SPECIAL REPORT:

WEST AFRICA 2020 ELECTIONS RISK OUTLOOK

24 January 2020

Six West African states are due to hold presidential elections this year. As these countries prepare to vote, a democratic recession seems to be underway alongside an intensifying Islamist militant threat and potential for political violence in the region. EXX Africa explores the risk outlook in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Niger, and Togo.

Over the course of 2020, six West African states will prepare to hold presidential elections in very different political, economic, and security contexts. While an expanding Islamist insurgency in Burkina Faso and Niger presents a significant challenge to the electoral process, in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Guinea, developments surrounding the upcoming elections indicate that democratic values face strong resistance from entrenched political elites. Moreover, even in historically democratic and peaceful states, the threat of unrest lingers for 2020, including in Ghana. Some of these risk indicators were assessed in EXX Africa's recent Africa 2020 risk outlook report (See SPECIAL REPORT: AFRICAN 'WINNERS AND LOSERS' IN 2020).

Taking these factors into account, there is an elevated threat of political violence across the region, as West African citizens have displayed increasing intolerance of authoritarian tendencies and a greater willingness to mobilise in public displays of discontent. EXX Africa's latest analysis briefing unpacks the outlook for each West African country.
Burkina Faso will hold general elections in November 2020. This will be the country’s second general election since the 2014 uprising which removed former President Blaise Compaoré. Current President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré has announced his intent to run for a second term in office, facing his chief opponent former Burkinabe Prime Minster, Kadré Désiré Ouedraogo.

Kaboré is facing broad scrutiny over his government’s perceived failure to stem the spread of militant violence from neighbouring Mali. In the past year, Islamist militant groups have reportedly killed over 250 civilians in attacks in northern and south-eastern Burkina Faso, all while drawing on support from Burkinabé communities with unresolved grievances over public-sector corruption and a lack of economic opportunities. Kaboré has blamed the spread of violence on factors external to Burkina Faso: the unresolved Libyan crisis and delays in the provision of international funding for the G5 Sahel Joint Force (See BURKINA FASO: COMMERCIAL IMPACT OF INTENSIFYING MILITANT ATTACKS).

As such, over the coming year, Kaboré’s prospects are likely to be determined by developments within the insurgency, as well as his government’s handling of inter-communal conflicts and the needs of socio-economically marginalised communities. The insurgency is also likely to affect the elections process itself, with a state of emergency already declared in six of the country’s 13 regions due to escalating violence. Militant attacks are likely to intensify in the run up to the election, which will in turn further highlight Kaboré’s shortcomings (See BURKINA FASO: TOWARDS ANOTHER MILITARY INTERVENTION AS INSECURITY INTENSIFIES).

Nevertheless, while the election is likely to be closely contested, Kaboré is at present the favoured candidate. According to the World Bank, under Kaboré, Burkina Faso’s economic growth increased from 5.9 percent in 2016 to 6.3 percent in 2017 to 6.8 percent in 2018, largely driven by improvements in the mining and services sectors. Over 2019-2021, it is further expected that GDP will remain high, stabilising at six percent. There is also some hope regarding the Islamist insurgency in the country over the next six months following a January 2020 commitment from...
France to deploy an additional 220 troops to the region and to create a new military structure that will combine the 4,000 G5 soldiers and 4,500 French forces under one structure to address the militant threat (See WEST AFRICA: THE RESILIENCE OF BOKO HARAM AND ISLAMIC STATE).

Côte d’Ivoire

Côte d’Ivoire will hold Presidential elections on 31 October 2020. Current President Alassane Ouattara originally stated that he would not seek another term in office, seemingly opening the country’s political space to a new generation of Ivorian politicians. However, in January 2019, former President Laurent Gbagbo was acquitted by the International Criminal Court (ICC), eight years after being accused of orchestrating violence against the opposition following his electoral loss to Ouattara in 2010. Ouattara has since indicated that he may run for a third term if Gbagbo is a candidate in 2020.

Even before his announcement to run however, Gbagbo’s government had implemented various restrictions on the opposition, including the issuing in December 2019 of an international arrest warrant for former speaker of parliament and opposition leader Guillaume Soro on allegations of planning to destabilise the regime. Soro remains in exile in Europe, while at least 15 of his most prominent allies in Abidjan have been jailed, raising the risk of protests in the run-up to the election.

While Côte d’Ivoire’s constitution allows for a president to be re-elected only once, Ouattara argues that the introduction of the new constitution in 2016 has reset the term-limit counter. As such, it remains unclear what the electoral field will look like by October and who will be most likely to win at this stage. In 2018, Ouattara’s former coalition partner, for example, Henri Konan Bédié, defected to the opposition and has indicated that he may run in 2020, but has yet to formally commit. Gbagbo, on the other hand, remains in Brussels on conditional release pending the outcome of an appeal by ICC prosecutors while Soro is exiled (See COTE D’IVOIRE: THREE OLD MEN TO COMPETE FOR YOUTH VOTE IN HIGH STAKES ELECTION).

Ghana

Ghana is scheduled to hold Presidential and Parliamentary elections on either 7 November or 7 December 2020. Incumbent President Nana Akufu-Addo will seek a second term, while Ghana’s main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), has nominated former President John Dramani Mahama as its candidate.

Mahama’s track record from 2012 to 2016 may prove difficult to overcome for the opposition, however. His administration is broadly viewed as having failed to address several key crises, including a sustained power shortage which resulted in widespread outages. On the other hand, at the end of 2016, as the New Patriotic Party (NPP) took the reins from the NDC, Ghana’s economy grew substantially from the 3.5 percent at which it stood. Under Akufu-Addo, GDP growth more than doubled to 8.5 percent in 2017 largely due to improved performance in the hydrocarbons sector, and settled to 6.2 percent in the following year. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Ghana’s cost of living has risen substantially during the past four years, an issue which has historically motivated protests by civil society groups and workers’ unions in Ghana.

As such, along with a stagnating job market and lingering corruption, the rising cost of living may prove to be a central issue in the 2020 election, providing the NDC with the opportunity to present a challenge to the NPP. Political mobilisation around these points is likely to stimulate protest action in the lead-up to the election, although violence is not likely. Nevertheless, while the election is likely to be closely contested, if the strong performance of the economy under Akufu-Addo’s NPP holds until the end of the year, he
will be on track to secure another victory (See GHANA: POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONCERNS MAY FRUSTRATE CURRENCY UNION AMBITIONS).

Guinea

In 2020, Guinea is scheduled to hold Parliamentary elections in February as well as Presidential elections in October. Parliamentary elections have been postponed for months amidst tensions between the opposition and the country’s electoral commission, which has been accused of supporting the incumbent, President Alpha Condé, in seeking a third term in office. While Condé has neither confirmed nor denied this, in December 2019 he announced a new draft constitution and his intent to hold a referendum in a move which the opposition alleges is an attempt to hold onto power beyond the end of his second and final five-year term in office.

At least five opposition parties have correspondingly stated that they will boycott the February poll, and protests against Condé have been ongoing since mid-October 2019. At the start of 2020, the National Front for the Defence of the Constitution, an opposition alliance, called for “huge” and “open-ended” demonstrations in response to the circulation of the draft constitution. Large protests have since taken place in the capital, Conakry, as well as a number of other cities, resulting in severe disruptions to commercial activity.

The run-up to both elections is likely to be similarly affected by demonstrations, with attendant confrontations between security forces and protesters. Triggers for protests include any notices by Condé’s government of further plans for a referendum, or the arrest of prominent opposition figures. There is a high potential for violence during any protests: between January 2015 and October 2019 at least 70 protesters and bystanders were killed during demonstrations against Condé, in addition to three members of the security forces (See GUINEA: PRESIDENT COMES UNDER PRESSURE ON HIS THIRD TERM AMBITIONS).

As indicated in a previous analysis briefing, the most likely trajectory for 2020 is for the government to push through a constitutional reform by means of a public referendum, perhaps as early as mid-year. This would allow legislative elections to be held by October at the latest before a presidential ballot in December or earlier. President Condé would then remain in office for at least one more term, despite the risk of further civil unrest and international condemnation of his power extension (See GUINEA: PRESIDENT THIRD TERM AMBITIONS IMPERIL STRONG ECONOMIC TRAJECTORY).

Niger

Niger will hold Presidential elections on 27 December 2020, with the run-off vote scheduled for 21 February 2021. Niger’s incumbent president, Mahamadou Issoufou, who was first elected in 2011, has stated that he will not seek re-election at the end of his second and final term in office. His party, the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (NPDS), has announced that its new Presidential candidate will be Mohamed Bazoum, Niger’s Minister of the Interior. Bazoum’s primary opponents are Seini Oumarou, leader of the National Movement for the Social Development, and Mahamane Ousmane, of the Democratic and Republican Rally.

As in Burkina Faso, Niger is combating an Islamist insurgency on the country’s western and south-eastern borders with the assistance of Western forces, including France and the US. However, the government remains under pressure to address growing levels of violence: on 9 January 2020, at least 8g soldiers were killed at a Nigerien military base near the Malian border in the most significant militant attack in the country to date (See WEST AFRICA: THE RESILIENCE OF BOKO HARAM AND ISLAMIC STATE).
The state of insecurity has prompted civil society groups to call for protests, demanding more action from the government. Added to this, over the course of 2019 protests against the presence of foreign military forces in Niger took place in the capital, Niamey, challenging the degree to which the government can rely upon Western security assistance. The lead-up to the 2020 election is similarly likely to be marked by demonstrations, with an attendant threat of violence between protesters and security forces.

Nevertheless, based on the strong performance of Issoufou and the NPDS in the 2016 election, Bazoum is in a good position to secure a first term in 2020/2021. As with Burkina Faso, there is also potential for militant attacks to reduce in the second half of the year should the additional French forces be deployed and new military structure implemented. This outcome would bode well for the NPDS, particularly ahead of the vote. Nonetheless, the opposition has considerable grounds to mount a challenge suggesting that the elections are likely to be closely contested (See NIGER: POLITICAL TRANSITION IMPROVES INVESTOR CONTRACT CERTAINTY AND ECONOMIC OUTLOOK).

Togo

Togo will hold presidential elections on 22 February 2020 in which incumbent Faure Gnassingbé will run again. The run-up to the election is likely to be marked by increasing political tension and a growing threat of protests. Having held office since 2005, Gnassingbé’s Presidency has largely been an extension of that of his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who ruled Togo from 1967 to 2005. This has increasingly prompted public dissatisfaction across Togo, with large protests against Gnassingbé’s extended rule taking place over 2017 and 2018. However, while the protests prompted reforms to the national electoral law and the imposition of a two-term limit in 2019, this has provided little impediment to Gnassingbé seeking additional terms, as the new laws are not to be applied retroactively (See TOGO: BOOMING ECONOMIC OUTLOOK DESPITE POLITICAL RUMBLES).

The government has also demonstrated its willingness to use force to suppress demonstrations. Over the course of 2018, at least 12 people were killed and over 100 wounded in violent confrontations with security forces. Moreover, at least 60 demonstrators were...
given prison sentences of up to 60 months. In the face of such threats, the opposition has struggled to maintain cohesion and the protest movement of 2017/2018 has lost momentum. As such, given the incumbent’s ambition to secure another term at all costs, he is expected to retain his presidency despite the high likelihood of further violent unrest (See **TOGO: POLITICAL TENSION EXPOSES VULNERABILITY OF INVESTMENT POTENTIAL**).

**INSIGHT**

**West African democracy under threat?**

In the past decade, indications have emerged that a democratic recession is underway in West Africa, as the governments of several states previously characterised as the foremost proponents of democratic ideals in the region have demonstrated a growing propensity towards authoritarianism. For instance, in 2018 the Senegalese government introduced new electoral regulations designed to limit the number of presidential candidates, while in 2019 Benin’s Electoral Commission raised the fees required for admission to the elections from CFA 15 million (USD 27,000) to 250 million CFA (USD 445,000) with the result that only two political parties competed – both loyal to the incumbent, President Patrice Talon.

Other efforts to hold onto power have revolved around resorting to constitutional changes in order to allow incumbents to extend their term in office beyond mandated limits – a trend which looks to continue in the region in the coming year. Indeed, in three out of six upcoming presidential elections in West Africa, the incumbents have demonstrated their intent to evade term limits through leveraging constitutional amendments.

Alongside these efforts, measures to restrict political opposition, including the banning of public gatherings, as well as social media and internet blackouts, have become a common feature in several West African states, such as The Gambia.

**Broad threat of political violence**

The backlash against this shift threatens to destabilise countries across the region, as protests have emerged as a typical response to the imposition of constraints on access to the political space. In particular, a lack of observance of term limits by incumbents has in several cases led to large-scale public violence, including the use of armed force. In Côte d’Ivoire, the militia-led violence which erupted in the wake of the 2010 election killed over 3,000 people. In Burkina Faso, mass protests demanding the removal of President Compaoré erupted in 2014 after he attempted to amend the constitution to lift term limits in an effort to extend his 27-year rule.

Notably, in such cases, protests were successful in removing incumbents who threatened to violate term limits. This is likely to encourage public resistance to authoritarianism in other countries within the region, with the result that security forces are likely to resort to more stringent and forceful measures in the year ahead.