



Regional Report West and Central Africa

Increasingly autocratic and assertive

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DOI 10.11586/2024039

Regional Report BTI 2024

West and Central Africa

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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 2022 in the re-view period from February 1, 2021, to January 31, 2023. Further information can be found at www.bti-project.org.

Please quote as follows:

Martin Welz, Increasingly autocratic and assertive — BTI 2024 Regional Report West and Central Africa. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024.

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Introduction

Political and economic transformation in the 22 countries comprising the BTI region of West and Central Africa is characterized by marginal progress in a few instances, a lack of significant change in most states, and clear setbacks in some countries. While the state of political transformation and governance quality varies throughout the region, economic transformation remains more uniformly underdeveloped across the region. In almost every country in the region, democracy and market economic transformation are under pressure. At the same time, African governments are exercising greater confidence on the international stage in a changing global environment. It remains to be seen whether this will help or hinder political and economic transformation processes.

The West African Sahel region offers a microcosm of the range of developments observed across the entire region. While Burkina Faso and Mali have suffered dramatic setbacks with regard to their respective transformation processes, which are primarily due to coups and a precarious security situation, neighboring Niger showed slight improvements during the period under review (2021–2023). However, the impact of these improvements in the latter state has been up in the air since the military coup in July 2023. A similar range of developments is apparent across the rest of West Africa as well. In Gambia, we see continued progress in both political and economic transformation. A similar, albeit less pronounced, trend can be observed in Côte d’Ivoire, which has now climbed to the 68th position in the BTI Status Index, thanks to gains made both economically and politically. At rank 45 in the Status Index, Gambia stands out as the second-highest-ranked country in the BTI region of West and Central Africa. Ghana has come under increasing pressure as it faces major political and economic challenges and has been downgraded from a consolidated to a defective democracy in BTI terms.

On average, Central African countries generally receive significantly lower ratings than West African countries. This region includes the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, two of the BTI 2024’s 10 *failing states* (nearby Sudan and South Sudan are likewise *failing states*, but are assigned to another BTI region). Chad has also regressed in all areas covered by the BTI. This can be attributed in large part to the consolidation of authoritarian rule following an unconstitutional seizure of power by the son of the president, who died on the frontlines while visiting troops fighting against rebel forces. Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo face similarly precarious situations and are classified as hard-line autocracies.

Overall, autocratization is on the rise across the entire West and Central African region. Due to developments in Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and Nigeria, all of which have experienced a decrease of more than 1.00 points on the BTI’s 10-point scale of political transformation in the past four years, the average development status scores in the region have seen a noticeable decline. Political setbacks observed in countries across West Africa account in large part for the massive decline in the region’s Status Index score. In the BTI 2020, all of the region’s countries, excepting Mauritania and Togo, were classified as democracies. In the BTI 2024, only six of the region’s 15 countries are democratically ruled.

A comparison with the countries of Southern and Eastern Africa highlights the tense situation in West and Central Africa. Despite consistently lower levels of economic development in the region, it was the significant political progress made since the BTI 2018 that had previously led to a higher overall assessment of transformation compared to Southern and Eastern Africa. “Poor but democratic” was the chosen headline for the BTI regional report of that year. However, despite similar negative trends observed in Southern and Eastern Africa, the notably unfavorable evaluation of political transformation in several West African states has once again positioned the entire West and Central Africa region behind Southern and Eastern Africa in terms of its transformation level. Political systems in many West and Central African countries have struggled to cope with the massive political, economic and social challenges they face. The level of difficulty identified for each country in the BTI sample, which also takes into account security issues, geographic factors and climate-related challenges, is higher in West and Central Africa than in any other region of the world.

Despite these challenges, we see an increasingly observable trend in which African governments are becoming more self-confident in international contexts and becoming less susceptible to international power dynamics. West and Central Africa is no exception. While African governments in the 1990s and 2000s were heavily reliant on Western donor countries, the rise of China and other non-democratic states like Türkiye and Saudi Arabia in particular has facilitated a crucial shift. Their increased interest in Africa means that governments in the region now have multiple potential partners to choose from. On the one hand, this undermines Western nations' (inconsistent) efforts to advance democratization. On the other hand, having options also compels African governments to demand cooperation on equal footing with Western countries.

In recent years, Russia has positioned itself as a partner for African states, a trend that has been further accentuated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions. In some cases, the Russian government was successful with its initiatives. In Mali, the Wagner mercenary group has established a foothold and become a stabilizing factor for the local government. In Cameroon, a Franco-Russian competition is growing, with Russia increasingly presenting itself as a strategic partner in economic and military matters. And in the Central African Republic, the security of the president depends significantly on the protection provided by the Wagner Group.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the reactions to it highlight the increased assertiveness of African governments and demonstrate that the West no longer holds dominance in Africa. At the first UN General Assembly resolution to condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine, held on March 2, 2022, the West and Central African states of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Togo abstained from the vote. The Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Mali, the Republic of the Congo and Senegal also abstained, while Benin, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone and voted in favor of the resolution condemning Russia. The pressure exerted by Western governments on their counterparts in West and Central Africa did not yield uniform results, as indicated by the large number of abstentions. This underscores, on one hand, the increasing autonomy of governments in the region and, on the other hand, their efforts to maintain flexibility in their international relations. Many governments in the region have maneuvered themselves into a comfortable position, enabling them to independently decide which countries to cooperate with, which not to, and which path to take in terms of political and economic transformation.

Political transformation

Political transformation in West and Central Africa remains under pressure. While many countries in the region appear to be in a state of stagnation, some have further deteriorated, casting a shadow over the overall situation. The list of countries demonstrating some progress in terms of political transformation is short: only Niger has achieved a higher ranking in terms of democracy compared to two years ago. The list of those countries that have been downgraded is considerably longer: Ghana, formerly recognized as the sole consolidated democracy in West and Central Africa, has regressed to the status of a defective democracy. Additionally, Sierra Leone has shifted from being categorized as a defective democracy to a highly defective democracy. Benin and Guinea-Bissau are no longer classified as democracies, but as moderate autocracies. Mali, along with neighboring Burkina Faso, is now considered a hard-line autocracy. Burkina Faso's decline in this regard is, next to Benin, the sharpest in the region. The BTI 2022 had classified Burkina Faso as a highly defective democracy.

Table 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 ▼▼	Burkina Faso ▼▼
	Gambia		Guinea-Bissau ▼	Congo, DR ●
	Senegal		Côte d'Ivoire	Cameroon
	Liberia		Togo	Central African Republic ●
	Niger ▲		Gabon	Mali ▼
			Mauritania	Congo, Rep.
			Guinea	Equatorial Guinea
			Nigeria	Chad

The table follows the BTI 2024 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their system categorization and respective score in political transformation status assessment. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2022, dots mark failing states.

The restrictions placed on the freedom of expression and the press in Ghana account in large part for the country's downgrade. In the case of Sierra Leone, observers have raised concerns regarding the competence of the electoral commission and the registration process for the general elections held in June 2023. The way in which the election was handled and its consequences, which will be addressed in the BTI 2026, will provide further insights into Sierra Leone's trajectory.

Benin, where the wave of democratization began in 1991 and captivated many parts of Africa, has witnessed a noticeable deterioration in its political situation. In this year's BTI, the country is now considered to be an autocracy. This development was already hinted at in the BTI 2022 report, which highlighted tightening regulations concerning the admission of opposition candidates. These rules, which were applied in the most recent elections, effectively barred key figures in the opposition from running and rendered the elections unfair. Voter turnout barely surpassed half of the eligible voters.

Guinea-Bissau's downgrading to the group of autocracies is based on the fact that the separation of powers no longer exists in practical terms. Having undermined the legislative and judiciary branches by positioning himself above the law, the president dissolved parliament in May 2022. During the review period, members of the opposition have been subjected to intimidation with the assistance of the military, and dissenters have also been threatened.

Burkina Faso and Mali's downgrades can be traced back to a specific issue: the coup d'états that took place in both states. Guinea also suffered a coup during the review period. And although the country's index score plummeted, Guinea remains among the group of moderate autocracies. Coup d'états such as those seen in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, are not a new phenomenon in Africa, and West and Central Africa, in particular, has been heavily affected by them. A dataset compiled by Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, listing all successful and unsuccessful coups worldwide, reveals that between 1950 and 2020, out of the 489 recorded coups or coup attempts globally, 132 occurred in West and Central Africa (including São Tomé and Príncipe with three coup attempts). Of these 132 coups, 69, according to Powell and Thyne's study, are classified as successful, indicating that the coup plotters managed to seize power and hold it for at least seven days.

The successful coups in Burkina Faso (both in 2022), Guinea (in 2021) and Mali (in 2021), as well as coup attempts in Gambia (in 2022), Guinea-Bissau (in 2022) and Mali (in 2022), therefore, join a long list of coups and coup attempts in the region. They illustrate that a change of power brought about by a coup is not an exceptional occurrence there. While there was a decrease in coups, partly due to the restrictive anti-coup efforts of the African Union in the 2010s, the period under review shows a significant change in this regard, with approximately a quarter of the countries in West and Central Africa being affected by coups or attempted coups.

The motivations behind these coups vary. Weaknesses in state institutions and socioeconomic challenges within affected countries create fertile ground for coups. Additional factors include whether military action is restricted by relevant regulations in a country, whether the military is politicized, and whether it acts cohesively. There is also statistical evidence suggesting that presidential term limits reduce the likelihood of a coup. Furthermore, the receipt of development aid is discussed as a contributing factor. The argument here is that coup leaders, as rational actors, may be incentivized to carry out a coup in order to gain access to the development aid payments, which they would potentially get after seizing power.

The population is not necessarily against a military takeover. In fact, data from the 2020 Afrobarometer show that 56.2% of the population in Burkina Faso expressed a high level of confidence in the military, while only 31.8% had such confidence in the president. This data shows that the putschists in Burkina Faso were greeted favorably by the population. In many other countries in the region that are not necessarily affected by coups, we see a similar pattern in which the population shows greater trust in the military than in the head of state. In Gambia, for example, 42.9% of respondents displayed significant trust in the military, whereas only 31.2% expressed similar confidence in the president. In Benin, the ratio is 34.15% to 28.8%. Even in democratic Ghana, 35.1% of the population demonstrates significant trust in the military, compared to just 13.9% in the president. This latter statistic suggests a cloudy future for Ghana.

The February 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, considered to be the region's most important, will be taken into consideration in the next BTI edition. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the election faced challenges, as evidenced by a high voter abstention rate. Initial analyses attribute the low voter turnout, which was below 30%, to several factors. Facing a fundamentally challenging security situation, the country experienced delays in the opening of polling stations, some remaining closed altogether. Polling stations, particularly in opposition strongholds, were subjected to attacks, and there was a shortage of gasoline and cash shortly before election day. These factors compounded the difficulty for a substantial portion of the population in accessing the polling stations. Ultimately, the desire for political change, especially among the youth in the country, went unfulfilled. The election thus underscores the BTI country report's portrayal of Nigeria as a moderate autocracy with problematic elections.

A key challenge for political transformation in West and Central African countries is the weakness of the opposition and the broader party landscape. In the National Assembly of Niger, no less than 19 parties secured seats in the last election, making it difficult for a united and effective opposition to emerge. In Mauritania, we observe a different problem: the strongest opposition parties do not form alliances to collectively challenge the ruling party. A fragmented party landscape (as seen in Niger) and a reluctance to form alliances (as in Mauritania) are common phenomena in the region. Clientelism within opposition parties is also an issue, as evidenced in countries like the Republic of Congo and Benin. As a result, trust in opposition parties is low. Afrobarometer data for Benin, for instance, shows that only 11.2% express high levels of trust for the opposition, while 30.1% do not trust them at all. This contrasts with the confidence expressed in the ruling party, with 16.1% expressing a high level of trust and 26.3% stating they have no trust in the party. The situation is even more dramatic in Ghana, where 47.2% of respondents express no trust in the ruling party, and 38.9% say the same about the opposition.

Freedom of expression and the press vary greatly across West and Central Africa. Gambia and Ghana are the countries with a high degree of freedom of expression and press freedom, followed by Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia and Senegal. Freedom of expression and press freedom have come under severe pressure in Mali and even more so in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. The situation is equally dramatic in Chad. Following the unconstitutional change of government that brought the president's son to power, the country's autocratic system seems to be consolidating through the increasing frequency of repressive measures. Members of the press increasingly face the challenge of working under life-threatening conditions when reporting on protests in the country.

Economic transformation

Economic issues pose a significant challenge across the region of West and Central Africa. During the reporting period, no country in the region was classified as having achieved a highly advanced or advanced state of economic transformation. Due to the improving economic situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic, both of which have moved from the lowest to the second-lowest category for this dimension in the BTI 2024, all 22 states in the region now fall into one of two categories. No other BTI region exhibits a similar type of clustering, and no other region faces such a challenging situation in terms of economic transformation. Economic transformation is deemed to be very limited in 17 of the region's countries and limited in the remaining five.

Table 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
		Benin	Senegal ▼	
		Gabon	Togo	
		Côte d'Ivoire	Cameroon	
		Ghana	Burkina Faso	
		Gambia ▲	Sierra Leone	
			Guinea	
			Mauritania	
			Mali	
			Liberia	
			Niger	
			Guinea-Bissau	
			Nigeria	
			Congo, Rep.	
			Chad	
			Congo, DR ▲	
			Equatorial Guinea	
			Central African Republic ▲	

The table follows the BTI 2024 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in economic transformation status assessment. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2022.

Given the political and economic challenges in the region, two findings stand out: on the one hand the relative economic strength in Gabon, where the economy rebounded during the review period after suffering an economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic. The upswing in per capita GDP was facilitated by the combined benefits of the country's resource wealth and a relatively small population. Gabon also reports moderate progress in its education system, including enrollment rates. On the other hand, the Democratic Republic of Congo stands out as we see marginal improvements there – albeit at a modest scale – achieved in external trade and fiscal policy. Nonetheless, this runs counter to the global trend otherwise observed for the BTI 2024 of a prevailing inclination toward weakening fiscal policies.

Ghana, on the contrary, finds itself navigating economically turbulent waters, as is reflected by the significant decline in its economic status score. This can be attributed to several factors, including a weak currency, the government's failure to curb inflation rates exceeding 50%, and challenges in combating corruption and mismanagement, which has resulted in diminished rev-

venues from cocoa and gold exports. Similarly, Guinea-Bissau has witnessed a substantial downturn in its state of economic transformation that is associated with its struggle to recover from the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and long-standing issues stemming from inadequate investments in education.

In most West and Central African states, per capita GDP lags significantly behind the global average. With exceptions like Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, ranked 45th and 51st respectively, alongside Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania and Nigeria falling within the mid-range, countries within the region tend to rank among the weakest performers in this regard. And even within the region, we see a wide gap between various countries. For example, while Equatorial Guinea has a per capita GDP of \$16,080, the Central African Republic only has one of only \$920.

The challenging economic landscape in West and Central Africa can be attributed to two key factors as recorded by the BTI: the structural constraints prevalent throughout the region and the intensity of conflicts. The term “conflict intensity” within the BTI context refers to the severity of political, social, ethnic and religious tensions within a country. Notably, apart from the BTI region of the Middle East and North Africa, no other region averages such a poor score for conflict intensity as does West and Central Africa. Nevertheless, substantial variations exist within the region. For instance, Gabon, with very low conflict intensity, is at one end of the spectrum, while Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria and the Central African Republic with high conflict intensity stand at the opposite end. The adverse impact of conflicts, especially when they escalate into violence, on economic and socioeconomic development is undeniable.

Countries in the region face a variety of structural constraints that have a profound impact on the economic landscape overall. These include an unfavorable geographic location, infrastructure deficiencies and a scarcity of skilled labor. Additionally, the region suffers from the consequences of climate change such as extreme weather events, droughts and desertification. Structural constraints are, in fact, more problematic for the region than conflict intensity. They pose the largest burdens and are uniformly present across the entire region. Unlike every other BTI region, not a single country in West and Central Africa faces minimal obstacles when it comes to structural constraints. This is hardly surprising given that the region has five landlocked countries without direct maritime access, which is crucial for global trade. In addition, the Sahara acts as a barrier to the north of the region. Finally, the historical neglect of infrastructure investment, coupled with limited local resource processing, exacerbates these challenges.

In countries blessed with abundant natural resources, structural constraints, combined with patronage and clientelism, often hinder the effective utilization of these resources for socioeconomic development. This scenario is particularly evident in oil-rich countries like Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo, where rentier economies disproportionately benefit the ruling elite. Guinea boasts the world's largest bauxite reserves, essential for aluminum production, while the Democratic Republic of Congo holds by far the largest share of global cobalt reserves, a critical resource for information technology and electric vehicle batteries. However, due to entrenched clientelism, the benefits of these resources remain largely concentrated among a select few.

The enduring economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to weigh heavily on several West and Central African states. Despite various efforts, many states have struggled to regain pre-pandemic growth levels. Gambia's economic trajectory illustrates this trend: GDP growth, which stood at 3.5% in 2019, plummeted to -2.0% in 2020 and only modestly rebounded to 1.7% in 2021. Notably, eight countries in the region, including Equatorial Guinea and the Democratic Republic of Congo, remain entrenched in recessions.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a multifaceted impact on the economic dynamics of West and Central Africa. A surge in prices of vital commodities like food, oil and gas has placed strains on both the populace and the fiscal stability of countries that rely on imports. Coupled with the ongoing fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression has led to a notable uptick in inflation across the region. Côte d'Ivoire offers a stark illustration: In 2020, inflation stood at 2.4%, yet by 2021, it had escalated to 4.1%, further climbing to 5.3% in 2022. Similar trends have been observed in Cameroon, where inflation rose from 2.4% to 6.2% between 2020 and 2022. Meanwhile, Sierra Leone experienced a doubling of food and fuel prices between 2021 and 2022, exacerbating significant social consequences such as heightened unemployment, increased poverty rates and compromised food security.

Despite the sanctions imposed on Russian oil and gas in the wake of the Ukrainian conflict, there has been no corresponding surge in production volumes among the oil-producing states of West and Central Africa. According to OPEC data, oil production has remained stable in Gabon and the Republic of Congo between 2021 and 2022, whereas Equatorial Guinea has seen a decline in production. Notably, Nigeria witnessed a dramatic drop in its production volume in 2022. Data from the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission indicates that average daily production plummeted from 1.49 million barrels per day in 2020 to 1.14 million barrels per day in 2022. This decline can be attributed to insufficient investments in exploring new oil fields and rampant sabotage and theft of oil, with estimates suggesting up to 20% of daily production being pilfered. As a result, Nigeria has relinquished its status as Africa's leading oil-producing state, with Angola and Libya surpassing it. The economic challenges in Nigeria are also spilling over into neighboring countries, adversely affecting Benin's economy and jeopardizing the implementation of economic reform programs in the region.

The economic difficulties confronting the region are reflected in its socioeconomic development. This is evident, among other indicators, in the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI), which gauges and ranks the state of human development. While Gabon ranked 112th in 2021 and performed relatively well alongside Ghana at 133rd, the overall performance of the region remains bleak. Eleven countries in the region rank among the bottom 20, from Gambia at 174th to Chad at 190th, with Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, the Central African Republic and Niger in between.

However, these rankings obscure significant inequality within these countries, which can be measured using the Gini coefficient. Countries such as Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic fare poorly on a global scale in terms of income distribution. In concrete terms, this means that the distribution of income in these countries is highly unbalanced in favor of a few and to the detriment of the masses. Equatorial Guinea, a wealthy oil-rich country on the Gulf of Guinea, for which no Gini coefficient is available, is presumed to exhibit the most pronounced inequality, described by the BTI report as "staggering." A notable contradiction lies in the fact that, despite having a significant per capita GDP – ranking third highest in Africa after Mauritius and Botswana – the country's poverty rate surged to 67% in 2020.

Governance

The quality of governance in West and Central Africa largely stagnated throughout 2021 and 2022. The largest declines were recorded in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad, which experienced un-constitutional changes of government that undermined the quality of governance. Similarly, Guinea-Bissau faced a marked decline. Here, the government faces difficulties in setting priorities, implementing policies and deal with anti-democratic elements. Niger recorded the most substantial gain in governance quality, though it still falls short of its 2018 levels, ranking 37th among 137 BTI countries. In addition, Côte d'Ivoire has emerged as a beacon of good governance, ranking 36th among all BTI countries. This improvement has been credited to the government's enhanced credibility, strengthened cooperation with neighboring states, and its resolve in combating corruption.

Table 3: 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	Niger	Nigeria	Congo, Rep.
	Ghana	Guinea	Mauritania	Congo, DR
	Gambia	Togo	Central African Republic	Chad
	Benin	Liberia	Guinea-Bissau ▼	
	Côte d'Ivoire ▲	Burkina Faso	Cameroon	
		Sierra Leone	Mali ▼	
		Gabon	Equatorial Guinea	

The table follows the BTI 2024 index scores. Countries are ranked according to their respective score in the Governance Index. Arrows mark a change of category compared with the BTI 2022.

The security situation remains tense in several West and Central African states, imposing a substantial strain on the governance capacities of these countries. In four cases, conflict intensity has escalated, namely in Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Chad. In another four cases, however, we see a decline in conflict intensity: the high-intensity conflict observed in the Central African Republic is easing, as are the moderately intense conflicts in Guinea and the Republic of Congo, and the low-intensity conflict in The Gambia. As noted before, conflict intensity encompasses a spectrum of political, social, ethnic and religious tensions, which may or may not manifest in violent outbreaks.

Violent conflicts driven primarily by rebellion, jihadism and to a lesser extent separatism, continue to present significant challenges to various states within the region. Jihadism is taking its toll on the Sahel region in particular, impacting countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Coastal states such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo are also threatened by Islamist terrorism. Another focal point of jihadist threats is the area around Lake Chad, especially in Cameroon, Nigeria and Chad. In these areas, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in West Africa, which has partly absorbed Boko Haram, and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb are particularly active.

The situation is different in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Islamist terrorism plays a rather minor role and it is instead insurgents who are shaping the landscape of conflicts. These groups either seek to overthrow the government or exploit the state of war for financial gain, showing little interest in ending the violence. While the overall security situation remains tense, violent clashes are mainly concentrated in the country's eastern region, where rebel factions like M23 and CODECO operate. Yet, Islamist extremist organizations have also begun to gain ground in the region. Decades of conflict, particularly in eastern Congo, have resulted in entrenched violence and a militarized society. Similar dynamics persist in the Central African Republic and Chad, where a near-permanent conflict has become the norm. In her book on Chad, Marielle Debos suggests that the intermittent calm experienced by the country throughout its postcolonial history should be referred to as periods of "inter-war," rather than peace.

Given the boundaries imposed by colonial powers in Africa, separatist aspirations across the continent are hardly surprising. However, they are remarkably rare, and even less successful. In West and Central Africa, separatist activity is most clearly observed in Cameroon, Mali and Senegal. In Mali, Tuareg groups in the north seeking self-rule have contributed to the crisis that erupted in 2013 and persists today. In Cameroon, separatist activity in the Anglophone part of the country involving militant groups in the Ambazonia region that have been engaged in a bloody struggle since 2017 has resulted in at least 4,000 deaths and over 700,000 internally displaced persons recorded by 2022. These groups escalated attacks on government forces in 2021 and 2022, which prompted the state to respond with massive countermeasures. The separatist movements in Senegal's Casamance region, while less tragic in comparison, are nonetheless remarkable in a country otherwise known for peaceful coexistence. The Senegalese government conducted military operations against separatist groups in 2021 and 2022 that culminated in a peace agreement with some insurgents in July 2022.

Continued militarization within the region could potentially either aid in stabilizing the security situation or exacerbate existing tensions. All governments in the region – with the exception of those in Gambia and Mali – have substantially increased their military spending during the reporting period. According to data from SIPRI, Togo registered an 80% rise in military spending from 2021 to 2022, marking the highest growth in expenditure during this span. Following Togo are Guinea with 43.3% and Niger with 28.9%. Nigeria's military spending reached its peak in 2021, with an investment of nearly \$4.4 billion to its armed forces, which is nearly tenfold the regional average for that year.

Anti-democratic actors, including the military, parties or companies, can be found in many countries across the region. The capacity of reformist factions to exert control over these actors remains generally weak. Only in Gambia, Ghana and Senegal do reformist and democratic forces garner recognition for their adeptness in addressing anti-democratic elements. However, the situation is quite different in Equatorial Guinea, the two Congos and Chad. In Chad, the son of the deceased president has solidified military rule under his leadership, further suppressing reform forces and leaving them with no room for action. A protest in October 2022 against the extension of the transitional period, intended to lead to elections, was brutally suppressed by security forces. Since then, October 22, 2022, has been referred to as "Black Thursday." The circumstances are also challenging for advocates of reform in Mali, where coups occurred in 2020 and 2021, resulting in military juntas assuming power and the marginalization of democratic actors. In neighboring Burkina Faso, the significance of anti-democratic forces was made clear by the two coups in 2022, revealing the limitations of reformist factions in combating anti-democratic influences.

Corruption remains a pervasive and debilitating issue throughout West and Central Africa, profoundly impeding governance efficacy and integrity. Together with the BTI region of Southern and Eastern Africa, the region ranks worst in the BTI when it comes to battling corruption. No significant improvements were recorded in this area during the period under review. Liberia serves as an illustration of these stagnating efforts. Although the downward trend underway since 2016 has stalled, the persistently low scores recorded for anti-corruption efforts in Liberia is striking, particularly considering that the country was among the best performers in the region nearly ten years ago. In Gambia, however, we see potentially positive developments underway with the establishment of an anti-corruption commission. Similarly, the government in Côte d'Ivoire has created a ministry dedicated to combating corruption.

However, corruption in Equatorial Guinea has reached such egregious proportions that the country was branded a “almost-perfect kleptocracy” in a 2010 report by the Open Society. Ranking at the bottom of the BTI assessment and various other indices, Equatorial Guinea has merited its own extensive entry on the English Wikipedia page, titled “Corruption in Equatorial Guinea,” since 2015. While some instances of corruption are subject to prosecution within the country, these endeavors often serve the government’s agenda of undermining undesirable competitors.

Outlook

West and Central Africa’s poor performance in the BTI Status Index is also due in large part to the region’s economic challenges. While the state of political transformation in the region surpasses that of the Middle East and North Africa by a significant margin and narrowly edges out Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – the two BTI regions that fare worse in political transformation – key indicators such as market organization, economic performance, equal opportunity and sustainability lag noticeably behind other regions examined by the BTI. Given the high structural barriers faced by West and Central African countries, many of which are simply inherent to the region’s geographical conditions, little change is expected in the regional situation in the foreseeable future.

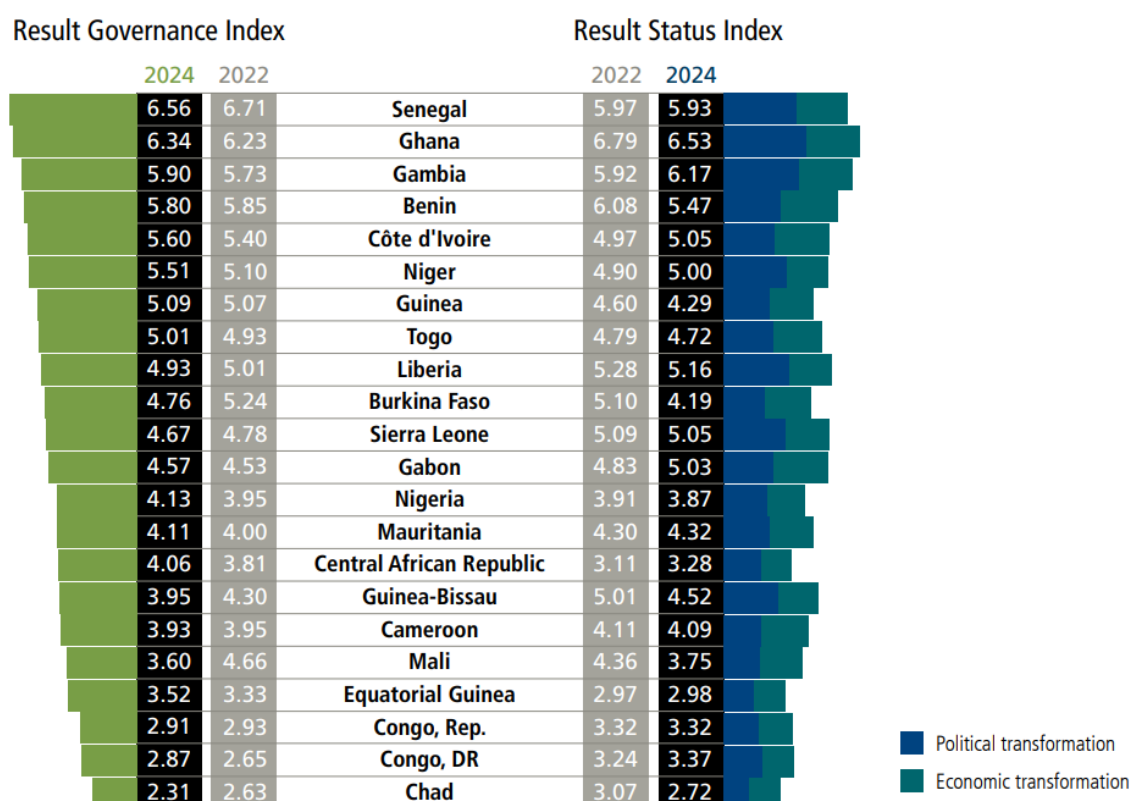
While the outlook may appear bleak, particularly considering obstacles such as the region’s geographical limitations, climatic challenges, and reliance on scarce or finite natural resources, individual countries can still make strides in advancing economic transformation and development. This is true for Gabon and Gambia, which have introduced positive reforms and thus achieved a higher ranking in the BTI 2024. Additionally, despite constrained economic development, the Democratic Republic of Congo is showing some signs of macroeconomic recovery. However, concerns persist regarding whether broad segments of the population would benefit from such progress, especially in Gabon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, where clientelism is prevalent.

Developments in Ghana warrant specific concern, both in economic and political terms. While Ghana has teetered between consolidated and defective democracy thresholds for years, the downgrade to a defective democracy might seem not dramatic at first glance. But the country’s

economic situation is strained and corruption scandals are increasingly eroding public confidence in democratic institutions. This suggests that pressure on political and economic transformation is likely to intensify in the coming years.

In contrast, we see mixed signals coming from Benin. While the country has fallen to the ranks of autocracies, its governance quality remains stable, and it has achieved notable progress in terms of economic transformation. The direction Benin takes will hinge on whether the president consolidates authoritarian structures or whether the opposition, which once again is represented in parliament, can counteract such efforts.

Conditions in Burkina Faso and Mali are more stark and clear. In both countries, advancements in political and economic transformation are unlikely. While there has been much talk about both countries undergoing a transition, persistent security challenges have kept the situation highly volatile in each. The increased presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali, combined with the requested withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission from the country and the already planned pullout of certain European countries, can hardly be construed as encouraging signs. If Mali continues to veer off the path, it could, at some point, be downgraded so far as to be classified by the BTI as a *failing state*. Similar concerns apply with regard to Burkina Faso.



If we take a broader perspective and situate developments within a global context, West and Central Africa, like the rest of the continent, showcases two divergent trends. On the one hand, we observe a growing dependence on foreign actors in both economic and, increasingly, security matters. For instance, the Senegalese government has sought Turkish assistance to weaken separatism in the Casamance region, while the government in Niger relies on Western military aid, particularly from France. Additionally, the military junta in Mali and the president of the Central African Republic have turned to Russia's Wagner mercenaries as a source of support. This creates

dependencies that not only impact Africa but also carry global implications. The Central African Republic's president ensures his personal security by granting Russian mercenaries permission to exploit the country's resources, which enriches them and helps fund their paramilitary activities in other parts of the world. At the same time, some West and Central African states are dependent on both Russia and Ukraine for fertilizer and grain supplies.

On the other hand, African actors are increasingly asserting themselves on the international stage, signaling a desire to shape global politics rather than being passive bystanders. This assertiveness is evident in ongoing international negotiations addressing the ramifications of anthropogenic climate change, where African governments have a strong argument, as Africans have contributed little to the climate crisis yet bear a disproportionate burden of its effects. In addition, African actors critique the international community for unequal access to COVID-19 vaccines, contrasting their slower distribution in Africa with the swifter rollout in Western states. Moreover, the intensified demand for the return of colonial artifacts, exemplified by Nigeria's pursuit of the Benin Bronzes from Germany, underscores this growing self-confidence. Another example is Africa's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where African states demonstrated diplomatic flexibility through their voting behavior in the UN General Assembly. Notably, mediation efforts by African presidents in Kiev and Moscow, including Senegal's president and the prime minister of the Republic of Congo, underscored their confidence and willingness to engage in global affairs beyond regional boundaries. This growing assertiveness is further evidenced by the increasing resistance of regional governments to external interference. Whether these developments bode well for political and economic transformation in the region remains to be seen.

About the BTI

Governance in International Comparison

Since 2004, the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) has regularly analyzed and evaluated the quality of democracy, market economy and governance in currently 137 developing and transition countries. The assessment is based on over 5,000 pages of detailed country reports produced in cooperation with over 280 experts from leading universities and think tanks in more than 120 countries.

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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.

Transformation Index BTI 2024

ISBN

978-3-86793-974-4

EDITION

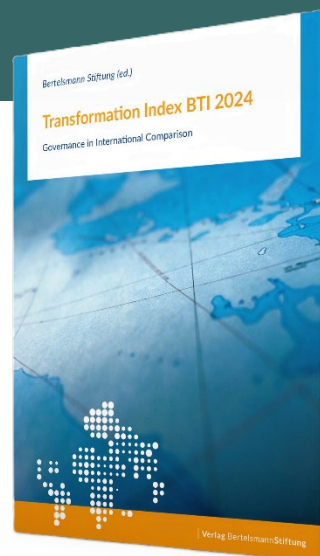
First edition

VOLUME/FORMAT

80 pages, soft cover

PRICE **18,00 €**

ADDITIONAL SHIPPING COSTS
SHIPMENT WITHIN 3-5 DAYS



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