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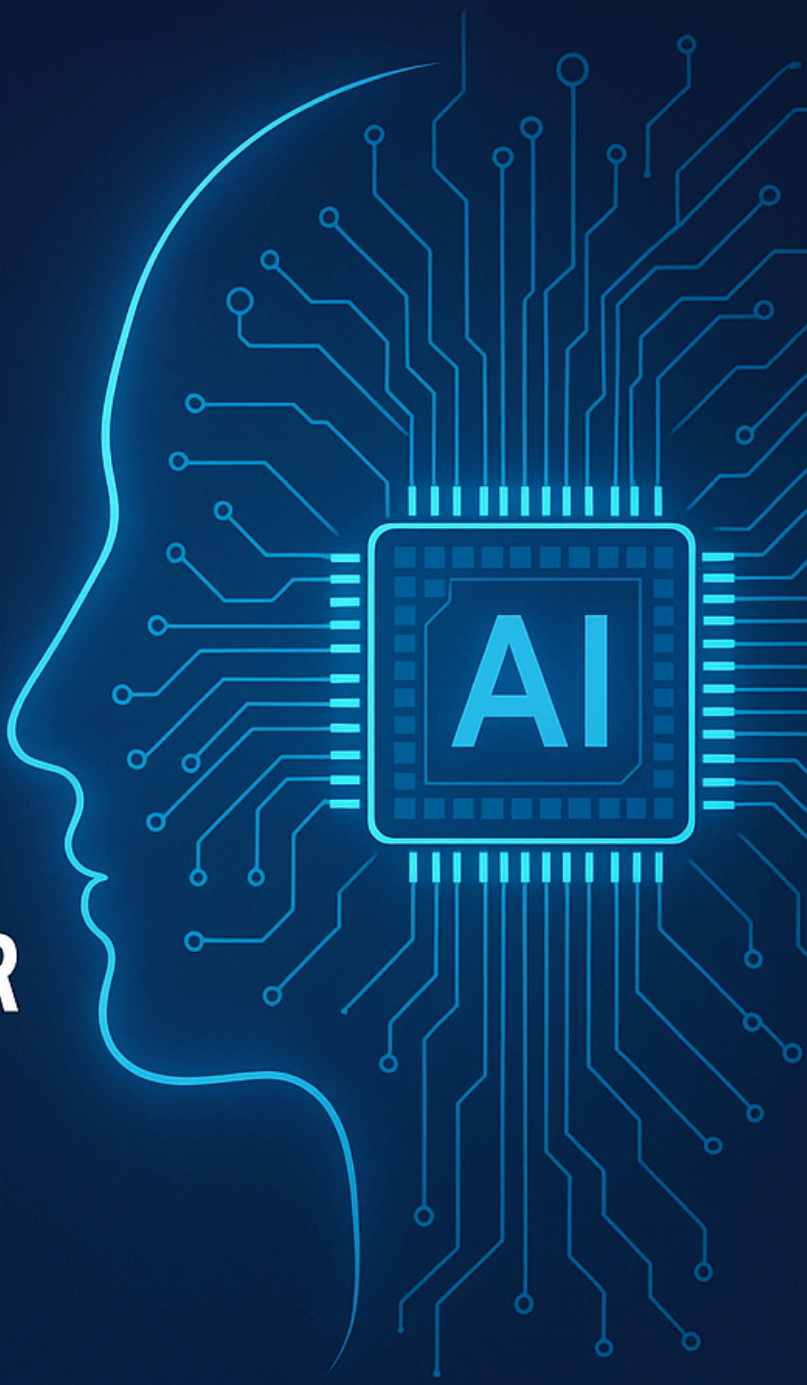
RESEARCH REPORT

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY IN WEST AFRICA

A GAME-CHANGER OR A PASSING DISRUPTION?



MUBIN ADEWUMI BAKARE

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Without facts, there is no truth. Without truth, there is no trust. Without trust, there is no democracy." Maria Ressa, 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impacts of AI on democracy and stability in West Africa are palpable in the political landscape, especially in information integrity, electoral administration, and participation, thereby exacerbating the fragility of the region. This situation persists despite some efforts put in place by some West African countries on AI governance, through national AI policies, data protection, privacy, and cybersecurity legislations.

While ECOWAS and these countries may not in the short term prioritize the enactment of overly restrictive AI-specific legislation, they need to concentrate on enhancing the respect for fundamental standards governing data management, but with specific attention to building a robust regional AI governance system that emphasizes the intersection of AI and democracy and human rights, enhances citizen's digital literacy awareness, mobilizes resources to procure shared AI infrastructure, regional governance structures and computing capabilities to build a robust regional AI ecosystem. Given the prevailing intensified geopolitics and global AI race, West African governments and their counterparts across Africa need to maintain their non-alignment stances, which open up frontiers of divergent partnerships at both vertical and horizontal levels to accelerate technology diffusion, safeguarding external manipulation in the democratic process and eventually boosting economic growth, while protecting locally adapted AI-enabled electoral tools and national interests.

INTRODUCTION

According to a recent International IDEA Global State of Democracy Report, "democracy is in trouble, stagnant at best, and declining in many places across the world."[1] Despite this global trend of democratic recession, the West Africa region is replete with inspiring stories of democratic resilience, evidenced by the outcomes of recent democratic elections in Liberia, Senegal, and Ghana, as countervailing institutions and citizen participation in the democratic process were remarkable in reinforcing long-standing democratic principles, an affirmation that elections retain the promise of empowering the people, despite the challenges. What is significant and salutary is the peaceful transfer of power with losers graciously conceding and congratulating the winners, even before the official declaration of the poll results. Notwithstanding this positive progress, the resurgence of military coup d'état, incessant terrorist attacks and protracted military-aided transitions in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger are undermining democratic gains recorded over the years in the region.[2] This mixed state of democracy is increasingly being threatened by other forms of fragility, underpinned most recently by the implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the democratic and governance landscape in West Africa.

The region is afflicted with AI-generated content to fuel information disorder, manipulation, voter suppression, and instability. For instance, in the recent 2024 General elections in Ghana, AI tools were used to amplify the spread of propaganda and fake news.[3] Also, Burkina Faso's most recent coup in September 2022 was followed by a series of AI-generated videos from American-based Pan-Africanists appearing to express support for the new military regime. However, after deeper investigation, it was confirmed that the videos were deepfakes, created using a tool from the company "Synthesia".[4] West African governments have therefore condemned the creeping deployment of dangerous technologies and autonomous weapons systems by Terrorists Armed Groups (TAGs) and other criminal networks in the region. These threats have become quite sophisticated and remarkably challenging to mitigate, thereby undermining the democracy and stability of the region.

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1. International IDEA. (2024). The Global State of Democracy 2024 The New Checks and Balances. Available at: The Global State of Democracy 2024: The New Checks and Balances . Accessed on 2/1/2025.
2. Mubin Adewumi B. (2023). ECOWAS and the Management of Political Transitions in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso: Adopting a Three-Dimensional Approach for Stability and Sustainable Democracy and Development. Available at: https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/ecowas-and-themanagement-of-political-transitions-in-mali-guinea-and-burkina-faso-adopting-a-threedimensional-approach-for-stability-and-sustainable-democracy-and-development/ Accessed on 2/12/2024.
3. WANEP, (2024). Ghana's 2024 Elections: A test Case for Democratic Resilience. September Policy Brief
4. Smith Galer, S. (2023). Someone MadeAIVideosof'Americans' Backing aMilitary Coup in WestAfrica. VICE. https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7vw3a/ai-generated-video-burkino-faso-coup . Accessed on 2/2/2025.

West African governments have therefore condemned the creeping deployment of dangerous technologies and autonomous weapons systems by Terrorists Armed Groups (TAGs) and other criminal networks in the region.[5] These threats have become quite sophisticated and remarkably challenging to mitigate, thereby undermining the democracy and stability of the region.

As a collection of technologies combining data, algorithms, and computing power, AI is transforming all spheres of society, including politics and governance. According to the African Union High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies (APET), AI has the potential to enhance democracy and human rights by promoting transparency and accountability.[6] Essentially, AI's impact on African democracies reveals a complex interplay between technological advancement, efficiency in the democratic process, and the persistent threats to electoral integrity, effective political participation, and stability. AI presents significant opportunities for safeguarding trust in electoral processes, efficiency in election administration, and participation in democratic governance. In effect, large language models (LLMs) offer Elections Management Bodies (EMBs) and political actors the ability to analyse, generate, and summarize complex texts. Other Generative AI (GenAI) models offer similar capabilities for other types of output, including video, audio, and numerical data. Similarly, machine-learning algorithms can analyse vast amounts of data to identify patterns indicative of fraud or interference, enabling faster responses to possible threats.[7] Also, automated systems can process votes with much higher accuracy than manual programs, minimizing latent human error risks. Furthermore, AI-driven tools can improve verification processes for voter identification and registration, thereby reducing fraud risks and ensuring compliance with electoral legal frameworks. As well, the use of AI-driven early warning systems is pivotal in conflict prevention, enabling the detection and analysis of early indicators of potential conflicts during elections.[8]

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5. See Final Communique of the Sixty-Sixth (66th) Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government held on 15th December 2024, Abuja, Federal Republic of Nigeria
6. See Empowering Fair And Inclusive Elections: How AI Is Shaping The Future Of Democracy In Africa | AUDA-NEPAD. Accessed on 2/1/2025.
7. Travis Gidado et all. (2024). Artificial Intelligence and Election Integrity in 2024. Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.
8. Yankoski, M., Weninger, T., & Scheirer, W. (2020)' 'An AI early warning system to monitor online disinformation, stop violence, and protect elections, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 76(2), 85–90 .

Since mid-2023, experts have identified the use of one or more forms of Generative AI (GenAI) in nearly every national election.[9] Indeed, EMBs have been using systems that would qualify as AI for years in West Africa. AI tools have been deployed by EMBs in the screening of candidate parrainage applications, comprising millions of signatures and endorsements, as witnessed in the last presidential election in Senegal. Also, the "I Vote" app in Ghana was deployed to empower citizens through financial inclusion and provide election information to reduce disenfranchisement during the December 2024 election. The use of AI is also now employed in early warning systems for conflict prevention, analysis of varied data sources for election campaigns, including social media and mainstream media, and detection of emergent conflict patterns and trends.[10] AI has, therefore, become a key part of the materiality of the evolving democracies in West Africa.

However, as the region moves progressively towards an AI-driven future in the democratic landscape, apprehensions about its influence on the integrity of democratic processes, effective citizen participation, and stability are mounting. For instance, some experts have expressed that in a region where technological systems' accuracy, reliability, and efficiency are validated by electoral outcomes and not vice versa, relying entirely on AI to deepen electoral integrity might not bridge the trust gap.[11] One of the most alarming risks is that AI might autonomously shape public knowledge, creating recursive, self-referential information detached from human understanding.[12] Also, it has been reported that African governments are experiencing the adverse consequences of unregulated AI, particularly in the realms of democracy. Indicating this as one of the most important challenges for democratic elections, UNESCO has cautioned that in contexts where "adequate transparency and democratic controls are lacking…search algorithms and recommendation systems can be influenced."[13] As AI is progressively being integrated into the democratic landscape in West Africa, it must be recognised that the intersection between AI and democracy is evolving.

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9. Beatriz Almeida Saab, "Manufacturing Deceit – How Generative AI Supercharges Information Manipulation", National Endowment for Democracy, 18 June 2024
10. Yiaga Africa, 'Yiaga Africa hosts Regional Conference to Explore Artificial Intelligence in African Elections'. Available at: <https://yiaga.org/aiandelectionsconference/> accessed 28 December 2024.
11. Samson Itodo, 'Artificial Intelligence and the integrity of African elections' <https://www.idea.int/news/artificial-intelligence-and-integrity-african-elections> accessed 28 December 2024.
12. See AI and Democracy | POLI.design and the AI4Gov Dialogue Accessed on 2/1/2025.
13. Robert Krimmer et All. (2022). Elections in Digital Times: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners. UNESCO, Paris, France.

The analysis of the intersection between AI and democratic stability in West Africa cannot be undertaken in isolation. Rather, it needs to be situated within the context of the larger geopolitics and global AI race, where binary power relations with Africa put the continent at a disadvantage due to its limited ownership of the technological infrastructure to power AI systems. Cutting-edge AI development is concentrated in a small number of countries in the south, but its impacts are global. Nearly 50% of global data centres are in the U.S., while Africa and the Middle East together host less than 2%.[14] This concentration impacts data ownership and power dynamics, making Africa's efforts geared towards digitalizing democracy vulnerable to foreign influence. It allows foreign tech giants to exploit Africa's growing user data for manipulation, offering limited benefits to democracy. Ethiopian-born cognitive scientist, Abeba Birhane (2020) has rightly warned about what she calls "the algorithmic colonization of Africa," arguing that the "invasion" of AI may echo colonialism by neglecting local interests and disadvantaging minority groups.[15] Yet Africa remains a key provider of natural resources to the rest of the world, which often involves exploitation and violence.

As AI is primed to pose a threat to democracy and stability, concerns about the impact of AI systems on democracies and electoral processes have triggered efforts to counter the negative effects of this technology around the region. Some ECOWAS member states have taken proactive steps to address the risk associated with AI by applying extant data protection laws. While a few, such as Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, have developed AI strategies, others have ongoing AI strategies and regulatory development processes. Even though the adoption of such regimes at the national level is important, the nature of the governance and regulatory challenges posed by AI-driven technologies is beyond the capacity of individual states. The heterogeneity of the policies in place in the different countries considerably limits any attempt at regional cooperation. Their harmonization must therefore be sought: relations and exchanges would be easier and more effective between West African countries with democratic and election trajectories and operating modes; identical requirements and

14. Center for AI and Digital Policy. (2024). Artificial Intelligence and Democratic Values Index. Available at: https://www.caidp.org/reports/aidv-2023/ Accessed on 2/1/2025.
15. Birhane, Abeba. (2020). "Algorithmic Colonization of Africa." SCRIPTed: A Journal of Law, Technology, & Society 17(2). Available at: https://script-ed.org/article/algorithmic-colonization-of-africa/ Accessed on 2/12/2024.

procedures would also ensure the protection of transnational AI infrastructures in the same way across the region. Besides, the lack of robust regional regulatory frameworks, requisite infrastructure, governance structures, and technological capabilities opens the region up to external and internal political algorithmic manipulation and threats, disenfranchisement, extremism, and electorate suppression.

Understanding the matrix of an intersection between AI and democracy in West Africa is as crucial as every other effort aimed at maintaining stability and consolidating democratic gains in the region. This is so because, as countries in the region continue to navigate the fragile and ambivalent democratic trajectory, elections, a critical pillar of democracy, remain a potential source of conflict, especially when not properly managed. The true ingenuity of AI and its applications in democracy, therefore, lies in the recognition that AI is a dual-edged sword: it is both a resource for innovation and a potential instrument of harm. By addressing these dualities through complementary lenses, and managing a complex array of trade-offs with corresponding risks and benefits, West Africa sets a precedent for building an AI ecosystem that is not just innovative but also serves as an enabler of stability and an inclusive, credible, and democratic process.

It is therefore important to understand the challenges that the adoption of AI technologies presents to democracy and stability, and how political systems across the West African region can become more resilient in facing such challenges. Stemming from this view, this article reflects on the philosophical implication of AI on democracy; contextualizes the intersection of AI, democracy, and stability in West Africa, with emphasis on factors fuelling the negative impact of AI on democracy and stability; explores the landscape of AI governance as it relates to democracy and stability in West Africa; and concludes by proposing strategies to build resilience and AI responsible governance as it relates to democracy and good governance.

Technology and Democracy: A Historical Nexus?

The advent of technology in democracy is as old as the birth of democracy itself. A social-scientific perspective on democracy developed by David Stasavage (2020) makes it easier to focus on the materiality of democracy, thus subsequently on the impact of AI.[16] Indeed, specialized AI has much potential for changing the materiality of democracy by modifying how collective decision-making unfolds and what its human participants are like. For Stasavage, to understand AI as a materiality of democracy, one must acknowledge the foundational sense in which technology is political. Technology is political, that is, especially in the sense that the material underpinnings of democracy matter for how the democratic ideal translates into practices and can survive.[17]

In the Athenian democracy, the governance system depended on a steady, high-volume circulation of people in and out of office to make governance impersonal, representative, and transparent at the same time. To guarantee that people were at the right place at the right time, bookkeeping involving technical devices was deployed. The kleroterion (allotment proto-machine) was deployed to select the required number of men from each tribe for the Council or for juries and committees where representation mattered.[18] Representative democracy was necessary since the 139 demes, groups of people comprising 150 to 250 men (women playing no political role), could not converge in Athens for the governance process.[19] For voting, the Athenians used flat bronze disks as ballots. These devices represent the material ingredients of democratic governance in early democracy.

Early democracy, as outlined above, was common around the globe and not restricted to Greece, as often encountered in standard narratives. For instance, in the old Oyo Empire, predominantly Yoruba speaking, in south-western Nigeria, the Alaafin (King) was not a purely hereditary monarchy, nor was it an absolute one.

16. Stasavage, David. (2020). The Decline and Rise of Democracy: A Global History from Antiquity to Today. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
17. Risse, M. (2023). Political Theory of the Digital Age. In Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp. i–ii). half-title-page
18. Ibid (2023)
19. Ibid (2023)

The Oyo Mesi, the seven principal councilors of the state, also constituted the Electoral Council and possessed legislative powers. The Oyo Mesi selected the Alaafin. The head of the Oyo Mesi, the Bashorun, consulted the Ifá oracle before the royal succession for approval from the gods. New Alaafins of Oyo were therefore seen as being appointed by the gods. Ifá, being deployed as part of the system for leadership selection and dethronement, represents the material ingredients for democratic governance in the Oyo Empire. Ifá's connection with computer science and the application of logic and probability justifies the earlier existence of AI in an African (Yoruba) tradition.[20] Several studies reported a connection between computer science, the advent of AI, and the Ifá divination system.[21]

Modern democracy also depends on material features to function. The material conditions for the existence of modern democracy resemble those of early democracy. But, unlike early democracy, modern democracy is possible in large territories, often with large populations. Modern democracy is representative in that the electorate has the absolute power to select persons who rule and make decisions on its behalf. This form of legitimacy is conferred through democratic elections. To make this happen, democracy requires voting systems, in addition to a political culture where every qualified citizen has the right to vote and seek office. Voting systems are all-encompassing of materials and processes of planning and administering elections, as well as participation by the citizens. Ballots, boxes, voter registers, computations, tabulations, and results sheets are major material ingredients for modern democracy. However, emerging AI-enabled verification machines and e-voting systems, among others, represent the changing materiality of democracy by modifying how collective decision-making is achieved. As far as AI and its impact on contemporary democracies are concerned, these broad historical lessons indicate that, in principle, entrenched democracies today could make good use of AI to enhance their functionality.[22] Therefore, AI could become a key part of the materiality of contemporary democracies. In essence, not only can technology be harnessed to improve democratic politics,

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20. Olojede, H. T. ., & Fadahunsi, A. (2024). On Decolonising Artificial Intelligence. Àgídìgbo: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities, 12(1), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.53982/agidigbo.2024.1201.20-j Accessed on 10/1/2025.
21. Omoregie, U. 2024. "An Ancient African Knowledge System's Resurgence in the Age of AI." SocArXiv. 10.31235/osf.io/h3stz . See also: Alamu F.O., Aworinde H.O., Isharufe, W. I. A 2013. "Comparative Study on Ifá Divinity and Computer Science." International Journal of Innovative Technology and Research Volume No. 1, Issue No. 6, October - November 2013, 524 - 528.
22. Risse, M. (2023).

but democracy inherently generates certain problems that can only be solved through technology. Nonetheless, the insight that democracy and technology are not natural allies remains valid: It requires sustained efforts to make sure technology is not used to undermine democracy.[23]

23. **Risse, M. (2023).**

AI, Democracy, and Stability in West Africa

The prospect of an estimated boost of 16 per cent, or US$15.7 trillion to global output by 2030 has led to an unprecedented race to promote AI uptake across industry, consumer markets, and government services.[24] President Donald Trump's announcement of a significantly increased investment in Artificial Intelligence (AI) by an astounding $500 billion and the sudden launch of Deepseek, a Chinese artificial intelligence startup, with a high-performing AI model and fewer resources than its Western counterparts, are reminiscent of past rapid-growth technological disruptions that changed industries in ways few anticipated. These strategic moves will heighten and disrupt the global AI race, particularly among the three dominant digital powers—the U.S., China, and the EU—and the choices we face as societies and individuals. What will be the implications of this race for West Africa and Africa generally within the political and security domains? What will be the effects of this race on AI regulation and governance? These questions, among others, beg for deeper reflection on reimagining the context and future of AI in democracy in West Africa from the perspective of African technology dependency on the Global South. Indeed, Africa and other global majority regions risk becoming vulnerable to powerful global AI actors due to reliance on external goodwill and a lack of robust AI regulatory frameworks. Currently, AI technologies are increasingly and significantly being developed, deployed, and applied more widely in the developed countries of the world than in Africa. Africa's adoption of AI has been at a snail's pace as the continent's technological development struggles to catch up with the rest of the world.[25] In West Africa, governments' limited readiness to adopt AI can be witnessed in the political landscape and other sectors. The Global AI Index, for instance, places the West African countries in its analyses among 'nascent' nations in terms of AI investment, innovation, and implementation. Nonetheless, political actors and EMBs are progressively integrating AI into traditional democratic practices or developing new solutions to address perceived problems. However, while there are instances of AI solving tangible problems, it also exacerbates harm and is often deployed without sufficient safeguards and accountability mechanisms. Electoral management authorities are also deploying AI to enhance efficiency and integrity, sometimes without the requisite impact assessment, leading to opacity, harm, and a lack of accountability.

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24. Boakye B. et Al. (2025). How Leaders in the Global South Can Devise AI Regulation That Enables Innovation. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Available at: AvZOa7CDaO1gZyFo2PDq5--1553005022025 Accessed on 2/2/2025.
25. See https://www.oxfordinsights.com/ai-readiness. Accessed on 10/1/2025.
26. Vainilavičius, J. (2023). Deepfaked African Union chief called European leaders. Cybernews. 15 November.

Consequently, experts have noted that governments in West Africa and Africa at large are experiencing the adverse consequences of unregulated AI, particularly in the realms of national security interests and democracy.[26] While this concern cannot be ignored, it is plausible to expect that the use of AI in democracy in West Africa and elsewhere will steadily expand. EMBs will deploy AI to cover their major functions; from managing voter lists better to identity verification and identifying potential counting errors more easily.

Election Administration

AI-enabled tools are not new to elections or election administrators in West Africa. Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are already incorporating AI technology to enhance some of their functions. For instance, reports and surveys have shown that African governments are leveraging AI to assist with voter registration, authentication, management, and engagement, along with detecting cyber threats and aiding in oversight and decision-making.[27]

Specifically, EMBs in West Africa revealed that AI is being deployed for parrainage management (aspirants' endorsement), voter authentication, and cyber threat detection in Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria, respectively. In Senegal, while parrainage remains a controversial policy given its exclusionary tendencies, integrating AI tools into the screening of citizens' endorsement of aspirants has amplified these undemocratic tendencies, leaving many qualified aspirants to be edged out from the race. Concerns persist regarding the opaque nature of AI algorithms introduced by the constitutional court of Senegal to manage parrainage. Clearly, there are challenges in ensuring transparency and accountability in data processing, leaving many Senegalese in the dark about how their data is processed and how decisions about their aspirants are made.

26. Vainilavičius, J. (2023). Deepfaked African Union chief called European leaders. Cybernews. 15 November.
27. Itodo, S. (2024). Artificial Intelligence and the integrity of African elections. International IDEA. https://www.idea.int/news/artificial-intelligence-and-integrity-african-elections Accessed on 10/1/2025.

In addition, a limited number of African electoral commissions are advanced in AI uptake for elections. According to a recent Yiaga Africa survey of electoral commissions in 22 African countries, fewer EMBs have deployed AI in their operations in West Africa.[28]

The Independent National Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court in Nigeria and Senegal hold sway in AI integration in their operations. A number of reasons explain the EMBs' reticence towards AI adoption. Majorly, there is a lack of a legal justification (a lawful ground) for integrating AI and other forms of technological tools in electoral administration. Other concerns include financial constraints, inadequate capacity, and suspicion over potential AI-generated harms to the electoral process. Notwithstanding, it is plausible to expect that the use of AI in electoral administration in West Africa will steadily expand, covering major EMB functions, from managing voter lists better to identifying potential counting errors more easily. On the other hand, civil society organisations should explore the use of AI as a tool to monitor elections more effectively.

28. Itodo, S. (2024).

Information Disorder in the Political Landscape

The debut of ChatGPT 3.5 in November 2022 marked a significant milestone in AI development. Its successor, ChatGPT 4.0, released in March 2023, showcases enhanced conversational abilities and multimodal capabilities. Image generation tools, such as Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Leonardo, have democratized digital art creation, enabling both professionals and amateurs to produce visuals from text descriptions. In the audio and video generation domains, AI-powered tools have emerged for voice synthesis and the creation of short-form content, deepfakes, and even rudimentary animations, often used by political actors to drive their strategies, produce content, and broaden their campaigns. From deepfake images to AI bots masquerading as real people on social media platforms, there are many tools that malicious actors can use if they wish to undermine democratic regimes, and worse, most of these activities have become extremely difficult to circumvent. Not only do these generative AI (Gen-AI) applications allow for false, dangerous content to be spread, but they also allow for it to be spread more rapidly than other information, finding gaps to reach even those without Internet access. Besides, they are fraught with a plethora of ethical concerns arising from their development, implementation, and usage.[29]

Perhaps the biggest threat to democratic governance in West Africa is that political stakeholders are struggling to sufficiently contain and manage the use of AI-generated content to fuel information disorder, manipulation, voter suppression, and instability. This anomaly, aimed at deceiving and causing harm, has surged on social media recently, fueling tension and political disorder, particularly during high-stake events like elections, coup d'états, and civil protests, across the region. For instance, in the lead-up and aftermath of the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, Gen-AI was used as a major tool to fuel information disorder. On social media, several partisan bots dedicated posts to either promoting a specific candidate or attempting to tarnish the reputation of another, and accounts on Twitter used AI-generated images to give false impressions of public support for their various stances.[30]

29. Bommasani,R., et All. (2021). On the opportunities and risks of foundation models. arXiv preprint arXiv:2108.07258.
30. See (https://twitter.com/ThatNaijaGuy001/status/1709493788211646621)

There were multiple cases of fake endorsements of candidates from prominent Nigerians, Hollywood actors, celebrities, and current and former United States presidents.[31] There were also two prominent cases of AI-generated audio files, one shared hours before the election in February 2023, purportedly depicting a candidate's plan to rig the election.[32] Similarly, in the 2024 General elections in Ghana, AI tools were used to amplify the spread of propaganda and fake news.[33]

Aside from local actors, some reports have revealed the rising influence of foreign disinformation campaigns within West African countries.[34] These campaigns have either been state-sponsored or operated by private, foreign entities. Also, research from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies has analyzed hundreds of misinformation campaigns throughout African countries, showing that 60% of disinformation campaigns are foreign-sponsored between 2022 to 2024. The majority of these state-sponsored campaigns come from Russia, China, and the Gulf States, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and are primarily focused on supporting authoritarian governments and military juntas. [35] Burkina Faso's most recent coup in September 2022 was followed by a series of AI-generated videos from American-based Pan-Africanists appearing to express support for the new military regime. However, after a deeper investigation, it was confirmed that the videos were deepfakes, created using a tool from the company "Synthesia."[36] Also, while the BBC reported a large amount of disinformation shared after Niger's coup in July 2023, there is insufficient evidence to understand the role that generative AI may have played in producing this content, given that mostly older content and manipulated images and videos were shared.[37]

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31. Adeyemi, I. (2023). Fact-checking fake political endorsements staged for Nigeria's presidential candidates. Dubawa. https://dubawa.org/fact-checking-fake-political-endorsements-staged-for-nigerias-presidential-candi dates/ ; Awojulugbe, O. (2022). No, Elon Musk hasn't declared support for Nigerian presidential candidate Obi video fake. Africa Check. https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/meta-programme-fact-checks/no-elon-musk-hasnt-declared-support-nigerian-presidential Accessed on 10/1/2025.
32. Shibayan, D. (2023). FACT CHECK: Viral audio of Atiku, Tambuwal and Okowa plotting to rig election is doctored. TheCable. https://www.thecable.ng/fact-check-viral-audio-of-atiku-tambuwal-and-okowa-plotting-to-rig-election-is-doctored/ Accessed on 10/1/2025.
33. WANEP, (2024). Ghana's 2024 Elections: A test Case for Democratic Resilience. September Policy Brief
34. Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., &Moyo,D.(2019). "Fake news"andcyber-propagandainSub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the research agenda. African Journalism Studies, 40(4), 1-12.; Lyammouri, R., &Eddazi, Y. (2020). Russian interference in Africa: Disinformation and mercenaries. Policy Center for the NewSouth.
35. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2024). Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/ Accessed on 10/1/2025.
36. Smith Galer, S. (2023). Someone MadeAIVideosof'Americans' Backing aMilitary Coup in WestAfrica. VICE. https://www.vice.com/en/article/v7yw3a/ai-generated-video-burkino-faso-coup Accessed on 1/1/2025.
37. Mwai, P. (2023). Niger coup: Fact-checking misinformation spreading online. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66406517 Accessed on 20/1/2025.

These campaigns also disproportionately target West African countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria. West Africa accounts for 43% of targeted disinformation campaigns, followed by East Africa (20%), Southern Africa (15%), Central Africa (13%), and North Africa (9%).[38] While West Africa has become an epicentre of foreign-sponsored misinformation campaigns, ECOWAS has remained a victim as the regional body is being continually discredited. All its interventions to promote the restoration of constitutional order have been framed to appear as though ECOWAS was influenced by Western powers. Whereas in the United States, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and bipartisan efforts on election security have sought to address foreign influence, including AI-driven disinformation.[39] There is a need for deliberate efforts by ECOWAS to combat both foreign-sponsored and domestic disinformation campaigns to legitimize ECOWAS' rule-based intervention in the affected countries.

Notwithstanding these negative impacts of AI on information integrity around the democratic space in West Africa, there have been instances where AI systems were deployed to combat information disorder. Nigeria's remarkable use of AI to combat misinformation during recent elections exemplifies the positive impact of AI on voter participation. This underscores the need for technological counter-tools to be adopted to counter the negative use of AI systems. The truth is that AI systems are not the first technological development to raise concerns about the potential to spread misinformation, which undermines electoral integrity and information integrity. As with other developments before it, the level of trust in democracy, media, and other institutions remains crucial factors that either amplify or hinder the impact of misleading AI systems. This is, therefore, a wake-up call for countervailing technological tools to be developed and adopted by electoral and political stakeholders more quickly. Standards for labelling content shared by political parties are needed, as well as digital literacy initiatives to raise awareness among voters, who are often unable to distinguish between authentic content and content created by AI. This is likely to be more effective across a broader spectrum of the West African population than debunking or fact-checking.

38.Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2024).
39. Dwyer A. and Radu R. (2024). Enabling Secure Democratic Ecosystem through AI. AI4Democracy. Centre for the Governance of Change, IE University. Available at: *AI4D Paper 4 Enabling Secure Democratic Ecosystems.pdf Accessed on 10/1/2025.

In the effervescent realm of AI, the known, the unknown, and the unknowable are best addressed through governance with humanity at its centre, for what AI giveth, AI also taketh."[40] The rapid advancement of AI technologies, coupled with their widespread adoption across many sectors, including democracy and governance, demands a thoughtful approach to their governance and regulation. However, the landscape of AI governance is rapidly evolving. There are a variety of viewpoints on how to approach AI governance. While some voices advocate for immediate regulation to harness the benefits and mitigate the risks,[41] others propose focusing on building the necessary infrastructure and addressing attendant challenges before implementing regulations.[42] There is also a perspective that not every new technology requires specific legal intervention, cautioning against hastily legislating on every technological advancement. This viewpoint highlights that existing laws already cover various AI-related risks, including data protection, intellectual property, anti-discrimination, consumer rights, and competition, among other domains.[43] The capabilities that AI technologies will possess in the political, governance, and other domains in the future, and the regulatory challenges that those capabilities will pose, are difficult to predict. However, governments cannot wait until they have perfect and complete information before they act, because doing so may be too late to ensure that the trajectory of technological development does not lead to existential or unacceptable risks.

Given the documented risks associated with AI technology and its increasing deployment by private and public entities, there is a growing consensus on the need for some form of regulation.[44] To this end, more than 37 countries have proposed or enacted AI-related legal frameworks, signalling a shared recognition of the need for regulatory measures that enable innovation by managing risks.[45]

AI governance is emerging both within countries and through intergovernmental and regional bodies. Notable examples include the OECD AI Principles, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the EU AI Act.

40.Fayaz King speaking at a panel discussion on 'Fostering prosperity through policies on artificial intelligence in Africa', on the sidelines of the 56th Session of the Economic Commission for Africa Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (COM) held at Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe on 3 March 2024.
41. The Herald, Speaker Calls for Laws to Promote AI' (The Herald). Available at: The Herald - Breaking news., accessed 5 December 2024.
42. See "Africa needs effective policies and infrastructure to prosper from artificial intelligence, experts say". March 3 UNECA (2024). Available at: Africa needs effective policies and infrastructure to prosper from artificial intelligence, experts say | United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Accessed on 10/1/2025.
43. Leenes, Ronald E. and Leenes, Ronald E. (2011) Framing Techno-Regulation: An Exploration of State and Non-State Regulation by Technology. Legisprudence, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 143-169, October 2011, Tilburg Law School Research Paper No. 10/2012, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2182439 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2182439 Accessed on 13/1/2025.
44. Cameron Kerry et all. 2021. "Strengthening International Cooperation on AI." Brookings, Available at: brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Strengthening-International-Cooperation-AI_Oct21.pdf , accessed 6 December. 2024.
45. Boakye B. et Al. (2025).

The EU AI Act was the first legally binding regulatory standard to establish measures, using a risk-based approach to categorize AI applications according to risk levels, with the highest risk applications, like those impacting fundamental rights and democracy, facing the most stringent regulations. However, experts have criticized the EU AI Act because enacting such legislation may hinder innovation and, therefore, is premature in an era of complexity and uncertainty associated with AI development. Indeed, the capabilities that advanced AI systems will possess in future democracies, and the regulatory challenges that those capabilities will pose, are difficult to predict. The puzzle then is how can African governments devise AI regulation that enables innovations?

In Africa, the African Union (AU) has adopted an incremental and reactive approach to AI governance, adapting existing laws to address relevant AI development. The Malabo Convention - the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, already operational – serves as a crucial instrument for regulating elements of AI, including the automated processing of personal data. Similarly, in West Africa, with no substantive AI instruments, ECOWAS has taken proactive steps to address risks associated with AI by applying existing data protection laws. In particular, Supplementary Act A/SA.1/01/10 on personal data protection within ECOWAS sets out the security obligations incumbent on those responsible for processing such data to ensure confidentiality; Supplementary Act A/SA.2/01/10 on electronic transactions within ECOWAS sets the conditions for acceptance of electronic signature; Directive C/DIR 1/08/11 on fighting cybercrime within ECOWAS adapts the substantive criminal law and the criminal procedure of Member States to address the cybercrime phenomenon. Lastly, ECOWAS adopted a Regional Cybersecurity and Cybercrime Strategy as the impact of cyber operations by adversarial states to undermine trust in democratic ecosystems is not new.[46] Indeed, the triad of privacy, data protection, and cybersecurity are promising in tackling the complex challenges of AI risks.

Data protection laws, cybersecurity regimes, and oversight authorities are pivotal in regulating AI, principally overseeing data processing activities, addressing privacy concerns related to AI platforms, defending against malicious online actors, and safeguarding data subjects' rights. Of the 15 West African countries, 11 have enacted data protection laws, except for The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.[47]

46.Whyte C. (2020). 'Cyber Conflict or Democracy "Hacked"? How Cyber Operations Enhance Information Warfare'. Journal of Cybersecurity, Volume 6, Issue 1. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/cybsec/tyaa013 . Accessed on 20/2/2025

47. The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone as at the time of writing this article had not adopted data protection legislations.

Table 1: West Africa Regional Cybersecurity Index 2024

Tier 5	Tier 4	Tier 3	Tier 2	Tier 1
Guinea Bissau	Cabo Verde	Nigeria	Benin	Ghana
	Niger	Côte d'Ivoire	Togo	
	Mali	Burkina Faso		
	Liberia	Senegal		
		The Gambia		
		Sierra Leone		
		Guinea		

Source: Global Cybersecurity Index 2024 (2401416_1b_Global-Cybersecurity-Index-E.pdf)

In the region, the cybersecurity outlook reveals a diverse range of developments. The cybersecurity commitment levels across these countries depict the availability of at least one form of cybersecurity policy or legislation. Ghana leads as a regional champion in cybersecurity, while countries such as Benin and Togo are advancing in Tier 2, and other countries in Tier 3 are at the Establishing level by demonstrating a basic cybersecurity commitment to government-driven actions while Tier 4 and Tier 5 are in various stages of evolving and building their cybersecurity frameworks, respectively. Principally, the region showcases a significant potential for growth and development in cybersecurity, with opportunities to enhance government-led cybersecurity initiatives and capacity building in the region to address AI risks while promoting ethical and accountable AI use.

In addition, the AU's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy marks a significant milestone for the continent and will be key to advancing national policies. Importantly, the strategy establishes AI governance and regulation as one of 15 key action areas to harness AI's positive and transformative potential in Africa.[48] It adopts an Africa-centred approach that promotes partnership and collaboration between countries while aligning with continental values. At the same time, recognising differences in the African context, whether economic, social, or political, is important to ensuring ethical and equitable AI use and engagement that allows for the full benefit of digital transformation. Notwithstanding this laudable initiative, the AU Strategy is limited in its implications for democracy. While these instruments are key in establishing shared ethical principles for AI, they rarely address the specific impact AI may have, and already is having, on electoral processes and other forms of democratic practices. Democracies have a great deal to win by directly tackling the intersection of AI and elections at the political campaigns, civic mobilisation, and electoral management levels, turning the potentially harmful technology into a force for good.

Several countries across the ECOWAS region have ongoing AI strategy development processes that factor in ECOWAS and AU inputs, local factors, and international guidance, such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI. These countries are embracing a multi-faceted regulatory approach to ensure the responsible development and use of AI technologies, but do not directly address AI's role in elections. While a few, such as Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, have developed AI strategies, some ECOWAS countries have taken proactive steps to address risks associated with AI by applying extant data protection laws. These countries have demonstrated progress in formulating their respective AI and data policy frameworks, with shared objectives focusing on the necessity for increased research and development in AI, construction of robust data infrastructures, skills development, developing local AI solutions, increasing AI funding and investment incentives, providing secure and trusted African data sets, etc.

Even though the adoption of AI policies and piecemeal regulatory frameworks at the national level is important, the nature of the governance and regulatory challenges posed by AI-driven technologies is beyond the capacity of individual states. The heterogeneity of the policies in place in the different countries considerably limits any attempt at regional cooperation.

48.African Union Commission. Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy. Available at: 44004-doc-EN-_Continental_AI_Strategy_July_2024.pdf Accessed on 10/1/2025.

Their harmonisation must therefore be sought: relations and exchanges would be easier and more effective between West African countries with democratic and election trajectories and operating modes; identical requirements and procedures would also ensure the protection of transnational AI infrastructures in the same way across the region. Moreover, the lack of robust regional regulatory frameworks, requisite infrastructure, governance structures, and technological capabilities opens the region up to external and internal political algorithmic manipulation and threats, disenfranchisement, extremism, and electoral suppression.

Towards an AI Governance for Democratic Growth and Stability in West Africa

AI has the potential to make enormous contributions to democracy and stability in West Africa, but only if risks are mitigated effectively and benefits are harnessed in a way that is inclusive, democratic, and sustainable. The region faces unique opportunities and challenges that require robust AI governance frameworks that are critical for fostering trust in West Africa's growing AI-enabled information and communication ecosystem. To responsibly harness AI's transformative impact on democracy, regulation is not only inevitable but essential. However, AI regulation should be accompanied by resources which support AI infrastructure, computing capacities, widespread digital literacy, and partnership across the board.

Building Effective AI Governance that Enhance Democracy and Stability

A sustainable impact of AI on democracy in West Africa will depend significantly on how AI is governed through policies, regulations, and oversight that adhere to democratic principles and local context. While AI systems are powerful tools for improving efficiency and solving problems, regulation is needed to address safety concerns and ensure widely distributed benefits. ECOWAS and its member states may not immediately prioritize the enactment of overly restrictive AI-specific legislation, but they need to concentrate on enhancing the respect for fundamental standards governing data management, with specific attention to safeguarding privacy, cyberspace and maintaining a safe environment, which enables technical standards to thrive around the democratic process and the public service in general. While keeping an eye on long-term safety and risks related to AI in democracy, ECOWAS should prevail on its few member states that are yet to enact data protection legislation to do so and support them to translate their commitment into enhanced, safe and secured cyberspace as these constitute the initial steps in the progression towards AI regulation.

In addition, ECOWAS needs to develop a robust and comprehensive regional AI strategy, which reflects African value systems; flexible, hybrid, and adaptable AI regulations; and resource and investment mobilisation strategy to position the region strategically to promote AI uptake across industry, consumer markets, and government services. Countries across the world have adopted divergent approaches, including balancing between sector-specific and broad-based regulations. While the latter can promote alignment and consistency, sector-specific regulations can foster agility. [49]

ECOWAS should promote a hybrid AI governance model that combines both sector-specific oversight with broader AI safety principles. In light of this, governments could establish agencies to regulate AI adoption in democracy and public service generally, while also implementing a broader AI governance framework that outlines the overarching national principles on AI.

While the regional body should leverage the AU Continental AI Strategy and other international frameworks, the proposed AI strategy should, among others, establish a direct link between AI and democracy, including activities and processes such as election administration, political campaigns, civic mobilization and electoral management, to turn the potentially harmful AI systems into a force for the good of democracy. Whereas other member states should expedite efforts geared towards developing comprehensive national AI policies with an established link to democracy, governments in Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, and Senegal should be encouraged to consider streamlining their existing national AI policies to align with democratic principles.

49. ABoakye B. et Al. (2025).

More importantly, AI national policies should be designed to ensure that the technology actively strengthens and promotes democratic conditions for all and that no actors can uniquely benefit from or abuse the technology to manipulate or interfere with electoral processes. To achieve this, inward-looking strategies and a pragmatic approach are essential. This requires stakeholders across the Community to openly share what has worked and what has not in the application of AI systems, particularly in the domains of democracy and public services. This presupposes that AI governance, therefore, should be grounded in local priorities across West Africa to foster a vibrant innovation ecosystem. Indeed, countries do not engage in the deployment of AI into democracy from equal positions. West African countries should embrace an incremental approach in integrating AI systems into democratic processes and practices to ensure effective management of AI risks.

Regional AI Trust Fund

Given that the world is entering into intensified geopolitical competition and AI infrastructure is capital-intensive while resources are increasingly scarce in the region, ECOWAS should consider mobilising regional resources for the establishment of a regional AI Trust Fund. The Trust Fund will be apt to procure requisite joint AI data infrastructure, connectivity infrastructure, compute capacity and skills, and governance structures to boost the regional AI ecosystem and put forward a shared common front to address external and internal political algorithmic manipulation and threats, disenfranchisement, extremism, and electorate suppression. ECOWAS should promote and support the establishment of regional and national data centres and community-governed critical AI infrastructures, including shared renewable energy grids powering cross-border AI facilities, aimed at boosting national security and domestic AI development by requiring data to be stored and processed locally.

Digital Literacy and Sensitisation

Public understanding of and participation in AI is a critical component of effective governance. Public participation is essential throughout the AI life cycle. ECOWAS and member states should create space and empower Community citizens to participate in the development, adoption, legislation/policy-making, and oversight of AI systems deployed in democracy. Although some member states invite citizens' participation and contributions in the development of national AI policies, as witnessed in Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Ghana, the process has recorded limited feedback, as the majority of West African citizens lack basic knowledge about AI to enable them to discern and engage meaningfully. EMBs and CSOs need to undertake extensive sensitisation and buy-in of the electorate in the adoption and operation of AI systems in their operations. Without widespread public awareness and education about AI, EMBs, and the ECOWAS Network Electoral Commission (ECONEC), political actors, media, and civil society organisations face the spread of misinformation about AI risks and benefits, public resistance to regulation, and challenges in enforcing compliance.

Fostering Multi-level and Multi-stakeholder Partnership

West African countries and other countries across the continent face a significant power imbalance in the AI value and supply chains when engaging with Big Tech and global governance platforms. The actions of AI companies from the Global North in Africa generally have been likened to a new era of digital colonialism, marked by exploitative and oppressive practices that undermine local agency and control. This is happening against the backdrop of the global AI race, often underpinned by divergent ideological lines and economic models, which have fundamentally influenced different interests in shaping AI regulations between the technology makers and takers. This is reminiscent of the Cold War era, wherein Africa's position has been the adoption of non-alignment principles. Under this prevailing intensified geopolitics and global AI race, West African governments and their counterparts across Africa do not need to align with any distinct economic and geopolitical bloc. Rather, they need to maintain their non-alignment stance, which opens up frontiers of divergent partnerships at both vertical and horizontal levels to accelerate technology diffusion, safeguarding external manipulation in democratic processes and eventually boosting economic growth, while protecting local AI entrepreneurs and national interests. This necessitates careful development of regional and national AI policies that address risks emerging at the nexus of AI and geopolitics, such as digital inequality and data sovereignty, as well as high costs related to AI technologies needed to foster efficiency in democratic processes.

49. ABoakye B. et Al. (2025).

ECOWAS needs to also foster multi-stakeholder partnerships at both national and regional levels. The partnership should comprise AI experts, academia, Big Tech, International and African-based think tanks, and development partners to undertake constant rigorous research to ensure AI accountability in democracy; mobilize resources; provide oversight; and promote domestic priorities while leveraging the benefits of global cooperation and guide the development of AI in the region. Also, this partnership will help future-proof investment in AI across key sectors, including democracy and governance, in recognition of the transformative power of the technology in elections, citizen participation, public service, and stabilit,y and to attract foreign direct investment.

CONCLUSION

For democracy to thrive in West Africa, particularly, there is a need for a sanitised information and communication ecosystem. As Maria Ressa (2022) noted, 'Without facts, there is no truth. Without truth, there is no trust. Without trust, there is no democracy." However, as AI's impact on democracy and stability intensifies, the challenges that the adoption of this technology presents to democracy are exacerbating the fragility of the West African region. This situation persists despite some efforts put in place by countries on AI governance, through national AI policies, data protection, privacy, and cybersecurity legislations. While ECOWAS and its member states may not in the short term prioritize the enactment of overly restrictive AI-specific legislation, they need to concentrate on enhancing the respect for fundamental standards governing data management, but with specific attention to building a robust regional AI governance system that emphasizes the intersection of AI and democracy, enhances citizen's digital literacy awareness, mobilizes resources to procure AI infrastructure, governance structures and computing capabilities to build a robust regional AI ecosystem. Given the prevailing intensified geopolitics and global AI race, West African governments and their counterparts across Africa need to maintain their non-alignment stances, which open up frontiers of divergent partnerships at both vertical and horizontal levels to accelerate technology diffusion, safeguarding external manipulation in the democratic process and eventually boosting economic growth while protecting local AI entrepreneurs and national interests.

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ABOUT CDD

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit research, training, advocacy, and capacity-building organisation. Its purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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