

Trends in Democratic Governance in West Africa: A Case Study of the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the state of democratic governance in West Africa. The study uses multiple case studies as research designs to explore the state of democracy in three West African Countries, the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. We used triangulation as the data collection technique in this study. This method helps us to compare different sources of data to establish a broad understanding of the status of democracy in these countries. The findings show that corruption is a major obstacle to democratic governance in these countries. The data generated indicated neither Gambia, Sierra Leone, nor Ghana has made an impressive achievement towards controlling corruption with all of them failing to achieve a 50% score in corruption control governance. Consequently, the findings show an impressive improvement by all the countries in the advancement of the rule of law, security, and fostering free media and vibrant Civil Society organizations. The findings show that within the period of five years (2017-2023), all these countries have improved significantly their overall governance score across all indicators except corruption. The study recommends strengthening the Anti-corruption Commissions and building the capacities of national audit institutions as well as strengthening Public Procurement authorities to ensure value for money in public procurement. The study also recommends greater transparency and ensuring access to information by the media to enable the citizens to get informed about government transactions and act accordingly to minimize corruption in their countries.

Keywords: Democratic Governance, Democracy, West Africa, Democratic Consolidation

INTRODUCTION

This study assesses the status of democratic governance in the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. The study explores the effectiveness of the rule of law and accountability mechanisms in these countries to facilitate democratic governance practice. The article also explores the strength of the democratic institutions in these countries and their ability to enforce democratic standards and corruption control mechanisms. Asare-Nuamah (2023) argues that the prospects for democratic governance in West Africa face challenges with many countries in the sub-region sliding back the gains in democratic accountability. Daffeh (2024) reasons that within the space of three years (2020-2023), the sub-region has experienced five successful Military Coups with the recent being in Niger. He maintains that The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States have condemned the recent military intervention in governance in West Africa yet people in some of these countries have openly celebrated the soldiers who staged the coups. Asogwa and Asogwa et, al (2023) explain that ECOWAS has adopted numerous governance instruments, such as the Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy to promote democratic governance in West

Africa, despite the efforts of ECOWAS, they contend that the trend of democratic governance practices in the sub-region suggests that this institution struggles to oversee the effective implementation of democratic programs in West Africa. Daffeh (2024) maintains that such difficulties faced by ECOWAS in promoting and maintaining democratic governance practices are due to non-compliance by member states to adhere to democratic norms and standards. Obasi (2023) contends that the trend of democratic backsliding in the region is caused by the failure of African leaders to accept electoral defeat. He notes that the sub-region has witnessed an upsurge of self-perpetuating civilian leaders who weaponized the democratic instruments in their countries to enable them to stay in power for long. Felbab-Brown (2023) claims that democracy remains horrendous in West Africa. He contends that Corruption and laughable infrastructure have characterized the conditions of many states in the sub-region. He points out that because of the incising corruption in West Africa, many governments are incapable of providing quality living standards and basic services for their citizens. Transparency International (2023) noted widespread corruption and a declining trend in corruption control in the sub-region. They pointed to a general lack of transparency and accountability in government spending and resource allocations. According to Transparency International, almost all countries in West Africa fall below the average 50% score in the 2023 Corruption Perception Index. This signaled a nerve-wracking situation for the consolidation of the practice of democratic governance in the sub-region.

Despite the drop in the trends of democratic governance practice in West Africa, Dulani, Asiamah & Zindikirani (2023) argue that based on the Afrobarometer survey (2022) two-thirds of the people in West Africa prefer Democracy to any other system of government. They argue that corruption and lack of transparency in public procurement and government spending are the biggest challenges to achieving the practice of democratic governance in West Africa. This study will assess the trends of democratic governance practice in West Africa with the case of The Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. The objectives of the study are to assess the overall state of democratic governance practice in these countries, their status of corruption, and the rule of law.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Democratic Governance

Kingah (2006) argues that Democratic Governance has gained momentum in many parts of the world and Africa is not an exception. He maintains that the African Union Constitutive Act expressed firm commitments to advance democratic governance in Africa. Afolabi (2009) contends that ECOWAS also promotes democracy and governance in West Africa through policy formulations and encourages West African governments to democratic governance practice as the ideal form of governance for sustainable development for their citizens. Ransford-Osafo (2015) illustrates that there is a consensus among scholars of governance that West Africa has made substantial gains in democratic governance in the last decade. He argues that from 2016-2018 almost all countries in West Africa experienced a change of government through democratic means. Gilley (2009) explains that the concept of democratic governance transcends international boundaries. He maintains that democracy is a way of life that should be characterized by how governments relate with their people and how resources are distributed in all aspects of the polity. Seaman (2016) points out that scholars have struggled to agree on a single definition of democracy. He claims that the conceptual understanding of the practices of democracy is simply the adherence to the rule of law and the dictate of national constitutions as the supreme law of the land. McMahan, (2016) also sustains that ensuring democratic governance practice is premised on the adherence to the rule of law and judicial independence. He argues that in a democracy it is the law that governs the affairs of the state and forms the basis of the systems of governance in a state. Igham and Wiens (2020) also maintain that democratic governance includes adherence to the rule of law and fostering citizens' participation in the governance process. Osafo-Danso (2015) suggests that many countries in West Africa view the exercise of democratic

governance from a minimalist perspective. He debates that the fate of democratic governance in West Africa is premised on the state's capacity to conduct free and fair elections. The World Bank (2021) defines democratic governance in line with resource distribution. The Bank contends that democratic governance is how power is exercised in the management of economic and social resources for development. Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2022) conceptualized democratic governance as the provision of the political, social, economic, and environmental goods and services that every citizen has the right to expect from their state. Hamdok (1999) maintains that the African Development Bank identified democratic governance as fundamental for sustainable development in Africa.

Decker (2003) reasons that the practice of democratic governance enables states to take control of their political, economic, and social development effectively. Seaman (2016) explains that democratic governance is not just procedures and the establishment of democratic institutions. He noted that it involves promoting the sustainability of democracy which includes an enduring capacity for the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government. Joseph (2014) points out that sustainable development is connected to the practice of democratic governance. He argues that a democratic and accountable government is crucial for poverty alleviation and growth in Africa. Khan, Khan, and Alam (2021) observe not all countries practicing democracy are following democratic governance principles. They argue that the practice of democratic governance means not only a set of specific government institutions but also insists that democratic governance practice should be built upon a well-understood set of values and attitudes that the people can willingly associate with. They contend that democratic governance protects citizens against all-powerful governments and makes states accessible and responsive to the people. Agyemang (2018) points out that Democratic governance is key to reducing poverty and improving human development in West Africa and across the world.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Minimalist and Substantive Theory of Democracy

Schumpeter (1950) maintains that a democratic system is an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions to acquire the power to decide using a competitive struggle for the people's vote. Dahl (1971) argues that frequent free and fair elections, Control over government decisions about policy constitutionality vested in elected officials, and universal adult suffrage are major ingredients for democratic survival. He explains that the right to run for public office, freedom of expression and access to alternative sources of information that are not manipulated by the government or any other single group are vital mechanisms for the consolidation of democratic governance practices. Dahl's conceptualization of democratic governance sets a foundation for the understanding of basic civil liberties that should in principle guarantee that the democratic process is inclusive, free of repression, and enables citizens to participate in the affairs of the state. Pettit (2017) claims that the wave of new democratization in the developing world since the 1980s suggests that the process of democratic governance entails the consolidation of the democratic system. Fye (2015) argues that relying on the minimalist concept of democracy cannot quite capture the challenges hampering regimes that have undergone a transition but have yet to consolidate their embryonic democratic structures. Forje (2014) expounds that the practice of democratic accountability leans towards a more substantive theory that gives greater value to the role and importance of accountability.

Handoyo (2023) maintains that substantive democracy outlines two dimensions of accountability: vertical accountability and societal accountability. Leon (2018) contends that Vertical accountability enables citizens to hold their political leaders to account through the electoral channel at a specific point in time. This kind of accountability he reasons is a mechanism that exists within distinct bodies of government. Decker (2003) describes vertical accountability as the checks and balances mechanism of governance that enables the arms of government to control and regulate the function of one another. O'Donnell (1996)

argues that societal accountability is the ongoing watchdog function of civil societies, NGOs, and Media over the actions of government and its officials. He argues that this model of liberal representation of democracy ensures free and fair elections, respect for basic civil rights, and responsiveness to the tenets of democratic principles. Chambers (2023) criticized this form of substantive democracy as being too elitist and lacking the popular participation of the ordinary masses.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study used multiple case studies as the research design, we used triangulation as the data collection technique for the study. This technique enables us to explore multiple sources of data and test their validity through the convergence of multiple data. Data sources for the study were generated through mediums such as the Mo Ibrahim Foundation Africa Governance Index, Transparency International’s corruption perception index, World Justice Project’s rule of law index, and the World Economic Research Governance Index. These data sources have been verified and found to be dependable sources of information for policy formulations by all the countries in this study. The data were generated within a five (5) year period (2017-2023). Data analysis in this study was based on content analysis. Data generated were synthesized and critically analyzed to enable us to establish patterns systematically by identifying differences and similarities in data sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the findings from data generated from the Mo Ibrahim Foundation Africa Governance Index (2017-2021). Data from the Corruption Perception Index by Transparency International (2023), The World Economics Research Governance Index (2024), and data on the Rule of Law Index by The World Justice Project (2023) have been presented. The presentation of the data is followed by a discussion and analysis of the state of democratic governance in the three countries.

Democratic Governance in the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Ghana

This table presents data generated from the Mo Ibrahim Africa Governance Index (2017-2021). The most recent data presented by the Foundation on Governance in Africa is the 2021 data released in 2022. This table presents the overall scores and rankings made by countries in Africa which are drawn from 0- 100 with 100 being the highest score and zero the worst and ranked out of the 54 countries in Africa.

Table :1 Overall Governance State of the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana (2017-2021)

The Gambia		
Year	Score (100%)	Ranking (out of 54 countries)
2017	52.8%	21
2018	54.9%	18
2019	54.6%	18
2020	55.1%	18
2021	55.3%	16
Sierra Leone		
2017	49.2%	26
2018	50.9%	23
2019	51.2%	23
2020	52%	22

2021	52.2%	22
Ghana		
2017	64.6%	7
2018	63.8%	8
2019	64.3%	7
2020	64.5%	7
2021	64.8%	7

Source: Mo Ibrahim Foundation,2022.

The Data shows a sustained trend of democratic governance improvement in the three countries in the last five years. The Gambia made significant progress from 52.8% in 2017 to 55% in 2021 and ranked 16 in Africa from 21 in 2017. Sierra Leone also made the momentous shift from 49.2% in 2017 to 52.2% in 2021 and made a four-point gain in its regional ranking from 26 in 2017 to 22 in 2021. Consequently, Ghana maintains a constant trend in its regional ranking and score with a marginal growth from 64.6% in 2017 to 64.8% in 2021, the country maintains a constant regional position of 7th for the last five years. These results illustrate the reform programs undertaken by these countries. The improvement of the Gambia is linked with the progressive undertaken by the government, the Launching of the National Development Program (2021), the Constitutional Review Commission (2020) tasked to draft a new constitution for the Gambia as well as the Commissioning of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (2018) with the mandate to established and impartial record of human rights abuses in the Gambia from 1994-2016. These progressive initiatives contributed to the significant improvement of the Gambia in overall governance. Consequently, the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission of the Gambia (2018) to promote and protect human rights standards also makes a positive contribution to the Gambia’s significant gain in democratic governance in Africa. This trend of democratic governance improvement is also linked to a robust civil society and media participation in the governance process of the Gambia through the Enacting of Media and Information Act (2020) by the Parliament of the Gambia. These reforms provide a solid foundation for growth in democratic governance in the Gambia for the past five years (2018-2021).

Accordingly, the progress made by Sierra Leone is a culmination of the government’s efforts and initiatives to improve the democratic landscape in the country. Sierra leon’s improvement is also connected to the country’s success in maintaining peace and stability in the country. The improvement in overall democratic governance in Sierra Leone is also the result of the government’s anti-corruption initiatives through the implementation of reforms, the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the adoption of the National Anti-Corruption Bill. The increased Women’s participation in governance also facilitated growth in democratic governance by the country. The improvement in Women’s representation in the Legislative House of Sierra Leone from 14.5% to 30.4% in 2023 is also associated with the admirable trend of performance by the country as reflected in the data. The removal of the oppressive Criminal Libel and Seditious Law in the country’s legal system adds to the improvement in their rankings and score. Consequently, Ghana maintained steady progress in democratic governance. The country is hailed for its steady performance in the last five years in democratic accountability and good governance. The data on Ghana reflects impressive governance reform programs by the government to consolidate democracy in the country. The independence of the country’s judiciary and the robust Civil Society and media participation in the democratic governance process of Ghana reflect the steady trend of performance in governance by the country. The country experienced eight consecutive elections without sliding back towards dictatorship.

This table presents data from the World Economics Research Governance Index which was released in March 2024. This data scores and ranks countries in Africa based on their governance performance. The survey uses key indicators such as countries’ level of corruption and rule of law to measure a country’s

governance ranking and score. The scores are rated from 0-100 with 100 being the most well-governed country and 0 indicating worst worst-governed country. The countries are ranked out of the fifty-four (54) countries in Africa.

Table 2: The status of Governance in West Africa

Country	Score (100%)	Ranking (out of 54 countries)
The Gambia	50.6%	10
Sierra Leone	49.9%	13
Ghana	61.7%	5

Source: World Economics Research,2024.

The Data presented by World Economics Research showed the Gambia, Siera Leone, and Ghana made significant improvements in their governance status. The result strengthened their earlier democratic governance improvements by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation Africa Governance Index. The results show that Ghana made significant progress in democratic governance practice in 2023. The data ranked Ghana as the fifth well-governed country in Africa with a score of 61.7%. Consequently, the Gambia is positioned as the 10th well-governed country in Africa with a score of 50.6%. Accordingly, Siera Leone scored 49.9% and sits as the 13th well-governed country in Africa. The World Economics data assessed these countries' governance factors based on their level of corruption, press freedom, rule of law, and political rights. This data suggests that the trend of democratic governance practice in the three countries continues to grow steadily. This means that the countries have taken the path of sustainable economic development and growth in human capital development.

This table presents the status of corruption in the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Ghana. The table presents the data from Transparency International's corruption perception index from 2017-2023. The data shows scores by each country from 0-100 with 100 being the best score and zero being the worst score.

Table 3: The status of Corruption in West Africa

The Gambia	
Year	Score (100%)
2017	37
2018	37
2019	37
2020	37
2021	37
2022	34
2023	37
Sierra Leone	
2017	30
2018	30
2019	33
2020	33
2021	34
2022	34

2023	35
Ghana	
2017	40
2018	41
2019	41
2020	43
2021	43
2022	43
2023	43

Source: Transparency International,2023.

The Data shows a chronic prevalence of corruption in all three countries. The data displays that none of the countries has made a significant gain in controlling corruption and ensuring accountability in resource distribution. All of them scored below 50% average point out of the overall score of 100% for the past five years, this provides a serious indignment of the massive disregard for accountability and transparency in all the countries. The data show that corruption has affected the entire governance landscape of these countries and makes them unable to respond to their people’s development needs. The lack of meaningful enforcement of corruption control mechanisms in these countries is responsible for such a protracted situation of corruption, which undermines the sustained democratic improvement of these countries. The data shows that all three countries made minimal progress in the last five years in fighting corruption in public sectors. The lack of robust and independent Anti-corruption commissions in all three countries as well as poor public procurement mechanisms fuels corruption in these countries. The rise in Corruption in these countries is also linked to a lack of democratic accountability mechanisms. While the Gambia and Sierra Leone failed to move below the global average score for the past five years, Ghana is stagnant in the same position and failed to make the necessary improvement in the global corruption score. The failure of these countries to put in place the necessary instruments, such as a strong and independent Anti-Corruption commission, and a transparent and vibrant public procurement Authority, enables corruption to thrive.

The table presents data from the rule of law index managed by the World Justice Project (2023). This index measures individuals’ perceptions and experiences of the rule of law in 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The index assesses countries based on key indicators such as Open Government, Fundamental Rights, Order and Security, Regulatory Enforcement, Civil Justice, and Criminal Justice. A score of 34 indicates the highest rank while 0 indicates the worst.

Table 4: Rule of Law in West Africa

Indicators	The Gambia	Sierra Leone	Ghana
Open Government	20	5	5
Fundamental Rights	11	15	7
Order and Security	12	7	7
Regulatory Enforcement	27	28	6
Civil Justice	10	23	6
Criminal Justice	11	21	8

Source: World Justice Project 2023.

The data show that the rule of law has been adhered to in all three countries. This indicates that all the

countries are governed by the dictate of the law based on their national constitutions. The data suggest growth in judicial independence and separation of powers of governments. The Gambia struggled to make the required points and ranked 20th in the open government category while Ghana and Sierra Leone made significant progress and ranked 5th in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Area of regulatory performance, both Gambia and Sierra Leone performed below expectations while Ghana made an admirable performance. The data shows that in civil and criminal Justice, the Gambia performs better and Sierra Leone drops its initial gain. This drop in Sierra Leone is linked to the decline of law and order in the country leading to the 2023 presidential election. Ghana made substantial steps towards strengthening its rule of law with a rank of 6 and 8 in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is associated with the public trust the judiciary of Ghana enjoys. The country ranked in the top three African countries for freedom of speech and press. The data shows that Ghana ranked seventh out of 34 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in overall governance. In the aspect of Fundamental Rights, it secured the fifth spot in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Data also projects progressive steps by The Gambia and Sierra Leone towards strengthening the rule of law. Both countries made a significant transition in 2023 toward consolidation of the rule of law. This progress is related to the efforts by both governments to institute the Anti-Corruption Commission and strengthen human rights standards as well as free media in their countries. Accordingly, Ghana enjoys stability and a positive trend of democratic governance practice. The country's judiciary has been credited for being independent which reflects the gains in the data. The overall Data suggest admirable practice of the rule of law in all the countries which indicates that the countries are on the path to democratic governance consolidation and sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Recommendation

Strong coordination is required by these countries to address corruption which is a major cause of bad governance in West Africa. The evidence showed that all the countries made progress in other indicators of democratic governance such as the rule of law and press freedom. However, the evidence suggests worrying concern about combating corruption as all the countries could not make an average score of 50% in the Corruption Perception Index. Therefore the countries should institute early warning systems on corruption that will ensure that all manifestations of corruption activities are addressed on time. They will need to reform their Public Sector and financial management systems as well as build the capacity of national Audit departments and Public procurement authorities in their countries to ensure due process and value for money in resource utilization. They will also need to ensure greater transparency and access to information to control corruption activities. All of them should empower the media and Civil Society Organisations to have access to timely information on all public expenditures and provide proper scrutiny of their governments. This will not only help minimize corruption in these countries, but it will also make the citizens act accordingly when there is any manifestation of corruption in their countries which will help them consolidate democratic governance practices.

Conclusion

Despite major concerns and the declining status of corruption control mechanisms in these countries. This study has shown growing commitments from these countries to address the surge of corruption in their countries. The data generated by this study has shown a positive trend of democratic governance practice and consolidation in the Gambia, Siera Leone, and Ghana with all of them making significant improvements in democratic governance practice from 2017-2023. They have made major strives to strengthen the rule of law, and security and provide a conducive environment for the media and civil society to engage with government which suggests that all of them are making a positive trend towards democratic governance

practice.

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