

BEYOND COUP EVENTS:

UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL, PROXIMATE AND TRIGGER
FACTORS OF UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT

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ABOUT AFSIT

Established in July 2023, AFSIT is a joint initiative of UNDP and the African Union Commission (AUC). It was established in response to the call by the AU Heads of State and Government during the 16th Extraordinary Session on Terrorism and Unconstitutional Changes of Government (UCG) in Africa for collective action and a robust mechanism to deepen democratic governance and reinforce collective security on the continent.

AFSIT provides targeted, catalytic support to African countries navigating complex political transitions. It applies a development approach to strengthen governance systems, restore inclusive social contracts and lay the foundation for investment in stability and resilience. The Facility prioritizes strategic, context-specific responses. These range from providing technical assistance to legitimate transition roadmaps to broader efforts that promote inclusive participation in transition processes. Anchored in inclusivity, AFSIT ensures meaningful engagement of civil society organizations (CSOs) and strengthens the representation of women, youth and marginalized groups in decision-making processes.

AFSIT also includes a critical focus on knowledge generation, producing insights and best practices that inform and improve transition processes across the continent.



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INTRODUCTION

Unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) remain a feature of Africa's governance landscape. Since 2020, nine African countries have experienced at least one successful UCG, representing 17% of African countries.¹ While each transition context is unique, the resurgence of UCGs represents a systemic challenge to continental democratic norms, weakening regional integration frameworks and risking the reversal of governance and development gains. Currently, six states remain suspended from the African Union (AU) as a result of UCGs.² The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and their new grouping under the Alliance of Sahel States, reflects broader institutional strain within regional governance architectures.

Beyond their constitutional implications, UCGs often act as catalysts for conflict, accelerating institutional fragmentation, eroding state legitimacy, and intensifying competition among security actors and political elites. For example, the conflict that followed the 2021 military coup in Sudan has displaced over 15 million people, while more than 30 million people now require humanitarian assistance.³ This underscores the profound human, security and development costs of failed or poorly managed transitions. These dynamics highlight a critical policy imperative: political transitions are not solely governance events. They represent both risk and opportunity and can either entrench instability or create conditions for a governance and development reset. The eventual outcome depends on the policy choices made by national authorities, with support from the international community.

In 2025, political crises in Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau and an attempted coup in Benin reinforced these trends and underscored the continued volatility of political transitions across the continent.

Each context presents its own dynamics and trajectory, yet together they point to the heightened urgency of advancing credible governance reforms, strengthening service delivery and renewing the social contract between states and citizens.⁴

In 2023, UNDP released its flagship *Soldiers and Citizens* report, which examines the complex drivers behind the resurgence of UCGs.⁵ The report identifies three interlinked layers of causation — structural or institutional 'root' factors, proximate dynamics, and immediate triggers — that shape how political crises unfold in different contexts.

This policy paper applies the same analytical lens to political events in 2025 in Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin. It examines how structural conditions, evolving political dynamics and short-term events interact to produce disruptions manifested through successful or attempted coups.

To help unpack the structural and proximate factors, this policy paper utilizes insights generated as part of the foundational research informing the Africa Transition Insights (ATI) tool, a data-driven platform that will enhance analysis of political transitions and inform evidence-based support to countries navigating governance challenges.⁶

The ATI aims to provide insights into political transition and governance trends across AU member states through three core domains, namely:

- Rule by the people (capturing democratic participation and political inclusion),
- Rule of law (assessing institutional strength and judicial independence) and
- Enabling environment (examining state capacity, economic stability and other factors that influence transition risks).

All scores are assessed out of 10, with higher scores indicating more positive trends and lower scores reflecting more negative trends.

By tracking 27 indicators over time and providing early warning signals, the ATI dashboard offers policymakers and development practitioners a comprehensive view of governance trends, upcoming electoral events, opportunities and emerging vulnerabilities. It complements existing regional and continental early warning systems and is designed to enable targeted, timely support to strengthen conflict prevention.

Nonetheless, the ATI has limitations in capturing the qualitative dynamics that may lead to the eruption of a crisis. For this reason, the analysis in this policy brief combines the ATI with a structured analysis of structural, proximate and trigger factors. This unpacking of events, together with insights from the ATI, provides a more comprehensive picture for understanding political events in 2025 in the countries under consideration.

The cases of Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin illustrate how ATI data can reveal varying forms of governance deficits that create conditions for political disruption. They also highlight opportunities for development actors to support governance and ultimately protect hard-won development gains.

MADAGASCAR

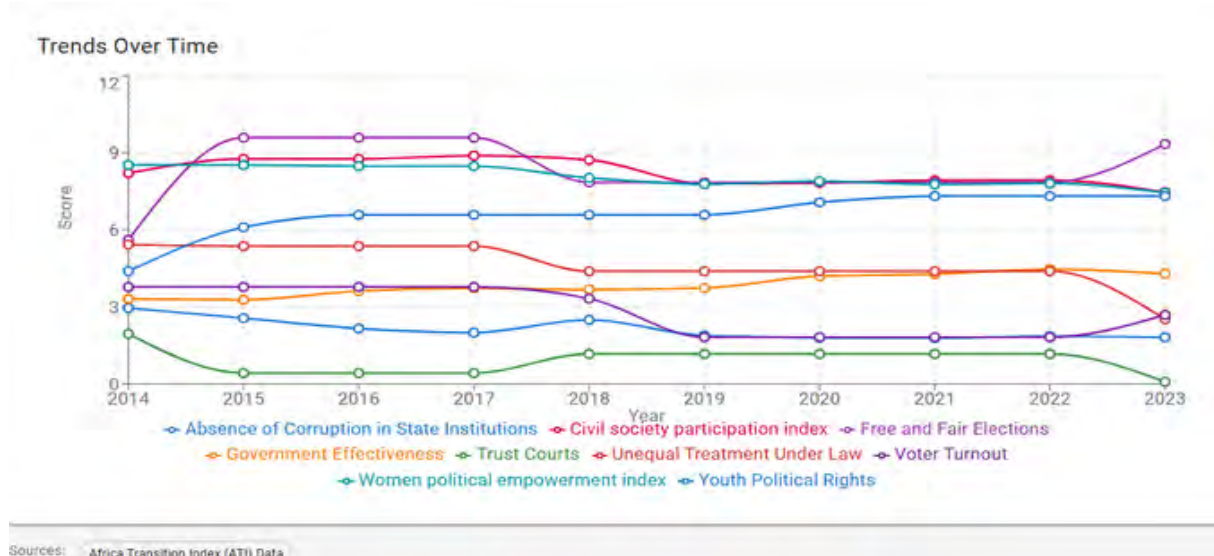
The current political crisis in Madagascar reached a climax on 14 October 2025 when the military assumed power, prompting the country's subsequent suspension by the AU.⁷ However, its roots lie in deep structural vulnerabilities that compounded over decades. A fragile and frequently contested constitutional order, combined with limited checks and balances, has produced a governance system highly susceptible to shocks.⁸

Chronic poverty, social exclusion and stark regional inequalities have further eroded state–society relations, while weak institutions and poor service delivery have strained an already fragile social contract. Political polarization and entrenched mistrust among elites have repeatedly fuelled cycles of confrontation rather than consensus, while persistent governance deficits — along with high levels of corruption — have deepened public disillusionment.⁹ Together, these dynamics form the structural foundations of Madagascar's present instability.

These long-standing weaknesses are clearly reflected in ATI indicators, which show a marked deterioration in Madagascar's rule of law between 2013 and 2023. Already low perceptions of integrity within state institutions have declined further, signalling worsening standards across the public administration. Public trust in the judiciary collapsed to a score of only 0.081 — the lowest on the continent — while disparities in equal treatment under the law have widened.

Although the decline in civil society participation was relatively modest, it nonetheless reveals a broader trend of shrinking civic engagement and exclusion from governance processes.

Figure 1: Trends over time, Madagascar (2013–2023)



These indicators demonstrate how structural governance deficits have progressively weakened the rule of law, reinforcing the vulnerabilities that underpin the current crisis.

Over the past 15 years, these long-standing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by proximate factors stemming from Madagascar’s complex political trajectory. Andry Rajoelina became a central political figure during the 2009 political crisis, when the military forced the resignation of President Marc Ravalomanana and installed Rajoelina as president of the High Transitional Authority. The country remained under a transitional administration from 2009 to 2013, during which the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the AU and the UN facilitated extensive mediation efforts to restore constitutional order.¹⁰

As part of a negotiated roadmap, Rajoelina did not contest the 2013 presidential election, which brought Hery Rajaonarimampianina to power. However, Rajoelina later returned to electoral politics and won the 2018 presidential election amid unresolved tensions stemming from the 2009 crisis. His administration placed

strong emphasis on large-scale flagship development projects and adopted a governing approach that concentrated decision-making authority and economic power within the executive.¹¹ This governance style interacted with pre-existing institutional fragilities, limiting oversight and accountability mechanisms and reinforcing structural governance vulnerabilities.

The 2023 presidential election unfolded in an atmosphere of heightened contestation, with 10 of the 12 opposition candidates mounting a coordinated boycott and denouncing the process as lacking legitimacy. President Rajoelina secured re-election, but the poll was marked by a historically low voter turnout of only 46 percent.¹² The continued deterioration of Madagascar’s socio-economic conditions culminated in a series of interrelated developments that triggered the October 2025 crisis.

From mid-2025, state legitimacy came under increasing strain, driven in large part by youth mobilization—particularly among Generation Z (young people born between 1997 and 2012). Key triggers included a sharp decline in

living conditions, marked by recurring electricity and water outages, alongside rising food insecurity.¹³ The arrest of municipal councillors seeking to organize protests helped catalyse broader, youth-led unrest in the capital. Public trust declined further as youth-led mobilization expanded, reflecting deeper frustration with perceived governance failures as well as the perceived capture of political power by economic interests.

A wave of nationwide protests, led by diverse youth collectives mobilizing under the banner of Gen Z Madagascar, erupted on 25 September 2025.¹⁴ The protests followed severe water and electricity outages and quickly spread beyond the capital. The government's response on 26 September included curfews and a militarized posture, which further inflamed tensions. The cabinet was dissolved three days later. An attempted dialogue with protest leaders on 8 October failed to calm public anger.

On 11 October 2025, the crisis entered a decisive phase when elements of the Army Corps of Personnel and Administrative and Technical Service (CAPSAT) military unit broke with the government and aligned with youth-led demonstrations, precipitating the collapse of executive authority and the president's departure from the country. In the days that followed, the National Assembly of Madagascar initiated impeachment proceedings against President Rajoelina, while the High Constitutional Court declared a power vacuum in the absence of both the President and the President of the Senate. On 14 October, CAPSAT announced that it was assuming control of the armed forces and state authority, and on 17 October, Colonel Michael Randrianirina was sworn in as interim president under a military-led transitional framework. The sequence and

interaction of these institutional actions generated a constitutional grey area that Malagasy authorities have since invoked to defend the legality of the transition.

On 15 October, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) suspended Madagascar from participating in AU activities. It determined that the military's accession to power constituted a UCG, in line with the AU's normative frameworks on the rejection of unconstitutional seizures of power.¹⁵ The AU and other regional bodies, such as SADC, subsequently intensified their diplomatic engagement to help stabilize the situation and support a return to constitutional order.¹⁶ On 18 November, the then newly appointed prime minister presented a 24-month transition roadmap to the National Assembly, outlining five phases towards the development and adoption of a new constitution and elections by 2027.¹⁷

In summary, Madagascar's political crisis reflects the cumulative effects of long-term institutional erosion that weakened democratic governance and public trust. Declining rule of law, an eroded social contract, reduced institutional integrity and limited oversight mechanisms created structural vulnerabilities that constrained the state's ability to manage political contestation effectively.

These weaknesses were reinforced by proximate political dynamics, including unresolved rivalries rooted in the 2009 crisis and repeated electoral contestation. These factors deepened political polarization and undermined confidence in democratic processes.

The immediate trigger emerged in 2025 when worsening socio-economic conditions and service delivery failures fuelled widespread public frustration. Youth-led mobilization transformed

these grievances into nationwide protests, which escalated following securitized government responses and divisions within the security sector — ultimately culminating in the collapse of constitutional order.

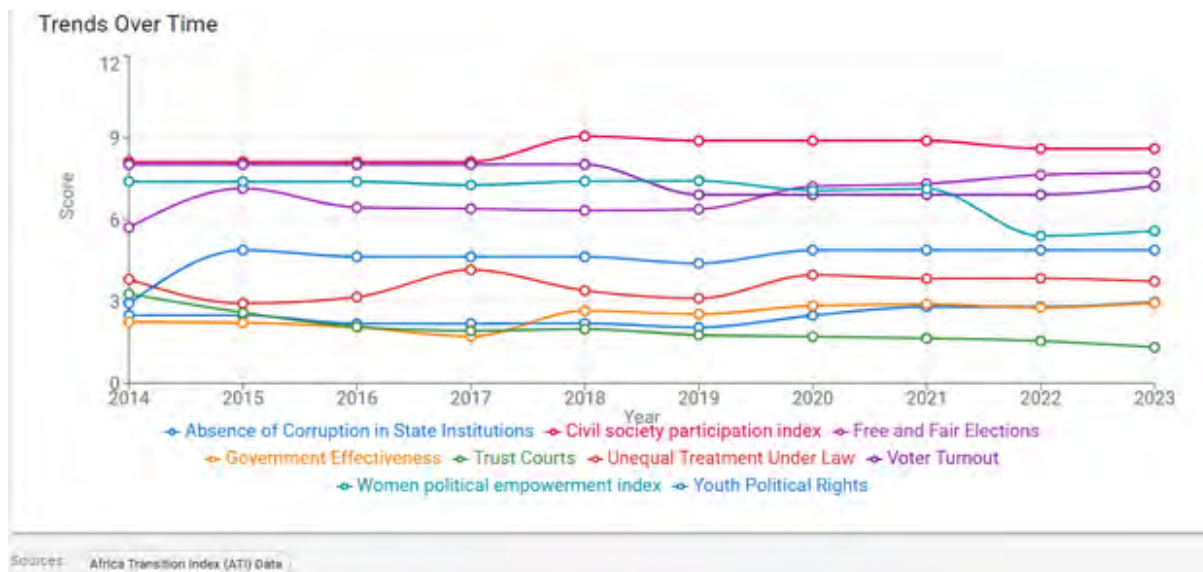
GUINEA-BISSAU

The case of Guinea-Bissau reflects similar structural drivers to those seen in Madagascar, albeit with different proximate factors and immediate triggers. Like Madagascar, the current political crisis in Guinea-Bissau is rooted in long-standing structural vulnerabilities. Since independence in 1974, the country has

experienced five successful coups and several other attempted coups: a reflection of the complex interplay between civilian and military institutions.

Persistent constitution-related ambiguities and politically disputed interpretations about executive authority have repeatedly led to institutional deadlock. Weak state institutions, inadequate service delivery, limited civic space and widespread poverty further undermined public expectations of governance.¹⁸ At the same time, corruption and the influence of illicit economies, including narcotics trafficking, have entrenched parallel networks of authority that routinely erode formal governance structures.¹⁹

Figure 2: Trends over time, Guinea-Bissau (2013–2023)



These dynamics have created a political environment highly vulnerable to recurring crises, successive disruptions and repeated attempts to undermine constitutional order.

These vulnerabilities are clearly reflected in Guinea-Bissau’s ATI rule of law indicators, which show a slow but steady

decline of institutional integrity and public trust between 2014 and 2023. Trust in the courts experienced the steepest decline, highlighting deteriorating public confidence in judicial institutions.

Women’s political empowerment also weakened, while the independent judiciary score deteriorated, signalling diminishing

judicial autonomy. Voter turnout saw moderate declines — with participation estimated by national authorities at around 65% in the 2025 general elections, compared to approximately 74.4% in the 2019 presidential election.²⁰ These trends, alongside a shrinking of civic space, further signal growing institutional fragility and shrinking civic space.

The proximate causes of the 2025 crisis lie in political tensions that accumulated over several years. Although Guinea-Bissau saw two presidents complete full mandates between 2014 and 2024, institutional stability remained limited, with 12 prime ministers appointed over the same period. This both reflected and reinforced persistent executive–legislative conflict and weak governance continuity.

These tensions were reinforced by the disputed 2019 presidential election, which was won by Umaro Sissoco Embaló but challenged in the courts by opposition leader Domingos Simões Pereira. Embaló was inaugurated on 27 February 2020 although the Supreme Tribunal of Justice validated the results only on 4 September 2020. This sequence left unresolved questions about constitutional practice and institutional authority.²¹

On 1 February 2022, a failed coup attempt further affected relations between the presidency, the security forces and an opposition-led legislature. This was followed by the dissolution of parliament in May 2022 and again in December 2023 after clashes between the National Guard and the Presidential Guard. These developments carried into the November 2025 electoral period, when the military reportedly thwarted an alleged coup attempt shortly prior to the elections.

These tensions were further compounded by disputes over the timing of the

next presidential election. The ruling administration argued that Embaló's five-year term began when the Supreme Tribunal of Justice formally validated the election results in September 2020, while the opposition maintained that the mandate commenced on the date of inauguration in February 2020.²²

From 21 to 28 February 2025, ECOWAS deployed a mission to facilitate dialogue on the revised electoral calendar. However, the delegation's post-mission press release indicated that it departed Guinea-Bissau after the authorities threatened that it would be expelled.²³ Tensions intensified when the Supreme Court barred Domingos Simões Pereira, head of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), and his Inclusive Alliance Platform (PAI)-Terra Ranka coalition from standing in the presidential and legislative races, respectively. Officially, these exclusions were based on procedural grounds. This prompted renewed debate about the neutrality and transparency of the process.

The immediate trigger for the current crisis occurred immediately after the 23 November 2025 presidential and legislative election. Opposition candidate Fernando Dias da Costa publicly claimed victory prior to the official release of results. Meanwhile, incumbent President Umaro Sissoco Embaló's camp reaffirmed its confidence in securing victory but urged the public to await the official announcement of results. These narratives inflamed an already fragile political environment. On 26 November, a day before the official announcement of electoral results, senior military figures — including the army chief of staff — reportedly detained Embaló at the presidential palace in what the ousted

president later described as a coup d'état. Several high-ranking security officials were also arrested, as was leading opposition figure Domingos Simões Pereira. Presidential poll rival Fernando Dias was reported to have escaped arrest, seeking refuge at the Nigerian embassy. President Embaló subsequently left for Senegal, then the Republic of the Congo and then Morocco.

Following the coup, ECOWAS dispatched a high-level political mission to engage the transitional authorities and key stakeholders on restoring constitutional order. The regional body has continued to press for a time-bound, inclusive transition while supporting dialogue between national actors to stabilize the political environment.

In summary, the crisis in Guinea-Bissau reflects structural governance vulnerabilities that closely parallel those observed in Madagascar. These include the cumulative effects of weak state institutions, persistent constitutional ambiguities, increased interference by the military in political affairs and the gradual erosion of democratic norms.

In Guinea-Bissau, these structural weaknesses were further reinforced by the historically entrenched role of the military in political affairs. At the same time, the influence of illicit economic networks have repeatedly undermined the authority and legitimacy of formal governance institutions. The deterioration in rule-of-law indicators, declining judicial independence, and weakening civic participation further illustrates the long-term fragility of institutional accountability mechanisms.

However, the trajectories of instability differ markedly between the two cases. In Guinea-Bissau, political tensions escalated

primarily through elite-level contestation. These included disputed electoral outcomes, institutional confrontation between branches of government and the growing involvement of the military in political decision-making arenas. By contrast, the crisis in Madagascar was driven more directly by widespread popular mobilization and public protest linked to broader societal grievances and perceptions of governance failure.

The immediate triggers of crisis in each context therefore emerged through distinct pathways. While, in Madagascar, the military takeover unfolded through mass mobilization, Guinea-Bissau's coup reflected the re-emergence of military intervention within an already polarized elite political environment. Analysed together, these cases demonstrate how similar underlying governance fragilities can produce different crisis trajectories, underscoring the importance of tailoring transition support and preventive engagement to the specific political, institutional and societal dynamics present in each context.

BENIN

On 7 December 2025, Benin experienced its most serious political crisis in decades when a faction of soldiers launched a coordinated attempt to seize power in Cotonou. The operation targeted the residence of President Patrice Talon and briefly took control of the state broadcaster. During a short, televised address, the group announced the dissolution of state institutions, the removal of the president, the suspension of the Constitution and the establishment of the Comité militaire pour la refondation led by Lieutenant Colonel Pascal Tigri. In their statement, the coup leaders cited

the deteriorating security situation in northern Benin and what they described as the “disregard and neglect of our fallen brothers-in-arms” as justification for their actions.²⁴

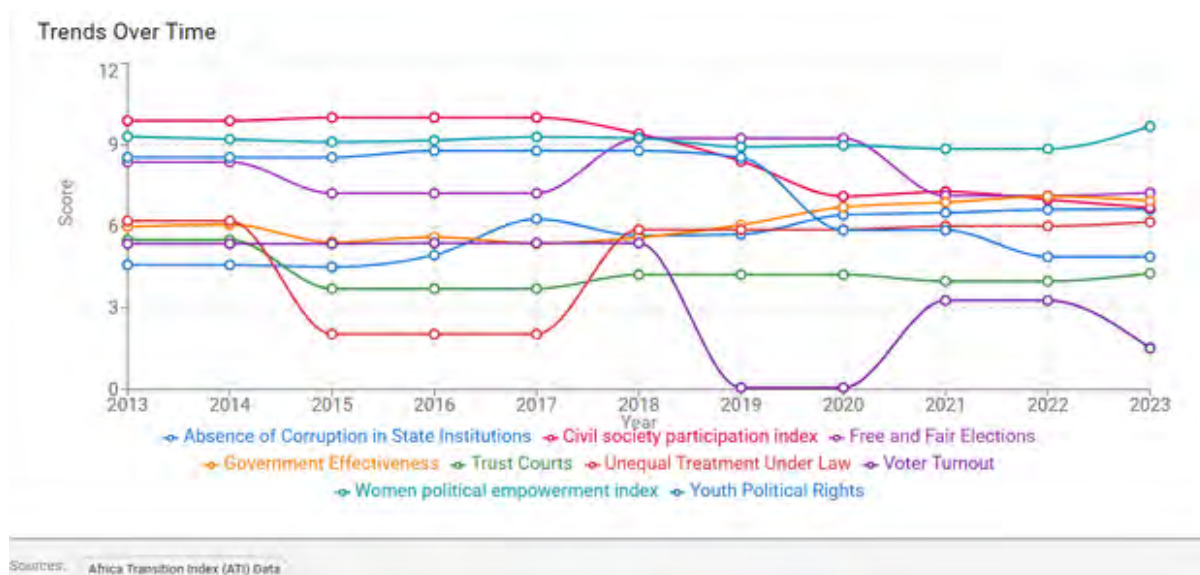
Reports of gunfire around the presidential residence and key military installations generated significant uncertainty in the capital. By mid-morning, government authorities announced that loyalist forces had re-established control over strategic sites, including the national television station.

The Interior Ministry later announced that the attempt had been “foiled”, describing the perpetrators as a limited group acting outside the chain of command. President Talon addressed the nation to reaffirm the restoration of constitutional order. ECOWAS and the AU issued rapid condemnations, while

Nigeria acknowledged deploying air and ground support at Benin’s request to help secure critical locations. The following day, authorities reported multiple arrests, ongoing efforts to locate fugitive actors and a stabilized security environment in Cotonou.

Historically, Benin has experienced several periods of military intervention. Five successful coups and several attempts occurred between independence in 1960 and the 1972 military takeover led by Major Mathieu Kérékou which ushered in a period of military rule and one-party Marxist-Leninist governance that lasted until 1990. However, following the National Conference and democratic transition in 1990, Benin has maintained relative political stability, with no successful coups recorded since.

Figure 3: Trends over time, Benin (2013–2023)



Despite being widely regarded as a democratic reference point in West Africa since 1990, Benin has shown emerging signs of vulnerability in recent years. These merit careful attention. ATI data from 2014 to 2023 indicates sustained declines across several democratic

indicators, most notably voter turnout — a sign of public disengagement. Voter participation in presidential elections has fallen steadily, from 85 percent in 2011 to 66 per cent in 2016 and just 51 percent in 2021.²⁵ With national elections scheduled for 2026, this trend underscores

the importance of renewed efforts to rebuild electoral participation and public confidence.

Declines have also been observed in civil society participation and perceptions of free and fair elections, while youth political rights have weakened significantly. Such phenomena indicate deepening generational frustration. They also draw attention to the need to move beyond rhetorical commitments towards more meaningful political inclusion of young people and women.

In November 2025, Benin's Parliament approved a constitutional amendment increasing presidential term limits from five to seven years.²⁶ This move was met with criticism from opposition parties and some civil society groups.²⁷ It followed previous reforms to the electoral and sponsorship systems in 2019, which restricted opposition participation, excluding many opposition figures.²⁸ Opposition leaders described these reforms as exclusionary, arguing that they risked reinforcing the dominance of the presidential bloc and deepening political polarization.

These democratic pressures occur against a backdrop of worsening security dynamics. Benin's impact of terrorism ATI score dropped markedly while violence against civilians also worsened, highlighting increasing exposure to violent extremism emanating from the Sahel. Indicators related to violent demonstrations and political stability point to a progressively fragile environment.

Developments in 2025 further underscore this trajectory. In April 2025, militants reportedly killed 54 soldiers near the northern border — the deadliest attack in the country's history. The incident highlighted heightened security

vulnerabilities with broader implications for political resilience and state–society relations, as rising insecurity risks eroding the confidence of local communities in governance institutions.²⁹ In addition, recent economic policies, have impacted rural livelihoods.³⁰ A key example is the ban on exports of food products, designed to prevent price rises of staple goods.

Notwithstanding, the above analysis, the failure of the coup attempt in Benin — unlike those in Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau — can be partly attributed to the country's comparatively stronger resilience to UCGs. Although several of Benin's ATI indicators have shown recent declines, its overall scores remain significantly higher than those of the other two contexts — particularly in areas such as trust in courts, government effectiveness, and the absence of corruption within state institutions.

What, then, can the recent political crises in Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin tell us about broader patterns of unconstitutional disruptions of constitutional order across the continent?

YOUTH MOBILIZATION

In the case of Madagascar, a key lesson is the potentially catalytic role of youth mobilization. A notable feature of the crisis is the increasing political and civic engagement of young people, whose expectations of governance are reshaping national political dynamics. Malagasy youth are demanding greater transparency, accountable leadership and expanded socio-economic opportunities, alongside more meaningful participation in public decision-making. These evolving expectations reflect broader demographic and social transformations across the continent, where youth agency is

becoming a central force in redefining state–society relations and advancing calls for more inclusive, responsive and performance-driven governance systems.³¹

In 2025, Gen Z–branded movements drove large-scale protests across multiple regions of the world, from Nepal and Morocco to Mexico, Peru, Paraguay and Timor-Leste. These reflect a global wave of youth-led advocacy against corruption, inequality and unresponsive governance.³²

In Madagascar, this mobilization played a decisive role in triggering the 2025 political crisis. Tech-savvy youth used social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp and Telegram to organize rapidly, crowd-source real-time information, expose service-delivery failures and broadcast incidents of repression. The ability to spread messages virally, circumvent traditional media and galvanize peers across both urban centres and rural regions transformed localized frustrations into a nationwide movement that forced political institutions to respond.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Africa – the world’s youngest continent – where roughly 70% of the population is under 30. In 2024, Afrobarometer surveys showed that while young Africans remain strongly committed to democratic norms, they are significantly less satisfied than older generations with how democracy functions in practice. They are also more likely to perceive political leaders and officials as corrupt.³³ UNDP’s Soldiers and Citizens report (2023) similarly found that, although tolerance for military intervention increases when elected leaders abuse power, the majority of Africans – including youth – continue to prefer civilian, democratic governance over military rule.³⁴

UNDP’s 2025 Future of Governance in the Sahel report similarly finds that, despite high unemployment, limited economic opportunities and widespread perceptions of inequality and marginalization, youth-led movements such as Y’en a Marre (Senegal), Balai Citoyen (Burkina Faso), and Occupy Nigeria illustrate growing youth demands for accountable governance across the region.³⁵

INTERPLAY BETWEEN ELECTIONS AND UCG

As outlined above, proximate drivers of the crises in Madagascar and Guinea-Bissau stem largely from protracted governance deficits, including limited delivery of democratic dividends and persistent service delivery failures. Pre- and post-electoral contestations and political tensions have largely reflected these deeper structural weaknesses rather than constituting the root causes of the crises. However, elections serve as institutionalized mechanisms for the contestation of power and the allocation of scarce state resources under conditions of structured uncertainty. When electoral processes lack procedural integrity, they risk becoming vehicles for political – and at times violent – contestation. Electoral disputes become particularly destabilizing where the military retains significant political influence and winner-takes-all systems operate alongside weak institutional checks and balances. This pattern reflects findings in Soldiers and Citizens, which show that military interventions are more likely in contexts where democratic norms and safeguards are already eroding. As seen in Guinea-Bissau, and previously in Gabon, electoral processes can therefore act as immediate triggers for UCGs.

Collectively, these cases suggest that elections can become particularly sensitive moments in fragile political systems, especially where institutional trust is low, civil–military relations are complex and political competition is highly contested. They highlight the importance of credible and well-managed electoral processes, since shortcomings or disputes may generate uncertainty that can, in some circumstances, create space for military actors to play a more pronounced role in political transitions.

INSECURITY AND COUP RISK

As demonstrated by the findings of *Soldiers and Citizens*, there is a strong link between insecurity and coup events. That report finds that persistent insecurity — particularly from conflict, terrorism, or insurgency — can undermine the legitimacy of civilian governments and can shift the balance between civilian and military authority. At the same time, prolonged insecurity can generate grievances within the armed forces themselves, whose members are often on the front lines of these crises and bear the highest human and operational costs.

The case of Benin illustrates that when deteriorating security conditions place exceptional strain on national defense forces, even comparatively stable democracies can experience episodes of acute institutional stress.

In such circumstances, disgruntled factions may become more susceptible to extra-constitutional impulses, particularly when they feel overstretched, under-resourced, or insufficiently supported by political authorities. Similar combinations of governance strain and acute security pressure also preceded military interventions in Mali, Burkina Faso, and

Niger. This dynamic should therefore be of concern for other African democracies currently grappling with expanding security threats.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The crises in Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin demonstrate that governance disruptions emerge through diverse pathways and can rapidly erode hard-won development gains. Each context reflects a distinct political trajectory. Yet, together they underscore the urgent need for development actors to support governance reforms and inclusive transitions that address underlying structural vulnerabilities rather than only their immediate manifestations, and to act proactively to prevent political crises before they emerge.

The findings of this paper strongly reinforce the conclusions of UNDP’s *Soldiers and Citizens* report. As highlighted in the report, three interlinked policy imperatives are critical to mitigating coup risks and strengthening democratic resilience — and each is clearly reflected in the comparative analysis of Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin:

First, *Soldiers and Citizens* underscores the primacy of development as a foundation for stability. The cases examined in this paper reaffirm that persistent socio-economic exclusion, weak service delivery and limited economic opportunity undermine state legitimacy and heighten vulnerability to political crises and unconstitutional power seizures.

Second, the report highlights the primacy of democracy, justice and the rule of law as essential safeguards of the social

contract. The experiences of the three countries demonstrate how contested electoral processes, weakened institutional checks and balances, and declining public trust in state institutions can accelerate political polarization and institutional breakdown.

Third, *Soldiers and Citizens* emphasizes the critical importance of international and regional cooperation and solidarity in reinforcing constitutionalism, democratic norms and human rights as the basis for stability and progress. The analysis in this paper similarly shows that timely and coordinated engagement by regional and international actors plays a vital role in supporting inclusive transitions, mitigating escalation risks and promoting credible returns to constitutional order.

Together, Madagascar, Guinea-Bissau and Benin reinforce the imperative for development partners to invest in long-term institution-building, inclusive political processes and nationally anchored pathways to stability. Supporting countries to address structural vulnerabilities, manage proximate pressures and mitigate immediate triggers will be essential for strengthening resilience against future governance disruptions and preserving development gains.

The following recommendations arise directly from the comparative analysis:

1. Address structural drivers of instability

a. Strengthen core institutions

Reinforce the independence of electoral management bodies, judiciaries and anti-corruption bodies through targeted capacity-building, peer exchanges and digital accountability tools, while strengthening constitutional courts'

capacity to adjudicate electoral disputes and address interference in electoral processes.

b. Rebuild trust through service delivery

Partner with governments to improve service delivery systems — including electricity, water and justice. The deterioration of these services directly erodes state legitimacy and undermines the social contract, as seen acutely in Madagascar.

Integrate service delivery accountability mechanisms (e.g. citizen scorecards, participatory budgeting and grievance redress systems) to ensure responsiveness to communities.

c. Address inequalities

Expand livelihood and economic inclusion programmes for youth and women, especially in rural and marginalized regions.

Support reforms that strengthen local governance and decentralization to reduce centre–periphery tensions.

Address historical grievances and unresolved political crises through inclusive transitional justice and reconciliation processes and institutional reforms.

2. Reduce proximate risks

a. Strengthen electoral processes as a pillar of crisis prevention

Promote integrated early warning and response mechanisms between the AU, UN and regional economic communities (RECs) that monitor broader governance and security risk indicators. These include national observatories, civil society

monitoring platforms and regional early warning systems that enable earlier detection and response to negative trends.

b. Strengthen civil–military relations

Work with AU, RECs and national authorities to professionalize and reform national security sectors, reinforce respect for civilian oversight and build internal grievance mechanisms for security forces.

Prioritize prevention-focused approaches, including preventing violent extremism (PVE) programming, alongside border security, intelligence sharing and community-centred stabilization in contexts that face expanding extremist threats.

Prioritize support to border security, intelligence sharing and community-centred stabilisation in contexts facing expanding extremist threats, such as northern Benin.

c. Expand and protect civic space

Support legal and policy reforms to safeguard freedom of expression, assembly and civil society operations in contexts where ATI indicators point to shrinking space.

Build platforms that facilitate structured engagement between youth, civil society and state authorities to reduce polarization and rebuild legitimacy.

3. Mitigate immediate triggers

a. Establish/reinforce national conflict prevention frameworks

Support the development of nationally owned and inclusive infrastructures for peace, focused on conflict prevention and peacebuilding, that can rapidly de-escalate

emerging crises.

Promote and support the development and implementation of national prevention strategies.

Strengthen inclusion by ensuring formal roles for youth, women, traditional authorities and diaspora groups in these mechanisms.

b. Provide agile support during periods of tension

Deploy AU- or REC-led rapid response missions that combine governance, security and mediation expertise to assist governments and communities during volatile moments.

Support transitional authorities to design credible roadmaps that strengthen legitimacy and provide a transparent pathway to a return to constitutional order.

c. Enhance communication and public information

Assist governments and civil society to develop conflict-sensitive communication strategies that reduce misinformation and prevent escalation during tense political moments.

Promote transparency in electoral processes—including voter registration, results management and dispute resolution—to rebuild citizen trust.

4. Harness youth mobilization toward democratic renewal

a. Treat youth actors as strategic partners and co-creators

Facilitate youth participation and influence on key structural reforms within government, public entities, parliament and national executive committees.

Promote youth’s meaningful participation in national dialogue and peacebuilding processes.

Support civic education, leadership training and digital civic engagement to channel mobilization into constructive policy influence.

b. Invest in research and data on youth civic and political behaviour

Further develop the continental evidence base to understand emerging patterns of youth mobilization, political engagement and digital activism across transition contexts.

5. Reinforce regional and continental UCG prevention and management capacities

a. Strengthen AU–REC coordination on UCGs

Support the AU and RECs to harmonize early warning tools, sanctions regimes and mediation mechanisms.

b. Build sustainable conflict-prevention ecosystems

Support national observatories, academic institutions and civil society to generate and monitor governance indicators for early warning and evidence-based early response.

Back regional learning exchanges across transition contexts to strengthen adaptive governance approaches.

6. Strengthen security governance and stabilization, particularly in border zones

a. Enhance state presence in underserved regions

Support integrated security–governance–development interventions in countries facing extremist threats in border regions, such as Benin.

Combine civilian protection strategies with livelihood support, local conflict resolution mechanisms and efforts to rebuild the social contract.

b. Improve military morale and accountability

Encourage transparent resourcing, welfare systems and grievance channels within the military to reduce the risk of grievance-driven interventions.

Support security sector reform initiatives that reinforce constitutionalism and civilian oversight.

For UNDP, the development imperative is to build governance systems resilient enough to absorb political shocks without reversing development gains. Our contribution therefore focuses on supporting countries to reset governance fundamentals, protect essential services and ensure that political transitions – however they unfold – create opportunities to strengthen inclusive and accountable institutions rather than erode progress.

This requires an integrated approach that tackles structural weaknesses, reinforces the credibility of political processes, expands inclusive dialogue and strengthens civilian oversight of security institutions. While such efforts cannot eliminate the risk of political crises, they can create conditions for more peaceful, predictable, and citizen-centred transitions across the continent.

Endnotes

- 1 Since 2020, the continent has witnessed eleven successful military coups; in Burkina Faso (twice), Chad, Gabon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, and Sudan (twice), alongside several failed coup attempts.
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