 (100%)	6,000 (100%)	5,998 (100%)

**Source:** Afrobarometer, 2024.

**Table 2**

*Choose leaders through elections vs other methods, 2011-2023 (Probe for strength of opinion: Do you agree or strongly agree? We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections. Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.)*

<b>Country - Total</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<b>Mali</b>	<b>Niger</b>
Choose leaders through elections	83,0%	77,9%	80,2%
We should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders	15,6%	21,0%	19,0%
Agree with neither	0,7%	0,9%	0,3%
No answer; Refused	0,001	-	0
Don't know	0,8%	0,2%	0,5%
(N)	6,000 (100%)	6,000 (100%)	5,998 (100%)

**Source:** Afrobarometer, 2024.

**Table 3**

*Reject one-man rule, 2011-2023 (There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? Elections and [Parliament] are abolished so that the [president] can decide everything.)*

<b>Country - Total</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<b>Mali</b>	<b>Niger</b>
Strongly Disapprove	37,2%	55,6%	46,8%
Disapprove	40,7%	26,0%	28,7%
Neither Approve Nor Disapprove	3,1%	3,2%	4,0%
Approve	11,3%	8,4%	10,9%
Strongly Approve	3,6%	5,4%	5,3%
Missing	-	-	0,1%
No answer; Refused	0,1%	0,1%	0,1%
Don't know	4,0%	1,7%	4,3%
(N)	6,000 (100%)	6,000 (100%)	5,998 (100%)

**Source:** Afrobarometer, 2024.

**Table 4**

*Reject One-Party Rule, 2011-2023 (There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.)*

<b>Country - Total</b>	<b>Burkina Faso</b>	<b>Mali</b>	<b>Niger</b>
Strongly Disapprove	38,4%	52,0%	53,8%
Disapprove	39,6%	23,9%	26,5%
Neither Approve Nor Disapprove	2,3%	2,9%	2,8%
Approve	13,6%	10,9%	11,0%
Strongly Approve	4,6%	9,7%	5,3%
Missing	-	-	0,0%
No answer; Refused	-	-	0,1%
Don't know	1,6%	0,2%	0,6%
(N)	6,000 (100%)	6,000 (100%)	6,000 (100%)

**Source:** Afrobarometer, 2024.

Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4<sup>1</sup> offer valuable insights into public opinion on governance and democracy in the three African countries: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The data show key aspects of democratic values, including support for democracy, preferences for electoral processes and attitudes toward non-democratic models such as one-man and one-party rule. A significant majority of respondents in all the three countries express a clear preference for democracy to other forms of government. Niger leads with the highest support for democracy and is followed closely by Burkina Faso and Mali. The rate of support for democracy in the three countries reinforces the idea that, despite political challenges and instability in the region, democracy is the most preferred form of governance (see Table 1). When it comes to the process of selecting leaders, a striking rate of respondents, 77-83% of them in all the three countries favor regular elections. Burkina Faso has the lowest support for elections, while Niger shows the highest level of support. This demonstrates a robust endorsement of democratic principles, even when in contexts where elections may sometimes be seen as flawed or less effective (see Table 2).

Rejection of one-man rule is also widespread, with approximately 75-82% of respondents in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger opposing one-man rule. Overall,

1 The data represents the average of the figures from 2011/2013, 2014/2015, 2016/2018, 2019/2021, and 2021/2023.

majorities in all the three countries strongly reject systems where the president holds unchecked power. This reflects a consistent preference for democratic governance, as evidenced by the substantial opposition to one-man rule across the region (see Table 3). Similarly, public opinion on one-party rule reveals a clear rejection of political monopolies. The overall percentage of respondents who strongly disapprove of one-party rule is 48.7%, with the highest levels of strong disapproval observed in Niger (53.8%) and Mali (52.0%). In Burkina Faso, the figure is slightly lower, 38.4%, yet still reflects a significant opposition to one-party rule. The disapproval (but not strongly) is also notable, with Burkina Faso (39.6%) and Niger (26.5%) showing high percentages, while Mali (23,9%) exhibits the greatest proportion of those who disapprove without strong feelings. Overall, the data confirm that a large majority of respondents in all the three countries reject the idea of one-party rule, reinforcing a commitment to democratic values and political pluralism in the region (see Table 4).

### Challenges to Democratization Process in Sub-Saharan Africa

In the 1990s there was an enthusiasm for rapid change and many called this process the “second liberation” or “second independence” (Riley, 1992). With this wave of democratization, the continent witnessed the strengthening of a new social movement for political change. Nearly 30 years had passed since the first wave and an economically and socially better life was common to both movements (Ihonvbere, 1996). Some African scholars were optimistic about describing the constitutionalism developments as “the rebirth of African liberalism” and even talked about the “second liberation” of Africa. On the other hand, some scholars took a more negative view of the process, arguing that the reforms served the continent’s good standing abroad rather than domestic politics. Recalling the history of “constitutions without constitutionalism” in post-colonial Africa, sceptics and “Afro-pessimists” point to the prevailing patterns of authoritarianism and illiberalism in present-day Africa and warn of the possibility of “unchangeable transition” (Prempeh, 2007).

Despite the passage of time, most of the African states have not reached yet the level of deepening and institutionalizing democracy. After autocratic one-party systems or military regimes disappeared, the enthusiasm that swept the continent gave way to an Afro-pessimism in the early 1990s, as one government after another tried to weaken the democratic content of the constitutions that were enthusiastically adopted. Although it has been nearly 30 years since most countries in the continent agreed to transition to democratic rule, it is noteworthy that efforts to deepen and institutionalize democracy have been interrupted. In most of these states, one-party rule has been replaced by a series of hybrid regimes that fall behind idealized liberal democracy. These regimes that combine elements of both democratic and

authoritarian governance, may have some democratic features such as elections and political pluralism, but they are characterized by significant limitations on political freedoms, civil liberties and the rule of law. For this reason, it is stated that there is a disappointment regarding the promise of democracy (Ihonvbere and Mbaku, 2003; Ndegwa, 2001). It is a valid argument that in almost all new democracies in Africa, democratic efforts have suffered major setbacks and the quality of political systems has not improved. Despite declarations emphasizing democratic values and liberal and democratic new constitutions, once elected, leaders ignored all democratic principles and manipulated the system. Hence, it has become clear that the solution is not to adapt the institutions of Western democracy to Africa (Adetula, 2011).

The continuing impact of militarism on the democratization process cannot be ignored. Although little progress was made in breaking the influence of the military on politics, extending from the 1960s when the sub-Saharan African states gained their independence to the 1980s, militarism continued to be one of the biggest obstacles to the democratization process. Matlosa and Zounmenou (2011) describe this situation as “a ghost that has haunted the democracy project”. Despite the region’s progress towards democratization, militarism occasionally emerges, reminding that African democracy is an ongoing process, constantly being built and rebuilt. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the army completely withdrew from African politics during the second liberation period (Lynch and Crawford, 2011). For example, Burkina Faso and Mali experienced two military coups within a single year. On August 18, 2020, a group of soldiers in Mali staged a coup, detaining President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and forcing him to resign. Following the coup, the military junta established the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). The CNSP set an 18-month timeline for the country’s transition to civilian rule. However, as the transition period progressed, military activity surged in Mali once again (TRT Haber, 2021). In Burkina Faso, in January 2022, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba seized power from President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who had been the first to come to office through democratic elections, citing the government’s failure to address security issues. Then, in September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré and his supporters claimed that Damiba had been ineffective in solving the country’s problems and took control of the government, suspending the constitution in the process (Euronews, 2022). The political environment shifted dramatically, moving away from the previous democratic framework established in the early 1990s. Finally, in 2023, another military coup took place in Niger. The government was ousted, the constitution was suspended and a military junta was established. A new government was formed under the leadership of General Abdourahamane Tchiani.

Additionally, one of the most important and widespread problems of recent years is the violation of the presidential time limit rule. For example, while the presidents of

some countries comply with their country's two-term limit, others attempt to amend the constitutions in order to be a candidate again after exceeding this period and they use the legislature or referendum for this. The concept of constitutional coup is used to refer to the case of amending the constitution in a way that eliminates such tenure and/or age limits for presidents and allow the incumbent president to extend his term unconstitutionally. Elections lose their effectiveness as a democratizing tool as a result of these constitutional coups. Even worse, in certain nations, the circumvention of term limitations has given rise to more violent and catastrophic uprisings by marginalized ethno-cultural groups. Once more, recent constitutional amendments have produced circumstances that make it challenging for the opposition to compete in elections (Mbaku, 2020). Following the defeat of former dictators, incoming leaders often use their powers to ensure that they remain in office longer than constitutionally mandated term limits, leading to a 'backsliding' towards authoritarianism. In Mali, for example, reasonably fair elections were followed by subsequent electoral contests that were significantly less transparent. Only 7 out of 16 run-off elections between 1995 and 1997 were found to be free and fair (Brown and Kaiser, 2007; Bratton, 1998). The democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa is also hindered by election delays. In Burkina Faso, the elections planned for 2020 were repeatedly postponed due to security concerns and political instability. The military junta announced a transition period instead of a firm election date. In Mali, legislative elections set for March 2020 were delayed multiple times due to security issues and COVID-19, with further postponements after the 2021 coup. The elections, originally scheduled for 2022, were postponed to 2023 due to ongoing instability. In Niger, elections scheduled for 2022 were also delayed due to rising violence from militant groups.

Popper (1989) argues that the key feature of democracy is not who governs, but how power changes hands, emphasizing peaceful transitions through popular vote. Przeworski et al. (2000) also regard power transfer as central to democracy. By the 1990s, elections had become a cornerstone of African politics, promoting representation, accountability and peaceful political transitions (Fjelde and Höglund, 2016). However, electoral violence, which can occur before, during, or after elections, remains a significant issue. This violence, aimed at influencing election outcomes, undermines the electoral process and democracy (Höglund, 2009). For instance, the presidential elections in Mali were marred by violent incidents. Intimidating the voter, the presence of individuals without voter cards and widespread violence that prevented many from casting their ballots overshadowed the electoral process (VOA, 2018). Similarly, during the 2020 parliamentary elections, there were numerous disturbances, including attacks on election commission representatives and voters, the destruction of voting equipment, vote-buying and kidnapping the opposition

leader (France 24, 2020). In 2021, post-election violence in Niger led to several deaths and hundreds of people were arrested (France 24, 2021). Electoral violence deters voters from participating in the election, disrupts elections and hinders the long-term sustainability of democratization, weakening both peace and democratic progress in Africa. In the 2020 parliamentary and presidential elections in Burkina Faso, voters were threatened by extremists and urged not to cast their ballots. The violence prevented people from registering and voting and many polling stations were closed due to security threats, according to officials (Euronews, 2020). While Africa has taken some steps toward democratization since the 1990s, the process is far from complete and faces significant challenges, including military influence, weak institutions, election-related violence and the manipulation of constitutional rules. These issues have led to a persistent gap between the formal adoption of democratic institutions and the reality of governance, often undermining the hopes for a genuinely democratic and liberal order across the continent.

**Table 5**

*Satisfaction with democracy by year* (Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (country)? Are you:)

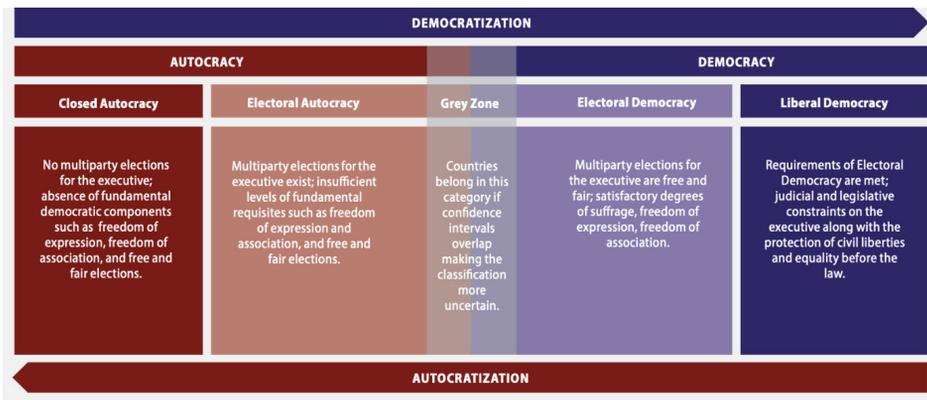
	<b>2011/2013</b>	<b>2014/2015</b>	<b>2016/2018</b>	<b>2019/2021</b>	<b>2021/2023</b>
<b>Country - Burkina Faso</b>					
Not a democracy	8,2%	12,2%	5,4%	8,7%	23,1%
A democracy, with major problems	25,4%	27,0%	24,5%	25,8%	37,0%
A democracy, but with minor problems	30,9%	33,3%	35,5%	42,0%	28,1%
A full democracy	23,9%	18,0%	27,7%	21,8%	8,4%
Do not understand question/democracy	3,9%	4,2%	4,1%	0,6%	0,8%
Missing	-	-	-	-	-
Not applicable	-	-	-	-	-
No answer; Refused	-	-	0,1%	0,2%	0,0%
Don't know	7,7%	5,2%	2,6%	0,9%	2,6%
(N)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)
<b>Country - Mali</b>					
Not a democracy	12,3%	4,7%	8,7%	19,4%	21,4%

A democracy, with major problems	48,4%	38,7%	50,0%	54,1%	51,0%
A democracy, but with minor problems	24,4%	34,5%	28,1%	17,6%	15,0%
A full democracy	12,0%	20,4%	12,1%	7,9%	10,0%
Do not understand question/democracy	1,4%	1,4%	0,5%	0,6%	1,2%
Missing	-	-	-	-	-
Not applicable	-	-	-	-	-
No answer; Refused	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	1,6%	0,2%	0,7%	0,3%	1,4%
(N)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)
<b>Country - Niger</b>					
Not a democracy	4,5%	3,4%	9,9%	9,8%	10,9%
A democracy, with major problems	21,0%	14,6%	38,4%	28,9%	33,0%
A democracy, but with minor problems	29,4%	31,4%	29,7%	34,0%	27,7%
A full democracy	39,2%	38,9%	17,6%	24,3%	23,7%
Do not understand question/democracy	1,4%	3,4%	3,0%	2,1%	1,9%
Missing	-	-	-	-	-
Not applicable	-	-	-	-	-
No answer; Refused	-	-	-	-	-
Don't know	4,5%	8,2%	1,4%	1,0%	2,8%
(N)	1,199 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,200 (100%)	1,199 (100%)	1,200 (100%)

Source: Afrobarometer, 2024.

The data presented in Table 5 reflect citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger over five different periods: 2011/2013, 2014/2015, 2016/2018, 2019/2021 and 2021/2023. Each country's respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the way democracy was functioning in their country. In all the three countries, there was a noticeable trend of increasing dissatisfaction with democracy, with a growing percentage of respondents believing that their countries were either "not a democracy"

or “a democracy with major problems.” In all the three countries, there was a steady decline in the percentage of people who regarded their country as a “full democracy.” The data reveal that ongoing political, security and governance challenges in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have led to increasing frustration with democracy in these countries. Fluctuations in satisfaction with democracy are likely related to political instability, military coups and the growing influence of jihadist groups on the Sahel region. These factors have weakened citizens’ trust in their governments’ ability to maintain democratic governance, resulting in rising frustration with the functioning of democratic institutions.



**Figure 1:** Regimes and Regime Change

**Source:** Nord et al., 2024.

Democracy in sub-Saharan Africa has declined to the level similar to that of the 2000s. Over the past five years, the region has experienced a deterioration in democratic conditions, largely due to coups in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. In 2023, Burkina Faso and Mali were classified as closed autocracies, while Niger was categorized as an electoral autocracy. Additionally, Burkina Faso and Mali are among the top 10 countries that have experienced “bell-turn” autocratization. “Bell-turn” cases can be viewed as instances of “failed democratization” or re-autocratization. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are three of the five “bell-turning” cases that made the initial transition to democracy but later saw their collapse. Burkina Faso began its democratization process after the 2015 military coup and subsequent general elections. However, by 2018, the country had quickly entered a process of “bell-turn” autocratization. In 2022, two consecutive military coups took place and the country saw an increase in armed conflicts. A decree issued on April 13, 2023, granted the military more authority to restrict civil liberties during counterterrorism operations, placing additional pressure on civil society and the media. The 2024 elections were postponed indefinitely. In just

two years, Burkina Faso shifted from an electoral democracy to a closed autocracy. Mali's "bell-turn" process began with significant improvements in 2014, when the country transitioned to an electoral democracy following the 2013 presidential elections, which restored civilian control over the government. However, the autocratization phase of bell-turn started in 2017 and by 2018, amid increasing instability, Mali had become an electoral autocracy. The military coups of 2020 and 2021 led to a closed autocracy in Mali, which was still ongoing as of 2023. Niger also serves as an example of bell-turn autocratization following a military takeover. The 2011 general elections brought Niger to the status of an electoral democracy. However, tensions from the conflict in Mali had begun to spread to neighboring countries by 2016, prompting the Nigerian government to impose restrictions on freedom of expression. The 2020-2021 elections symbolized Niger's first-ever peaceful transfer of power, but in July 2023, the newly elected government was overthrown by a military junta. By the end of 2023, Niger had become a closed autocracy (Nord et al., 2024).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the democratization process in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a complex and evolving process, with both significant advances and formidable setbacks. While countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have taken notable steps in adopting new constitutions, establishing multi-party systems and adopting democratic reforms such as term limits, the path to full consolidation of democracy remains challenging. The enthusiasm of the 1990s, often referred to as the "second liberation," has gradually been tempered by harsh realities such as political instability, military interventions and erosion of democratic principles in many parts of the region.

One of the central obstacles to deeper democratic consolidation is the persistent influence of the military on political affairs. Despite formal transitions to civilian rule, military coups have disrupted democratic progress in key countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, leading to the suspension of constitutions and civil liberties and the delayed return to civilian governments. This recurring military involvement reflects the fragile nature of the democratic gains made so far, underscoring the challenges of establishing stable political systems free from the shadow of military control.

In addition to military interventions, the manipulation of constitutional frameworks—particularly regarding presidential term limits—has further hindered the development of democratic governance. The rise of "constitutional coups," in which leaders amend constitutions to extend their term limits, has contributed to the erosion of public trust in democratic institutions and the perpetuation of authoritarian tendencies. This manipulation, coupled with election-related violence, intimidating

the voter and irregularities in the electoral process, has undermined the legitimacy of elections, weakening the role of elections as peaceful means of political change.

The growing disappointment with democracy, as evidenced by rising dissatisfaction in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, further complicates the democratization process. The gap between citizens' high expectations for democracy and the failure of political systems to deliver on promises of effective governance has contributed to declining faith in the democratic process. The rise of insecurity, the proliferation of extremist groups in the Sahel and ongoing economic crises have exacerbated these frustrations, making it more difficult for governments to effectively address the needs of their population and maintain political stability.

Despite these significant challenges, the progress made since the 1990s is promising, albeit uneven. The increasing political engagement of citizens, especially in countries like Burkina Faso and Niger, where voter turnout has been rising, suggests that there remains a deep-seated desire for democratic governance. The widespread rejection of autocratic rule and the growing commitment to pluralism and democratic values suggest that African societies are seeking more inclusive, transparent and accountable political systems.

Ultimately, while the road to full democratic consolidation in Sub-Saharan Africa is still long and troubled with obstacles, the momentum for change is undeniable. The region's democratization process will require continued efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure the rule of law and promote peaceful transitions of power. Only through overcoming these persistent challenges can Sub-Saharan Africa realize its potential for a stable democratic future in which the aspirations of its citizens for good governance and political participation are fully realized.

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