



Regional Report West and Central Africa

**Diverging Paths:
Between Democratic Consolidation
and the Entrenchment of Autocracy**

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Regional Report BTI 2026

West and Central Africa

Diverging Paths: Between Democratic Consolidation and the Entrenchment of Autocracy

by Martin Welz *

Overview of the transformation processes in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (hereafter: CAR), Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (hereafter: DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Republic of Congo (hereafter: ROC), Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo



This regional report analyzes the results of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index BTI 2026 in the re-view period from February 1, 2023, to January 31, 2025. Further information can be found at www.bti-project.org.

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Introduction

During the reporting period between February 2023 and January 2025, developments in the BTI region of West and Central Africa diverged sharply. In several countries, coups further eroded democratic gains and entrenched authoritarian rule. Elsewhere, however, democratization advanced incrementally. The result is a region marked by pronounced contrasts, spanning a spectrum from “defective democracies” to “hard-line autocracies,” with the latter clearly predominant. After the Middle East and North Africa, West and Central Africa posts the second-lowest average score in the Democracy Index. Democratic quality improved slightly in countries such as The Gambia and Liberia. In contrast, it deteriorated markedly in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Gabon – and most dramatically in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Niger experienced the steepest decline. Following the 2023 coup that brought a military junta to power, much of the country’s previous democratic achievements are terminated. The junta now governs in an overtly authoritarian manner and has shown no credible intention of organizing democratic elections in the foreseeable future. Having only recently been classified as a “defective democracy” in the BTI 2024, Niger is now categorized as a “hard-line autocracy” in the BTI 2026 – a drop of three categories. Niger is not an isolated case but the latest in a string of Sahelian coups that have brought into power military governments. These regimes cooperate closely with one another and cultivate ties with authoritarian partners such as China, Russia and Türkiye, while narrowing space for domestic democratic actors. Authoritarian rule has also deepened in Burkina Faso and, albeit less dramatically, in Mali.

In economic terms, the region presents a more uniform picture. All countries fall into one of two categories: “limited” or “very limited” levels of economic transformation. Ghana, Benin, The Gambia, Côte d’Ivoire and Gabon make up the first group; all others are classified as “very limited.” Generally speaking, Central African states face more acute structural constraints, often more severe than those confronting their West African neighbors. Across the region, entrenched structural barriers – compounded by the mounting effects of climate change – continue to impede socioeconomic progress.

A similar dual pattern emerges in the quality of governance. On average, the region ranks near the bottom globally, though it still performs marginally better than the Middle East and North Africa and Southern and Eastern Africa. At the same time, disparities are pronounced, ranging from cases of “good” governance to those the BTI classifies as “failed.” Excluding the sharp declines in Niger and Burkina Faso, the broader trend is one of stagnation. Movement remains limited. Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Togo registered minor setbacks, while Gabon and Nigeria posted modest improvements.

The country reports suggest that in terms of economic development, the sharp downturn of recent years – triggered or exacerbated in part by the COVID-19 pandemic – may have reached its nadir. With the exception of Burkina Faso, Niger, Cameroon, Gabon and Togo, which saw slight declines in economic status, eight countries stagnated and nine recorded improvements. The latter group includes the Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo.

The following sections examine these trends in greater depth across political transformation, economic transformation and governance quality. Drawing on the country reports of the BTI 2026, which provide detailed national analyses, this regional report concludes with an outlook.

Political transformation

In the area of political transformation, many of the trends observed in recent years continued across the BTI region of West and Central Africa. These include democratic consolidation in some countries, sustained pressure on existing democracies, the entrenchment of authoritarian governments, the spread of military rule and the continued expansion of jihadist activity, particularly in the Sahel. The most consequential shift during the reporting period occurred in Niger. Classified as a “defective democracy” in the BTI 2024, the country became a “hard-line autocracy” following a coup – a dramatic drop of three categories.

Although “hard-line autocracies” remain numerous across West and Central Africa, this should not obscure the region’s broad diversity in political systems. At one end of the spectrum stands Senegal, where democratic institutions ultimately prevailed after a brief period of turbulence, and The Gambia, whose democratic order has continued to stabilize after years of dictatorship. At the other end are countries such as Chad, where democratic actors have been systematically silenced, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – categorized as a hard-line autocracy and a “failing state” – where the government has struggled to provide basic security and essential services.

In the BTI 2026, three countries in the region are classified as defective but consolidating democracies: The Gambia, Liberia and Senegal. In The Gambia, the political transformation that began after the fall of authoritarian President Yahya Jammeh in 2017 has continued incrementally. Under President Adama Barrow, the government has maintained an environment in which human rights and democratic standards are largely respected and anti-corruption efforts have gained traction. Liberia has likewise continued along a path toward democratic consolidation. Following elections in November 2023, won by Joseph Boakai, the country witnessed a peaceful transfer of power. Boakai’s victory reflected widespread disappointment with the unfulfilled expectations that had accompanied George Weah’s election as president in 2017. Boakai campaigned on promises to improve the quality of public services and stimulate economic growth.

Developments in Senegal proved considerably more turbulent. Incumbent President Macky Sall attempted to delay the regularly scheduled presidential election and weaken the opposition. Just three weeks before the planned vote in February 2024, he postponed the election by several months. His earlier efforts to secure a third term – widely seen as contrary to the spirit of the constitution – had already triggered recurring unrest since 2021. In July 2023, Sall announced he would not seek re-election and instead endorsed his prime minister, a technocrat, as his preferred successor. Ultimately, Sall’s maneuvers failed. The Constitutional Court compelled the government to hold elections before the end of his term, forcing authorities to organize the vote hastily by late March 2024. The opposition nominated Bassirou Diomaye Faye after the popular Ousmane Sonko was barred from running while in prison. Faye won the presidential election, appointed Sonko as prime minister and dissolved parliament in late 2024 to call legislative elections. His party secured victory, further consolidating the transfer of power.

Another ongoing trend is mounting pressure on democratic governance in Ghana. Although Ghana continues to lead the BTI ranking in West and Central Africa, ranks 19th among all BTI countries and remains classified as a defective democracy, challenges in political transformation have become more visible. The country report notes particular declines in freedom of assembly and in public commitment to democratic norms. In the BTI 2024, Ghana had already been downgraded from a consolidating to a defective democracy. In December 2024, the opposition won national elections, aided in part by its promise of a political and economic reset amid a severe economic crisis. According to the BTI assessment, the elections were considered free and fair. However, the Ghana Center for Democratic Development reported that the vote was marred by violence, resulting in six deaths, 46 injuries and several cases of property damage nationwide. Despite the peaceful transfer of power, Ghana's persistent economic difficulties and a perceived stagnation in living standards have eroded trust in public institutions, gradually weakening the foundations of its democracy.

A trend running counter to developments in The Gambia, Liberia and Senegal is the broader advance of autocratization across the region. As early as 2024, the BTI region of West and Central Africa recorded its lowest average score in the dimension of political transformation since the launch of the BTI in 2006, at 4.76. In the BTI 2026, this figure declined further to 4.44. Only the BTI region of the Middle East and North Africa ranks lower, with an average score of 3.44.

The Sahel stands out as a focal point of accelerating autocratization. In Burkina Faso and Mali, which experienced coups in 2022 and 2021 respectively, military governments further entrenched their authoritarian rule during the reporting period. This consolidation occurred partly with the support of Russian mercenaries and partly with the backing of segments of the population who placed their hopes in the military to restore security amid worsening instability. In Burkina Faso, the transition period was extended until 2029, effectively postponing elections until that date. Political parties were banned and civil society faced mounting repression. Political activists and journalists were subjected to systematic intimidation. In Mali, elections have neither been held nor scheduled. The country's three most powerful offices – president, prime minister and head of the National Transitional Council – are now firmly in military hands.

Chad followed a similar trajectory. After Mahamat Déby assumed power unconstitutionally in 2021 following the death of his father, Idriss Déby, he moved to consolidate his rule. Déby formally ended the transition period through a presidential election. However, as the country report notes, the vote was marred by irregularities. During the reporting period, there was little evidence of functioning democratic institutions or meaningful commitment among key political actors to establish them.

Niger, also located in the Sahel, was swept up in this wave of autocratization. Having been upgraded to a defective democracy in the previous BTI, the country experienced a dramatic reversal following a coup in July 2023 – within the 2023 – 2025 reporting period – that brought a military junta led by Abdourahamane Tiani to power. The junta capitalized on widespread frustration over the failure of substantial foreign assistance to deliver tangible improvements in living conditions. It suspended the constitution, banned political parties and subordinated both the legislature and judiciary to military control. As in Burkina Faso and Mali, there has been no credible indication that elections will be held to conclude the transition.

Beyond the Sahel, autocratic systems consolidated further. In Guinea, the military government showed no intention of ending the transition by the previously announced deadline of late 2024 following the 2021 coup. Instead, the junta maintained its grip on power. In the Central African Republic, the president strengthened his position with the assistance of former Wagner mercenaries, ushering in a comparatively calm and stable phase in an otherwise crisis-prone country – at the expense of democratic standards. In Equatorial Guinea, Russia has emerged as an influential actor, supporting President Teodoro Obiang Nguema as he appears to prepare a transfer of power to his son. In Cameroon, Paul Biya, in power since 1982, signaled his intention to run again in the presidential election scheduled for October 2025, despite being 92 years old at the time of writing. In the Republic of the Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso has entrenched his rule, abolishing term and age limits and positioning himself to remain in office until at least 2031. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Félix Tshisekedi secured re-election amid allegations of electoral fraud.

Tab. 1: State of political transformation

consolidating democracies Score 10 to 8	defective democracies Score < 8 to 6	highly defective democracies Score < 6	moderate autocracies Score ≥ 4	hard-line autocracies Score < 4
	Ghana	Sierra Leone	Benin	Guinea ▼
	Gambia		Côte d'Ivoire	Central African Republic
	Senegal		Guinea-Bissau	Cameroon
	Liberia		Togo	Congo, DR ●
			Mauritania	Congo, Rep.
			Nigeria	Equatorial Guinea
			Gabon	Mali
				Burkina Faso
				Niger ▼▼▼
				Chad

The table follows the BTI 2026 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their system categorization and respective score in political transformation status. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2024, dots mark failing states.

Autocratization was particularly stark in Guinea-Bissau. The parliament elected in June 2023 was dissolved unconstitutionally in December of the same year. Members of parliament were prevented from entering the parliamentary building through the use of tear gas. In November 2024, the required new elections were postponed due to financial and logistical constraints. No parliamentary elections were held during the reporting period, leaving the country without a functioning legislature. The presidential election due in 2024 also failed to take place. In parallel with these developments, demonstrations were banned over extended periods. A protest held in defiance of the ban in May 2024 was, according to the Bissau-Guinean Human Rights League, marked by police violence, including arrests, torture and kidnappings. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression were further curtailed.

Gabon followed a somewhat different trajectory. In July 2023, a coup ended the successive rule of Omar Bongo and his son Ali Bongo, whose family had governed continuously since 1967. The military installed Brice Oligui Nguema, a cousin of the ousted president, as transitional president. In November 2024, a new constitution drafted through a national dialogue process was approved in a referendum. Oligui went on to win the presidential election in April 2025.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Félix Tshisekedi stood for re-election in December 2023 and secured victory amid allegations of electoral fraud. As the BTI country report notes, the election appeared more a mechanism for legitimizing those in power than a meaningful exercise in democratic participation. Democratic institutions continued to erode during the reporting period, while corruption remained pervasive and systemic. Security conditions – particularly in the eastern part of the country – remained volatile. The M23 rebel group, supported by neighboring Rwanda, made territorial gains. In June 2025, after the close of the reporting period covered by the country reports, a peace agreement brokered by Qatar and the United States was signed in Washington between Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. At the time of writing, its impact remained uncertain. Owing to persistent weaknesses in the state's monopoly on the use of force and its failure to provide even basic infrastructure, the Democratic Republic of the Congo continues to be classified as a failing state in the BTI 2026. Rapid improvement appears unlikely, as the underlying causes are deeply rooted in systemic corruption, limited administrative professionalism and enduring ethnic tensions. The situation is particularly tragic given the country's extraordinary wealth of globally sought-after natural resources, including copper, cobalt and diamonds. Despite – or perhaps because of – this resource abundance, the government has failed to translate wealth into broad-based development. During the reporting period, 70% of the population lived below the poverty line.

A final trend worth highlighting is the continued expansion of jihadist activity, arguably the region's most serious security challenge during the reporting period. Groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Boko Haram – formally known as Jamā'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihād – and its offshoot, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, operated across borders. Jihadism was not confined to Mali and neighboring Sahel states, particularly Burkina Faso. It also spread to coastal West African countries such as Benin and Togo and affected the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the Allied Democratic Forces have established a presence. In several Sahel states, jihadist actors controlled significant portions of territory, in some cases acting as de facto authorities and establishing parallel governance structures.

Economic transformation

The state of economic transformation remained at a low level, with no significant structural shift taking place during the review period. After reaching a record low regional average of 4.22 in the BTI 2024 – the lowest since the BTI's launch in 2006 – the score improved only marginally to 4.27 in the BTI 2026. The overall picture remains strikingly uniform, characterized by a small group of countries classified as having a “limited” level of economic transformation and a much larger group rated as “very limited.” With the exception of Gabon, counted as part of Central Africa, all better-performing countries are located in West Africa.

A few figures underscore the scale of the region's economic challenges. With the exception of the oil-rich states of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, all countries in West and Central Africa rank in the lower half of per capita GDP among all BTI countries. Even Gabon, which posts the highest figure in the region, falls just short of the BTI-wide average. While the average per capita GDP across all BTI countries stands at 20,789 current international dollars, Gabon reaches 20,757. At the lower end of the spectrum, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo record per capita GDP levels of just 1,260 and 1,616 current international dollars – among the lowest worldwide. Only Burundi posts a lower figure.

A closer reading of the country reports nonetheless points, on balance, in a cautiously positive direction. Only five countries received slightly lower economic transformation scores compared with the BTI 2024, while eight stagnated and nine recorded – in some cases significant – improvements. This pattern is reflected in per capita GDP growth rates. With the exception of Equatorial Guinea, which saw its economy contract by 7.3%, due largely to oil price volatility and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries fell within a relatively narrow range between -0.8% and 1.0%. Eleven countries even achieved per capita GDP growth exceeding 2.0%. The downward trend observed in the BTI 2024, linked to the economic fallout of the pandemic, appears to have been halted. This is particularly evident in Ghana and Nigeria.

Tab. 2: State of economic transformation

highly advanced Score 10 to 8	advanced Score < 8 to 7	limited Score < 7 to 5	very limited Score < 5 to 3	rudimentary Score < 3
		Ghana	Senegal	
		Benin	Togo	
		Gambia	Cameroon	
		Côte d'Ivoire	Burkina Faso	
		Gabon	Mauritania	
			Guinea	
			Sierra Leone	
			Mali	
			Liberia	
			Niger	
			Guinea-Bissau	
			Nigeria	
			Congo, Rep.	
			Equatorial Guinea	
			Central African Republic	
			Chad	
			Congo, DR	

The table follows the BTI 2026 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in economic transformation status. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2024.

In Ghana, the new government responded to the severe economic crisis of recent years. Although presidential candidate John Mahama had pledged to renegotiate the country's agreement with the International Monetary Fund, he reversed course after taking office and proceeded to implement the existing IMF-supported program. Measures included tightening monetary policy to curb high inflation and reducing the fiscal deficit. Improvements in fiscal and financial policy, strengthened social safety nets and more visible engagement in international environmental protection efforts contributed to Ghana's improved economic transformation score in the BTI 2026.

In Nigeria, President Bola Tinubu's administration introduced a series of reforms aimed at stabilizing and strengthening the economy. The government unified multiple exchange rate systems and allowed the naira to float more freely. It lifted certain trade restrictions and further liberalized international trade. Costly fuel subsidies – long criticized by external advisers – were removed, though later partially reinstated. In May 2023, the Dangote Refinery, Africa's largest, officially began operations. The project, estimated to involve \$20 billion in costs, is seen as a potential game changer, as it aims to transform Nigeria from an oil producer that exports crude oil for processing abroad into a self-sufficient refiner capable of meeting its own fuel needs.

Despite these positive signals in Ghana and Nigeria and the modest improvement in the regional average, the structural constraints facing West and Central African economies remain profound and persistent. Geographic factors play a significant role, including the high number of land-locked countries without direct access to maritime trade routes and the Sahara Desert, which continues to function as a natural barrier to North Africa and Europe. In addition, inadequate transport infrastructure, limited economic diversification and high public debt burdens continue to weigh heavily on economic transformation across the region.

One structural challenge that is exceptionally difficult to manage is climate change. With the exception of North Africa – where conditions are even more severe – West Africa ranks among the continent’s most affected regions, according to a 2024 report by the World Meteorological Organization. The report finds that in 2023, average temperatures in the region were 1.29 degrees Celsius higher than during the 1961 – 1990 reference period. It also notes that southern Cameroon and southern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo experienced extreme drought, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic recorded a high number of heat waves. According to the World Meteorological Organization, African countries lose an estimated 2% – 5% of GDP annually due to climate change. In sub-Saharan Africa, the projected costs of climate adaptation are estimated at \$30 – \$50 billion per year over the coming decade, equivalent to roughly 2% – 3% of regional GDP. The country reports capture these mounting pressures by assessing environmental policy performance and evaluating whether and how governments address environmental concerns. Here, the trend is negative. After years of relative stagnation since the BTI’s inception, the regional average score declined again in the BTI 2026, falling from 3.83 in the BTI 2024 to 3.77.

Regional economic communities remain a central pillar of Africa’s broader development strategy. Among them is the Economic Community of West African States, better known as ECOWAS. The organization comprises 15 member states and pursues not only economic integration but also political objectives, including the promotion of democracy. In line with its legal framework, ECOWAS suspended Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger following the coups in those countries and imposed sanctions. After the coup in Niger, ECOWAS even threatened military intervention to restore civilian rule.

The economic consequences of these sanctions were severe. Following border closures by neighboring states, shortages in Niger forced the temporary closure of schools and businesses. Approximately 70% of the country’s electricity supply – largely imported from Nigeria – was disrupted due to sanctions. Other ECOWAS members also felt the impact. The port of Cotonou in Benin serves as a major transit hub for goods destined for Niger, while the port of Dakar in Senegal plays a similar role for Mali, which was also under sanctions. As trade declined, both ports suffered significant revenue losses. Although sanctions were lifted in January 2024, the economic damage had already been done.

In September 2023, the military juntas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States – a security pact that also carried political weight as a counterweight to ECOWAS. In January 2024, citing what they described as inhumane sanctions, the three governments announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS. The exit became effective on January 30, 2025. The full implications of these withdrawals are not yet clear. However, significant negative effects on socioeconomic conditions and economic performance are widely expected. By leaving ECOWAS, the three countries also exited its customs union, which since 2015 had eliminated import tariffs on

goods traded within the bloc. As a result, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger must now pay tariffs when trading with ECOWAS member states. The loss of preferential access to key ports in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal further constrains trade flows, with particularly serious implications for food security. Food prices in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger could rise sharply. Even before the withdrawal, food costs were already 110% higher than the minimum wage in these countries. The departure from ECOWAS may therefore have dramatic consequences for the population. Some analysts argue that the three states could offset part of the economic fallout through increased mineral exports, particularly gold. Yet even if such compensation materializes, rising food prices are likely to impose substantial burdens on households and exacerbate existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

Governance

Unsurprisingly, the negative trends observed in political and economic transformation are also reflected in governance quality. The regional average score for West and Central Africa declined slightly from 4.55 points in the BTI 2024 to 4.41 points in the BTI 2026. This marks the lowest level recorded since the BTI was launched in 2006, when the regional average stood at 4.48. The drop is driven primarily by the sharp deterioration in governance in Burkina Faso and Niger. Their scores fell by 0.96 and 1.82 points respectively, with each slipping down one category and now classified as having weak governance performance.

In Burkina Faso, conflict intensity rose significantly. By the end of 2024, the country counted approximately one million internally displaced persons. Since 2015, the number, geographic spread and brutality of terrorist attacks have increased exponentially. Despite claims by the military government to the contrary, Islamist violence continued throughout the reporting period. The 2024 Global Terrorism Index, developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace and released by Vision of Humanity, ranked Burkina Faso as the country most affected by terrorism worldwide. Human rights violations by security forces and by the vigilante group *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* also increased. Reform-oriented actors advocating democratization operated in an increasingly hostile environment dominated by anti-democratic forces.

The downgrade for Niger is even more pronounced than for Burkina Faso because, unlike in its neighbor, the coup in Niger occurred during the current reporting period. As a result, the BTI 2026 fully captures the immediate governance consequences of the 2023 takeover. Conflict intensity in Niger was high, and the country appeared deeply divided along multiple fault lines. As the BTI country report notes, divisions emerged between younger and older citizens, between rich and poor, and between those favoring a democratically oriented civilian government and those supporting military rule, at least as a transitional arrangement. There was no broad societal consensus on the desirability of democracy. Anti-democratic actors dominated the political space, and reformers struggled to make their voices heard. Notably, unlike in previous periods of military dominance, the 2023 coup triggered only limited public protest.

Tab. 4: Quality of governance

very good	good	moderate	weak	failed
Score 10 to 7	Score < 7 to 5.6	Score < 5.6 to 4.3	Score < 4.3 to 3	Score < 3
	Senegal	Côte d'Ivoire ▼	Mauritania	Congo, Rep.
	Ghana	Liberia	Central African Republic	Congo, DR
	Gambia	Gabon	Cameroon	Chad
	Benin	Togo	Burkina Faso ▼	
		Sierra Leone	Guinea-Bissau	
		Guinea	Niger ▼	
		Nigeria ▲	Equatorial Guinea	
			Mali	

The table follows the BTI 2026 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in the Governance Index. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2024.

Burkina Faso and Niger also shared a marked reorientation of foreign policy. Both governments distanced themselves from Europe and ECOWAS member states while strengthening ties with authoritarian governments in China, Türkiye and particularly Russia, as well as with neighboring military regimes. As a result of this shift, Western countries largely suspended cooperation with the military governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Development assistance flows declined sharply. Government priorities centered on short-term security concerns, with little evidence of coherent long-term development strategies. The withdrawal from ECOWAS further compounded these challenges. These developments, combined with the refusal to hold elections or even outline an electoral timeline and with rising repression, have eroded the credibility of the military governments, especially in Burkina Faso and Niger. The country reports for both of these countries illustrate this clearly. The BTI explicitly assesses the extent to which governments act as credible and reliable partners in the international arena. On a 10-point scale, both Burkina Faso and Niger receive only four points in the BTI 2026. For Burkina Faso, this represents a loss of two points; for Niger, the decline amounts to five points.

Excluding Burkina Faso and Niger from the regional picture, governance quality across the remaining countries largely stagnated during the reporting period. Unlike economic transformation, where countries cluster into two main categories, governance performance spans almost the full spectrum; no country in West and Central Africa reaches the highest category of “very good” governance.

Senegal and Ghana continue to stand out for comparatively strong governance performance, ranking 15th and 20th respectively among all countries assessed in the BTI 2026. In Senegal, the new government under President Bassirou Diomaye Faye has demonstrated productive continuity in governance quality. As under the previous administration, performance remains rated as high. In Ghana, as in Senegal, there is broad societal consensus in favor of preserving democratic institutions. Unlike in many other countries in the BTI region of West and Central Africa, reform-oriented actors in both states are able to participate meaningfully in political debate and exert influence. Both governments have also maintained constructive cooperation with neighboring countries, international partners and multilateral institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund. This external engagement has contributed positively to their governance ratings.

Nigeria likewise recorded a modest improvement in governance quality, resulting in an upgrade by one category. According to the BTI country report, the government improved its capacity to prioritize and implement policy reforms. Most significant in this regard were the long-demanded reductions in fuel and electricity subsidies and the consolidation of the exchange rate for the Nigerian naira. These reforms enhanced the government's credibility with international partners.

Governance performance also improved slightly in Gabon and The Gambia. In Gabon, the Bongo dynasty and the long-ruling Parti Démocratique Gabonais had for decades acted as central obstacles to meaningful democratization. The August 2023 coup, which removed the Bongo family from power, brought a military-led transitional government that dissolved the ruling party and initiated a political transition culminating in democratic elections held in 2025. In the presidential election of April 2025, Brice Oligui Nguema, who had led the military government after the coup, was elected president with approximately 90% of the vote. His closest competitor received roughly 3%. The removal of the Bongo family and the Parti Démocratique Gabonais opens at least the possibility that reform-oriented forces could gain greater traction. Nguema's decision to initiate a national dialogue on constitutional reform and to submit the draft constitution to a referendum may be interpreted as steps in that direction. The new constitution was approved in November 2024 with 92% support. According to the BTI country report, civil society enjoyed an unprecedented level of participation during this transitional phase, marking a potentially significant moment in the country's political trajectory.

Côte d'Ivoire declined by one category and is now rated as having "moderate" governance quality in the BTI 2026. Although both the government and the opposition continue to profess a long-term commitment to democratization, growing doubts have emerged as to whether the government is in fact pursuing a coherent democratization strategy. Uncertainty also persists over whether the military would accept any civilian government without reservation. The government's credibility and commitment to the rule of law had already suffered in 2020 when, following dissatisfaction with a ruling by the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, it withdrew from the court's jurisdiction and barred citizens and NGOs from filing cases. The court nonetheless continued to pursue pending proceedings against Côte d'Ivoire. In September 2023, it issued a landmark ruling concerning the 2006 dumping of toxic waste, which resulted in 17 deaths, caused respiratory and skin illnesses for hundreds of thousands and contaminated groundwater. The court found that Côte d'Ivoire had violated, among other rights, the right to life and health and called for reparations.

Guinea also experienced a significant decline in governance indicators, although not enough to trigger a shift into a lower category. Since the 2021 coup, the operating space for civil society has steadily narrowed. Some civil society representatives were co-opted by the new authorities, while others who remained critical faced harassment and repression. In February 2025, Abdul Sacko, head of the Forum des Forces Sociales de Guinée, a network of civil society organizations, was abducted and reportedly tortured. The case illustrates the increasingly hostile environment for reform-oriented actors. The junta's overriding focus on consolidating its own power has come at the expense of broader policy priorities. Limited strategic planning, weak policy implementation and a lack of meaningful policy learning have further undermined governance performance. Limited strategic planning, weak policy implementation and a lack of meaningful policy learning have further undermined governance performance.

Chad ranks last in the region in terms of governance quality, falling from 126th to 127th place among all countries assessed in the BTI 2026. The country has been mired in protracted conflict for years. In her book *Living by the Gun in Chad*, Marielle Debos argues that Chad cannot meaningfully be described in terms of “war” and “peace,” but rather as alternating between “war” and “inter-war.” This characterization remains apt. Since Mahamat Déby assumed power, conflict intensity has increased, in part because the president has sought to consolidate his authority, at times through violent means. Reform-oriented forces face severe constraints. During the reporting period, civil society was largely excluded from decision-making processes. The events of Black Thursday, October 20, 2022, when security forces killed at least 128 protesters, continued to cast a long shadow, serving as a stark reminder of the government’s repressive capacity. As under his father’s long rule, there is little indication that the government of Mahamat Déby is prioritizing policies capable of improving living standards through targeted cooperation with international donors. Taken together, these factors explain why the BTI 2026 rates governance quality in Chad as particularly weak.

Outlook

During the reporting period, reform-oriented forces advocating democracy and good governance in the region faced strong headwinds. In many countries of the BTI region of West and Central Africa, resistance came from within, in the form of repressive autocratic governments willing to suppress democratic aspirations by force if necessary. Pressure also came from outside, notably through the partial withdrawal of traditional donors – a trend that in some cases amounts to growing disengagement – while authoritarian states have shown increasing interest in deepening their involvement on the continent. There is little reason to expect these external headwinds to abate in the coming years

The election of the 47th president of the United States in November 2024 dealt a significant blow to democracy-oriented actors in West and Central Africa. During his first term, he had referred disparagingly to African countries as “shithole countries” and demonstrated limited engagement with the continent. In his second term, he has pursued an “America First” approach toward Africa with greater consistency. In practical terms, this has meant the effective end of U.S. development cooperation and democracy promotion programs on the continent. The loss of U.S. funding represents a major setback not only for reform-oriented actors within African countries but also for international organizations working to promote democracy, socioeconomic development and regional security. Without U.S. financial contributions, these organizations are unlikely to sustain operations at previous levels. In 2024 alone, the United States accounted for more than a quarter of the United Nations’ budget.

Beyond the financial implications, the erosion of the United States’ role as a reference point may carry even greater long-term consequences. Despite inconsistencies and double standards during and after the Cold War, the United States broadly positioned itself as a proponent of democracy, human rights, good governance and socioeconomic development. In July 2015, toward the end of his second term, President Barack Obama addressed the African Union and – to the applause of the mostly young audience in the galleries – he told the assembled heads of state and government in the plenary session: “When I first came to sub-Saharan Africa as a president, I said that Africa doesn’t need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.” Continuing, drawing

laughter: “Sometimes you’ll hear leaders say, well, I’m the only person who can hold this nation together,” he added: “If that’s true, then that leader has failed to truly build their nation.” The current U.S. president has little interest in promoting democratic institution-building abroad. As a result, the United States’ function as a democratic role model has diminished. The full implications for democratic development in West and Central Africa and beyond are not yet clear.

Result Governance Index			Result Status Index		
2026	2024		2024	2026	
6,68	6,56	Senegal	5,93	5,93	
6,41	6,34	Ghana	6,53	6,63	
6,27	5,90	Gambia	6,17	6,33	
5,80	5,80	Benin	5,47	5,45	
5,52	5,60	Côte d’Ivoire	5,05	5,06	
5,02	4,93	Liberia	5,16	5,19	
4,79	4,57	Gabon	5,03	4,69	
4,77	5,01	Togo	4,72	4,52	
4,56	4,67	Sierra Leone	5,05	4,88	
4,55	5,09	Guinea	4,29	4,08	
4,44	4,13	Nigeria	3,87	3,99	
4,25	4,11	Mauritania	4,32	4,33	
4,22	4,06	Central African Republic	3,28	3,38	
3,95	3,93	Cameroon	4,09	4,05	
3,80	4,76	Burkina Faso	4,19	3,64	
3,70	3,95	Guinea-Bissau	4,52	4,29	
3,69	5,51	Niger	5,00	3,37	
3,50	3,52	Equatorial Guinea	2,98	3,08	
3,21	3,60	Mali	3,75	3,51	
2,91	2,91	Congo, Rep.	3,32	3,41	
2,65	2,87	Congo, DR	3,37	3,32	
2,22	2,31	Chad	2,72	2,77	

■ Political transformation
■ Economic transformation

The United States is not alone in scaling back. European countries have also begun to reduce funding for democracy promotion and development cooperation. In light of Russia’s aggression and the perceived need to strengthen national and collective defense, member states of the European Union and NATO – traditionally among the most significant donors and supporters of democratic governance – are likely to prioritize defense spending. As a consequence, fewer resources will be available for external democracy support and development assistance in the years ahead.

Parallel to these developments, France – the last former colonial power still maintaining a substantial presence in parts of West and Central Africa – has been steadily withdrawing, not least under pressure from host governments. This shift does not automatically spell negative consequences for democratization. France’s repeated political and military interventions have, at times, helped sustain Francophile autocrats in power. For many in the region seeking greater sovereignty and self-determination, the French drawdown reflects long-standing demands. Yet the departure of French troops has also created security vacuums.

In several countries, these vacuums are being filled with the support of authoritarian powers, most prominently Russia. Russian advisers, troops and mercenaries are now active particularly in the coup-affected Sahel states and in the Central African Republic, where they provide security assistance. This support, however, frequently comes with disregard for fundamental human rights and minimum democratic standards, further constraining prospects for democratization. Resentment toward Western countries – especially France – and frustration over decades of perceived failures in development cooperation have fueled a sustained pivot away from Western partners. Russia, like China and other authoritarian states, does not condition its support on

democratic governance or the rule of law. Instead, it pursues economic and geostrategic interests. This approach makes Russian backing especially attractive to consolidating military regimes in West and Central Africa. As a result, the region has become one of Russia's most significant areas of engagement outside the former Soviet Union.

The depth of anti-Western sentiment is particularly evident in parts of the Sahel, where segments of the population view Vladimir Putin as a potential ally or even savior. This perception stands in stark contrast to Putin's conduct of a brutal war of aggression in Ukraine in violation of international law – a conflict that has claimed the lives of countless civilians as well as Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. Western governments would do well to recognize the degree of despair and disillusionment that must underlie such shifts in public sentiment in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. For the foreseeable future, democratization efforts are unlikely to be driven from outside the region. Democratic change will have to emerge domestically. This is not inherently disadvantageous. Democracies rooted in broad-based domestic support are often more resilient over the long term. The coming years will offer important indications of the region's trajectory. Upcoming elections in Gabon will provide further insight into whether the constitutional referendum and national dialogue mark the beginning of a genuine reform process or merely a temporary opening. In Côte d'Ivoire, the incumbent president – whose third-term bid in 2021 drew criticism – appears unlikely to run again. Should a reform-oriented candidate prevail, one of the region's economic heavyweights could reorient toward a renewed democratization path. The Gambia also stands at a crossroads. Presidential elections scheduled for 2026 will test whether the country remains committed to its current reform trajectory. Perhaps most consequential, however, will be developments in Senegal. The resilience of its political system in the face of growing autocratic influence will soon become clearer. Russia has shown interest in supporting the newly elected Senegalese government in further distancing itself from France. In this sense, Senegal serves as a bellwether for broader geopolitical shifts across West and Central Africa – a region increasingly intent on redefining its external alignments and charting a more autonomous course.

About the BTI

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The current assessment period is from February 1, 2023 to January 31, 2025.

The BTI is the only international comparative index that measures the quality of governance with self-assessed data and offers a comprehensive analysis of political management in transformation processes.

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