



*Centre pour la Démocratie,  
le Développement et la  
Culture en Afrique*



# ISLAND POSITIONS

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## Political Transitions in the Sahel and its impact on civic voices of women and youth in Mali and Burkina Faso

### Executive summary

Gorée Institute presents a 'Island position' as a policy brief series intended to contribute to the ongoing political discourse around the need for inclusive and peaceful political transition in Mali and Burkina Faso. This is in line with key deliverable of multi-year Power of Dialogue Program of Gorée Institute designed to promote a peaceful democratic space and inclusive, responsive, and representative political decision-making process at all levels.

In essence, the 'Island Position' reflect the opinion of concerned citizens in Sahel and other West Africans states, who willingly responded to key questions during this study and expressed collective concerns in search for peaceful solution to the political deadlock in the two countries in Sahel. This has been to stimulate moral policy imagination and consciousness of regional, state, and non-state actors to encourage active participation of women and young people within transition agenda of the two countries.

The Island Position postulates that failing to involve women and youth from the embryonic stages of political transition can become a missed opportunity to influence post-transition political stability. This thus necessitates an inclusion of this civic group at every phase of transition including constitutional review and policy formulation processes to ensure their needs, interests and expectation are guaranteed within the transition agenda. This position is also maintained from the viewpoint that women and young people constitute the largest proportion of citizens of Sahel and are by and large the pioneering influence of change to difficult political situation. However, they are equally victims of bad governance, political manipulation, political instability, the ongoing humanitarian challenges, as well as ECOWAS sanctions and embargo impose on countries in response to unconstitutional change of governments.

As recently documented across West Africa, bad governance, corruption, and marginalization drives this civic group to take to the streets to influence change of regimes that are perceived to be incapable of delivering social contracts. As recently witnessed, street protests pioneered by this civic groups have challenged democratically elected governments in Mali, Guinea-Conakry, and Burkina Faso to the extent of triggering military coups. However, respondents of this study affirmed that their civic voices are increasingly becoming less useful to policy makers within the framework of political transition in the two countries.

### Recommandations

- The Governments to reassure citizens of their commitments to the full implementation of the agreement and transition action plans with mindset on delivering the popular aspiration of women and young people
- Government should provide resource to ensure conflict prevention measures are constantly in place in collaboration with CSOs with the thematic expertise in conflict prevention and peacebuilding to start sensitizing the public about peace and security issues in the context of political transition.
- The Governments to reassure citizens of their commitment to the full implementation of the agreement and transition action plan with mindset on delivering the popular aspiration of women and young people. This should also include manifesting genuine commitment to fast tracking peaceful political transition plan that will also include sustain peacebuilding, humanitarian and development agenda.
- The Governments should encourage an inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders without exception, as a viable and inclusive approach in the search for security sensitive democratic transition in Mali and Burkina Faso; as such appealing for commitment of states and non-state actors to creating a conducive environment for dialogue.
- The Governments to encourage the active participation of women and youth in the overall transition action, amidst the expressed concern that failing to involve this civic groups from the nascent stages of national consultative dialogue and negotiation process towards consensus building during political transition could have been a missed opportunity to have all voices to influence democratic transformation
- ECOWAS to provide support for local initiatives that seek to reverse the erosion of presidential term limits. Such support could include the adoption of specific protocols to commit presidents to uphold norms and principles enshrined in the ECOWAS Protocol with respect to presidential term-limit.
- ECOWAS to deal with the regional dimension of Violent Extremism in West Africa aimed at tackling the regional dimension of the threat.

## 1. BACKGROUND

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2020, the world woke up to the news of a coup d'état in Mali. The army had toppled a democratically elected president forcing him to resign, leading to the dissolution Parliament. Nine months later, in May 2021, a segment of the military junta again ousted the transition government thereby plunging the country into another political crisis. ECOWAS appointed a mediator, but this move had a very limited impact on the situation on the ground as the military extended the transition period to five years.

Similarly, Burkinabe President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was overthrown in a military coup, announced on state television in January 2021, thereby ending more than six months of public demands for resignation. Kaboré was re-elected for a second term in 2020 in an election that just over half of the registered voters took part. At the time of the presidential election, 926 polling stations could not open due to the country's ongoing security situation. On 30 September, less than eight months after the coup by lieutenant-colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, another coup was staged by captain Ibrahim Traoré who declared himself President of the transition and promised to continue the fight against terrorism and insecurity.

Analysts maintain that the trend of increasing coups in West Africa perhaps reflects the growing dissatisfaction of the citizens with the political situation compounded by high levels of corruption and fundamental breaches of civil liberties and democratic gains. For example, ECOWAS in return imposed economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions on Mali but has since lifted the embargo.

Addressing the 77<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly, the prime minister of Mali reiterated that the military would transfer power to elected officials in 2024 as significant progress had been made by the passing of the electoral law, the establishment of an election management authority and the creation of a commission to draw up a new Constitution.<sup>1</sup> However, citizens are skeptical about the transitional action plan.

<sup>1</sup> Navigating Mali's Political Transition-ISS Africa

## 2. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

### *Women And Youth: A Pioneer of Political Transition in Sahel*

West Africa has recently witnessed rapid democratic decline following constitutional manipulation, shrinking civic space, and unconstitutional change of governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Conakry, and attempted Coup in Guinea Bissau. Evidence from in-depth discussion with respondents from these countries shown that democracy and the underpinning principles of democratic good governance are regarded by citizens of these countries as an abstract concepts and political game with formal and informal rules played by political actors competing to access state resource at the tears of improvised segment of society. It has been also pointed by many political commentators in Sahel that the ongoing civil wars, expansion of violent extremism, coup d'états as well as anarchic security situation in Liptako Gourma<sup>2</sup> are part of the dominant pattern of economic and political survival strategy of state and non-state actors through underworld economy.

According to some respondents, the perceived negligible attitude of policy makers presents deep worries in the conscience of women and youth who mastermind massive protest actions against democratically elected governments, whilst the beneficiaries of the change itself are politicians who formulate policies that does not often reflect the needs and expectation of women and youth who influence change process.

It was self-evident that, with the help of information and communications technology (ICT), young people use various forms of social media platform to inspire their pairs and influence change. A remarkable example of such youth movement seen in Sahel include Y'en a Marre (Fed Up)<sup>3</sup> in Senegal; and Le Balai Citoyen

<sup>2</sup> Liptako Gourma region is common borders between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, which is deeply affected by a complex crisis involving growing competition over dwindling resources; climatic variability; demographic pressure; high levels of poverty; disaffection and a lack of livelihood opportunities; communal tensions; the absence of state institutions and basic services; and violence related to organized crime and Non-State Armed Groups.

<sup>3</sup> Y'en a Marre (Fed Up) is a group of young people founded by rappers and journalists in Senegal in 2011 to protest against

(The Citizen's Broom)<sup>4</sup> of Burkina Faso at a critical crossroad in two countries post-independent political history.

However, experience has shown that, the hopes and aspirations of women and young people are easily transformed to civic frustration, as their expectations of benefiting from socio-economic opportunity dreamt about often rapidly dwindle and fade away after transfer of power or any positive development in the political context. As witnessed in Burkina Faso and Guinea-Conakry, women and young people have become increasingly skeptical about the capacity and willingness of their respective military governments to fast-track political process leading to transfer of power to civilian governments.

As in the recent protest actions witnessed in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Conakry leading to military coups, women and young people demanded better economic and employment opportunities, as well as increased transparency, accountability, and widening civic space. Most importantly, as in the case of Burkina Faso, poor policy directives, and the lack of political option to address rapid expansion of militia groups, the killing of innocent civilians and humanitarian situation in rural communities have been re-echoed by the coup makers.

Likewise, in Togo, Guinea and Ivory Coast, women and young people demonstrated against dictatorships, constitutional manipulation, the extension of presidential term limits, the lack of transparency during elections and unpopular socio-economic policies. In many of these protests, some young people lose their lives owing to heavy handed response by state security officials as witnessed in Senegal in March 2021.

Some young people from Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali interviewed during Gorée Institute youth Mentorship program in July 2022 affirmed that they lack trust and confidence in policy makers. This has changed their hope and political aspiration into disappointment, frustration, and

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poor governance and to mobilise young people to vote during elections.

<sup>4</sup> Le Balai Citoyen (The Citizen's Broom) is a youth political grassroots movement in Burkina Faso that organises protests and rallies against poor governance and in support of citizen movements.

lack of interest in political affairs of their respective countries. They were also of the consensus that most women and young people risked their lives to influence change. Unfortunately, politicians and their families who are silent spectators to the change influencing process are mostly the beneficiaries of the change itself. Therefore, the failure of the political class to address youth aspirations and to meaningfully include them in the decision-making process has led youth to feel excluded from the transitional process, despite their leading role in the influencing change itself.

### 3. DIVERGENT SCENARIOS AND FEAR FACTORS

From the backdrop of the problem and situation analysis presented, this policy brief is presenting divergent scenarios and fear factors, which could be dependent on the way the respective transition agenda of Mali and Burkina Faso are designed and implemented; as well as what will be the implication for post-transition stability if one scenario is remain the true option as against the other. One need to bear in mind that the scenarios are more speculative rather than predictive based on the descriptive vulnerability analysis and with implications.

#### 3.1. Best Case or Happy Ending Scenario

If the transition agenda of the two countries are well implemented with significant consideration to active participation of women and young people; with results widely accepted by the dissatisfied political actors, and the general citizenry, there is a good indication that the two governments are moving towards constitutional possibility with significant sign of respect for the rule of law. However, it is also believed that democratic processes go beyond electoral processes of a nation, rather how to sustain post-transition governance by reforming and strengthening independent democratic institutions with the mandate to protect democratic gains.

In the process, women and youth are encouraged to express their voices to influence the blueprint

for democratic transformation; and their opinions taken into consideration in all phases of the transition process including constitutional review process, new policy formulation and implementation to ensure that their rights are guaranteed and preserved in post-transition democratic dispensation.

It is also worth stating that this scenario could be dependent upon the two military governments willingness to relinquish power, exit the political scene, serve as a neutral arbitrator to the transition process, and return to their respective military careers. However, as experienced has shown, there has always been an exit bargaining strategy or trade-off by military juntas after critical cost benefit analysis. The question which citizens must be mindful of is: What will they lose as against what they could benefit from relinquishing power either with or without guarantee of any political safe passage? The question could be thought provoking or speculative. However, it requires thorough analysis to guide the processes. Otherwise, the slightest doubt during negotiated settlement to attain win-win trade-off might result to delay or derailing of the transition roadmap.

### **| 3.2. Worst-Case Scenario (1)**

If the two military governments attempt to stay in power, there is a high possibility of significant political instability in an uncertain security landscape, which will undoubtedly take the form of massive street protests, youth violence, as well as heavy handed response from state security. If it does happen, citizen could doubt the neutrality of Election Management Bodies, and credibility of the election. This scenario must be avoided at all costs as it will have created opposition boycott of the elections, thereby resulting to increased election-oriented violence.

In the process, the rights to freedom of association as guaranteed in Article 20 of UDHR and freedom of expression as guaranteed in Article 19 of the ICCPR and the UDHR, Article 9 of the ACHPR; as well as the fundamental rights that underpin effective democratic societies could have been violated. These threats will have been deepened in an already declined civic space, whilst Civil Society Organizations, Gender Advocacy Groups, and youth-led organizations

team up with opposition political actors against the respective military governments, as they try to institute authoritative tendencies to derail the transition process. Attention will have been deviated from the ongoing peacebuilding and conflict prevention process in the rural communities amidst the rapid expansion of violent extremism – to political tug of war between the military and opposition politicians on the one hand, as well as civic groups calling on the international and regional community to influence the position of the military junta to withdraw from the political landscape.

### **| 3.3. Worst Case Scenario (2)**

The Military leadership support a presidential candidate that offers an excellent trade-off and exit strategy. This scenario will depend on the identity of the individual or political party supported by the military juntas. The fear factor embedded in this scenario is that favoring close associate of military junta against other candidates, who could be widely regarded as a sympathizer with very close ethnic affiliation, or political party interest to the leadership of the military juntas could deepen division and political intolerance. There is a tendency that this will trigger cross-ethnic anger and frustration, which opposition politicians could use to manipulate frustrated youth with ethnic sympathy to take to the street or trigger cross-ethnic violence.

One needs to bear in mind that ethnicity is linked to social, political, and economic opportunities and political persuasion in West African societies. Therefore, deep-rooted political rivalries are mostly part of the root causes of election-related violence. By all indications, the leadership, and supporters of political parties, as in every West African society are dominated by regional ethnic affiliation. Therefore, the interplay of ethnicity and the competition for executive and legislative power will continue to affect public political debates in the months ahead of elections. The challenges include how to deal with such threats to the countries' political transition, particularly when political party affiliations in the two countries are largely dependent on personal alliance on ethnic and regional lines, as well as increased expectation from political actors to transform the promising economic aspiration of women and young people. This is expressive of

the fact that, some women and young people will have anchored strong uncontrollable-emotional attachment to political parties and their leadership owing to expected benefits. The fear factor is that the slightest political favoritism exhibited by the leadership of military juntas along ethnic or regional line have the tendency to trigger an increased the level of political intolerance and politically motivated violence before, during and in the aftermath of political transition.

#### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POST TRANSITION GOVERNANCE

This depends on any of the scenarios that one might wish to experiment. However, evident-based experience has shown that the period following transfer of power from military to civilian government could be very volatile, as they are often bound to experience number of structural challenges including in addressing urgent social and economic expectations of women and youth. Already, social services are underprovided, state institutional capacities are low, and the focus of attention then are often how to respond to immediate political issues, rather than initiatives that can produce some economic benefit and security needs of citizens.

In such a scenario, transfer of power, is often perceived to be the end of social, political and economic challenges. Evident-based experience has shown that, donor partners often turn their attention elsewhere after transfer of power at this point without effective system in place to monitor or support post-transition agenda including institutional reform, creating employment opportunity and widening civic space for women and youth to be actively involved in political decision-making process. So far, experience shows that problems and disputes connected to the implementation or non-implementation of post-transition governance agenda can be relentless and can even lead to recurrence of many governance and security challenges, particularly in such an uncertain political environment like that of Sahel.

Marginalization of women and young people, especially unemployed youth that have been directly involved in street protests, and those that

have been manipulated by political actors to serve as their hoodlums often sow the seeds for renewed discontent and violent responses. There is an unmistakable lack of urgency about these and similar problems, which often makes matters worse. In such context, high levels of violence are sometimes politically motivated but more often the nature of common crimes and lawlessness often complicates the issues (Deutsch and Coleman, 2000)<sup>5</sup>.

The donor communities usually focus mainly on reform of political systems, at the detriment of other social and economic areas that will benefit grassroots or rural communities (Lyons, 1999).<sup>6</sup> Some critics such as Kumar (1998)<sup>7</sup> argued that too much attention and resources are directed towards the fulfilment of narrower political goals, which also threatens the success of the broader and more comprehensive implementation of post-transition economic agenda.

Within the ongoing context, one could imagine gradually growing economic challenges indicative of rising inflation, skyrocketing prices of staple food and youth unemployment, thereby leading to intermittent youth violence, lawlessness, and gradually escalating instability in rural communities. In such scenario, key issues related to the root causes of the armed conflict including radicalization of young people are often largely left uncertain as they were before the military takeover. Besides, there is a tendency that international military support could be leaning towards dealing with political and military issues but failing to undertake decisive action to address urgent grassroots social problems in rural communities including poverty, displaced, food insecurity as well as cross border security issues.

The anticipated reality is that tensions could mount periodically because young people might not have experience significant change to their existing economic condition following transfer of power from military to civilian government. What might happen in the two countries between

<sup>5</sup> Deutsch, M. and Coleman, P.T. (eds) (2000) *The Hand Book of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher.

<sup>6</sup> Lyons, T. (1999) *Voting For Peace; Post-Conflict Election in Liberia*. Washington D.C.: Booking Institution Press.

<sup>7</sup> Kumar, K. (ed) (1998) *Post Conflict Election, Democratisation and International Assistance*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.

now and 2024, will set the stage for post-transition stability.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The political transition in Mali and Burkina Faso could pose threats to continuing democratic instability in an already fragile security environment if the processes are not inclusively managed. Normalizing the country's political landscape after several years of abuse to democratic principles resulting to coup d'états thus call for effective implementation and monitoring of transition action plan – not just elections, but also how to strengthen institutions that are expected to protect and sustain democratic gains after the anticipated transfer of power from military to civilian rule. This is more related to how to create post-transitional functional states that can deliver effective services, and being responsive and accountable to citizens' needs, interests, as well as the demands of women and young people.

There is also a need to be more conciliatory, whilst discussing key trade-offs, which must be win-win situation for both the military junta and citizens. The priority is the restoration of balance within post-transition government in the context of full spectrum of democratic principles and reforms that must provide opportunity for women and young people to express their voice. In this regard, the best possible option could be development outcomes that must go beyond immediate political and security settlements, but medium and long-term post-transitional development agenda that could have emanated from National Consultative Dialogue and negotiated settlement at multiple levels.

One should be mindful that dialogue during political transition should involve bringing previously excluded groups including women and young people to contribute to solution to the respective countries' social, political, and economic future. In this respect, a neutral platform must be adopted to involve various civic groups that have previously been marginalised to achieve wider national consensus and foster post transition stability. The fear factor is that sustaining position that exclude certain groups based on identity or political ideology or divergent views has the tendency to spoil,

undermines consensus and weaken post-transition national cohesion and development at the expense of post-transition stability.

## 6. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1. The Military Governments in Mali and Burkina Faso

- The Governments to reassure citizens of their commitments to the full implementation of the agreement and transition action plans with mindset on delivering the popular aspiration of women and young people
- Government should provide resource to ensure conflict prevention measures are constantly in place in collaboration with CSOs with the thematic expertise in conflict prevention and peacebuilding to start sensitizing the public about peace and security issues in the context of political transition.
- The Governments to reassure citizens of their commitment to the full implementation of the agreement and transition action plan with mindset on delivering the popular aspiration of women and young people. This should also include manifesting genuine commitment to fast tracking peaceful political transition plan that will also include sustain peacebuilding, humanitarian and development agenda.
- The Governments should encourage an inclusive dialogue involving all stakeholders without exception, as a viable and inclusive approach in the search for security sensitive democratic transition in Mali and Burkina Faso; as such appealing for commitment of states and non-state actors to creating a conducive environment for dialogue.
- The Governments to encourage the active participation of women and youth in the overall transition action, amidst the expressed concern that failing to involve this civic groups from the nascent stages of national consultative dialogue and negotiation process towards consensus building during political transition could have been a missed

opportunity to have all voices to influence democratic transformation

## **| 6.2. ECOWAS Secretariat**

- ECOWAS to provide support for local initiatives that seek to reverse the erosion of presidential term limits. Such support could include the adoption of specific protocols to commit presidents to uphold norms and principles enshrined in the ECOWAS Protocol with respect to presidential term-limit.
- ECOWAS to focus more on playing more proactive role towards preventing abuse of the 2001 protocol; pre-empting potential democratic breakdowns and to discourage unconstitutional change of government in all its forms.
- ECOWAS to deal with the regional dimension of Violent Extremism in West Africa aimed at tackling the regional dimension of the threat.

## **| 6.3. Civil Society Organizations**

- CSOs should actively engage all political actors to publicly commit to respecting the rights of their political opponents before, during and after the elections; and also sensitise the public on the need to work together in the spirit of national unity and social cohesion, and to refrain from any actions that could obstruct or undermine the transition process and its aftermath.
- CSOs should mobilizes and maintain common voice and builds capacity of women and young people as part of a collective effort to empower them to stand for what they deserve.
- CSOs should continue identifying acceleratory and triggers conflict indicators during political transitions, and to also continue strengthening partnership with local authorities at community level to respond to early warning signs.
- Civic groups including traditional and religious leaders, women's groups, the youth

and the media should play key roles in helping to foster political tolerance before and in the aftermath of transition. In other words, CSOs should intensify their campaigns on political tolerance, non-violence, national unity and cohesion.

- Gender Advocacy Groups should engage all political actors and their supporters to preserve the peace and stability of the target countries.
- The women and youth groups should mobilize a critical mass to ensure that their voices and positions are heard and considered in the promotion of national reconciliation, and attaining sustainable peace, security and post-transition development process.

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