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**Mega-trends: Data and Citizen Opinion on
Governance and Conflict**

Joseph Asunka
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A. Introduction

Africa has experienced a significant increase in conflict and organized violence in the last decade and currently leads other regions in the frequency of conflict between government forces and armed groups (state-based); armed groups not including government forces (non-state-based); and violence against civilians (one-sided conflict).¹ Other types of violence have also stagnated or worsened: for instance, electoral violence has shown no signs of abating despite more than two decades since the adoption of multiparty elections in several countries and public protests have intensified in some countries.

Meanwhile the global wave of democratic retreat, partly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has not spared the continent. Various regional and global governance indicators and public opinion data all point to declining quality of governance and democracy in most countries.² In fact, some of Africa's longstanding democracies like Benin and Mali have suffered significant reversals over the past several years. The recent surge in military coups has reinforced democratic retreat on the continent and raised concerns about a possible return of military dictatorships.³

In this chapter, we draw on expert data to highlight key trends of conflict and instability as well as governance and democracy on the continent in the last couple of decades. We complement the expert data with Afrobarometer⁴ survey data on citizen experiences of conflict and instability and their evaluations of democracy, quality of governance, and social conditions. We then examine Mali in more depth to demonstrate possible links between trends in public opinions and assessments of government performance and risk of conflict and instability. In retrospect, the protests by Malians and political instability could have been predicted from Afrobarometer survey data in that country. Looking ahead, we apply the perspectives gained from Mali's experience to present some troubling trends in public attitudes in South Africa and identify possible implications for stability and democratic development in that country.

¹ Therese Pettersson, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg & Magnus Öberg "Organized violence 1989-2020, with a special emphasis on Syria." *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4), (July 2021): 809–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211026126>.

² Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021*, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf; International IDEA, "Global State of Democracy" 2021, <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>; Richard Wike and Shannon Schumacher, "Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong," Pew Research Center Report, February 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>; Robert Mattes, "Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat,'" Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 54, February 2019, https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Policy%20papers/ab_r7_policypaper54_africans_views_of_democracy1.pdf

³ Financial Times. 2021.: 'Failure of Democracy': why are coups on the rise in Africa? <https://www.ft.com/content/a669c8e3-a744-445c-b613-9ff83059c90c>

⁴ Afrobarometer is a survey research network that conducts public attitude surveys in more than 30 countries in Africa.

B. Conflict and Instability Trends in Africa

1. Organized Violence

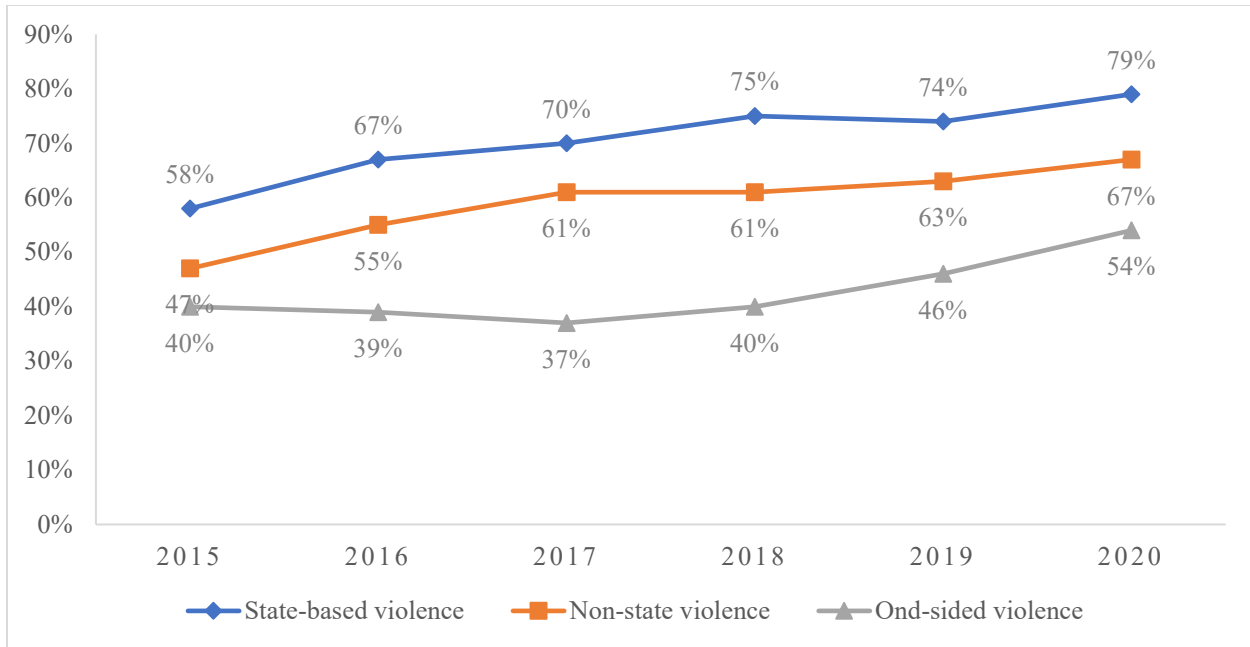
According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), organized violence—namely, state-based conflict, non-state-based conflict, and one-sided conflict—have been on the rise across the globe over the last 5 years. Africa accounted for 65% of total organized violence worldwide in 2020 (Figure 1), a significant increase since 2015, when it accounted for only 47%.⁵ With respect to state-based conflict—conflict between governments and armed groups—Africa accounted for more than half (54%) of the global total. The rise in state-based conflict in Africa is due primarily to the rise in violent extremism, present in 11 countries.⁶ Africa accounted for 67% of the world’s non-state-based conflicts (i.e., clashes between armed groups, excluding government forces), a significant increase since 2015, when it accounted for less than half (47%). It is worth noting that even though Africa recorded the largest number of non-state-based conflicts globally, the number of fatalities was lower than that recorded in the Americas.⁷ Finally, on one-sided conflict—government or armed-group attacks against civilians—nearly 80% took place in Africa, a concentration of intensity not seen since the 1990s.⁸

⁵ UCDP records conflicts when they result in more than 25 battle-related deaths per year. Therese Pettersson, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg & Magnus Öberg “Organized violence 1989-2020, with a special emphasis on Syria.” *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4), (July 2021): 809–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211026126>.

⁶ Therese Pettersson, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg & Magnus Öberg “Organized violence 1989-2020, with a special emphasis on Syria.” *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4), (July 2021): 809–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211026126>. Note that the state-based conflict with the highest number of fatalities took place in Ethiopia’s Tigray region, which does not feature a violent extremist organization.

⁷ Therese Pettersson, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg & Magnus Öberg “Organized violence 1989-2020, with a special emphasis on Syria.” *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4), (July 2021): 809–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211026126>.

⁸ Therese Pettersson, Shawn Davis, Amber Deniz, Garoun Engström, Nanar Hawach, Stina Högladh, Margareta Sollenberg & Magnus Öberg “Organized violence 1989-2020, with a special emphasis on Syria.” *Journal of Peace Research* 58 (4), (July 2021): 809–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433211026126>.



Sources: Melander et al. 2016; Allansson et al. 2017; Pettersson and Eck 2018; Pettersson and Öberg 2019 and 2020; Pettersson et al. 2021

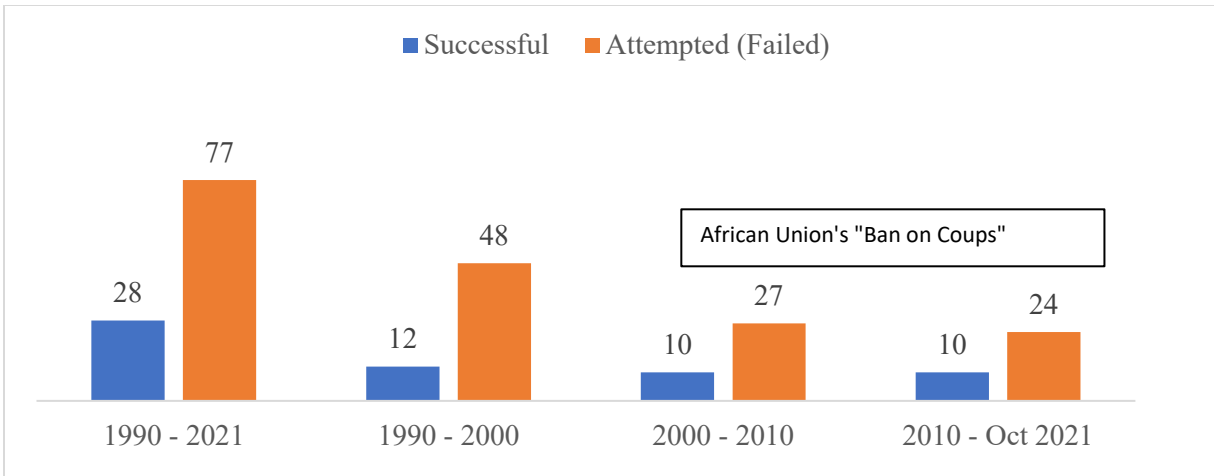
Figure 1. Types of Organized Violence in Africa as a Percent of Global Totals: 2015–2020

2. Coups d'état

Coups d'état have also persisted. Following 22 successful and 48 attempted coups between 1990 and 2000, the African Union's (AU) constitutive act imposed a so-called "ban on coups." Essentially, the AU pledged to punish member states for unconstitutional changes in government by prohibiting them from participating in the body's activities.⁹ In the nearly two decades since the AU's constitutive act came into force, incidents of coups have stagnated, rather than decreased. Between 2000 and 2010, Africa recorded 27 attempted and 10 successful coups; and between 2010 and 2021, there were 24 attempted and 10 successful coups.¹⁰ Half of the coups during the latter decade took place in West Africa, a region that was previously considered as having relatively stronger democratic institutions, which underscores the emerging consensus that democratic norms and institutions are on the decline across the continent.

⁹ African Union, Constitutive Act, "Article 30," <https://au.int/en/constitutive-act>

¹⁰ Center for Systemic Peace, <https://www.systemicpeace.org/>



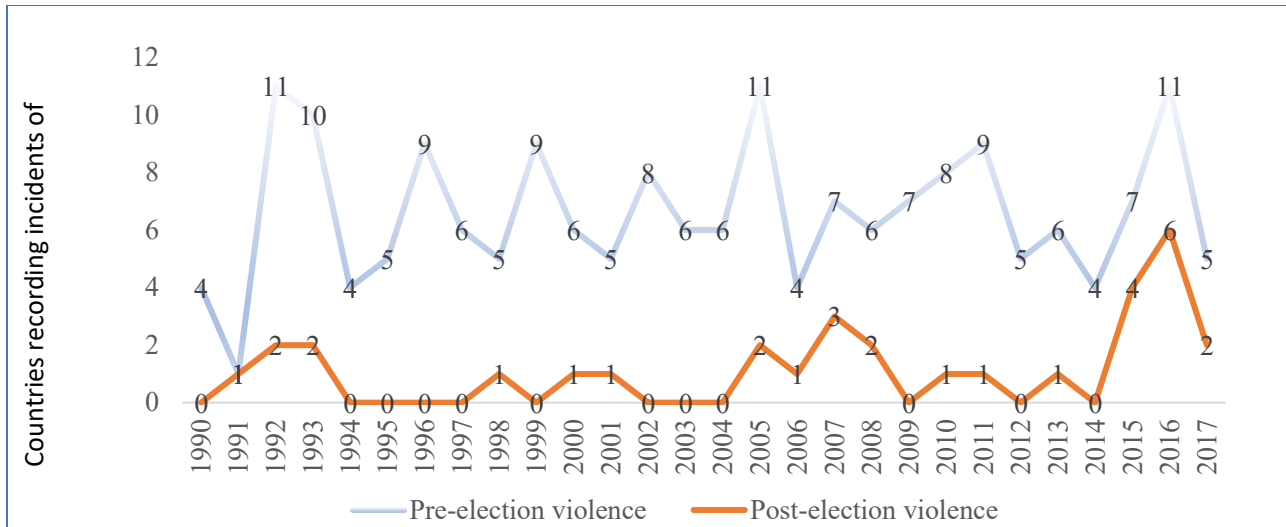
Source: Center for Systemic Peace

Figure 2. Number of Coup d'états in Africa: 1990–2021

3. Electoral Violence

Electoral violence in Africa has also persisted somewhat, although the frequency of post-election violence has been low. Between 1990 and 2017, some form of violence has accompanied approximately 65% of Africa's elections. Trends in incidents of electoral violence reveal an erratic pattern of peaks and valleys (Figure 3)—particularly pre-election violence.¹¹ Elections are a fundamental institution of democracy and as such their quality and integrity matter for democratic development. Persistent incidents of violence could significantly weaken this institution and reinforce the trends toward authoritarianism.

¹¹ Straus and Taylor 2012; United States Department of State, various years; Human Rights Watch, various reports; Amnesty International, various reports.



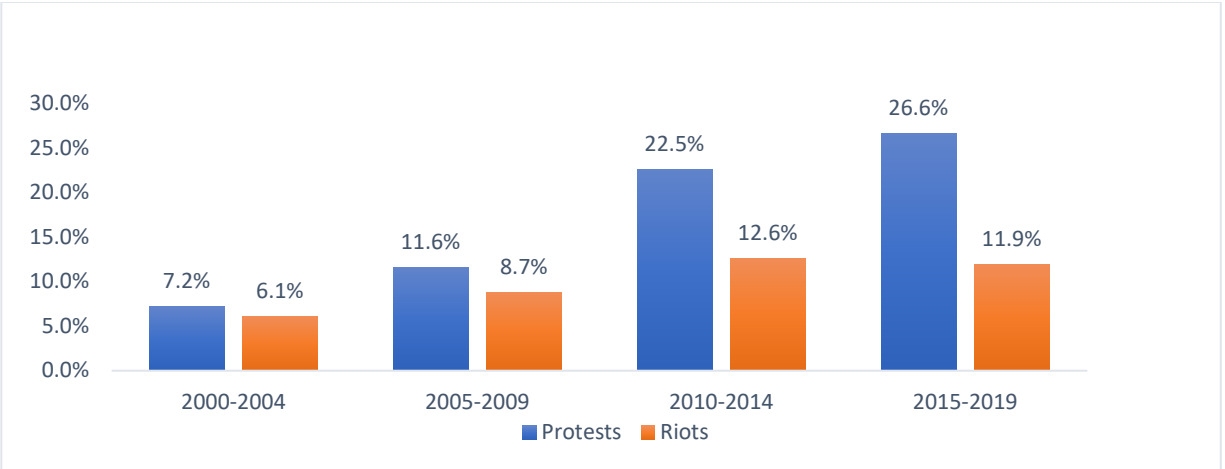
Sources: Straus and Taylor 2012; United States Department of State, 'Country reports on human rights,' various years; Human Rights Watch, various reports; Amnesty International, various reports.

Figure 3. Incidents of Electoral Violence in Africa: 1990–2017

4. Social Conflict

Protests and riots have also increased as a percentage of conflict incidents over the past two decades. Of the two, protests have risen more steeply. Whereas from 2000 through 2004, protests accounted for roughly 7% of conflict incidents, between 2015 and 2019, they accounted for nearly 27%. In fact, by 2015, protests comprised the largest category of conflict in Africa, exceeding the proportion of conflict between armed groups and violence against civilians combined. More than half (57%) of the protests in 2019 took place in just four countries: South Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, and Sudan. These protests were often against bad governance and poor economic conditions and, in the case of South Africa, exacerbated by xenophobia.¹² Similarly, half of all riots took place in four countries: South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and Uganda. Remarkably, South Africa experienced more than a quarter (27%) of all riots in 2019. The chart in Figure 4 shows the incidents of protests and riots from 2000 through 2019.

¹² Raleigh, Clionadh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen. 2010. "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data." *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(5) 651- 660; current ACLED data on: <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>



Source: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)

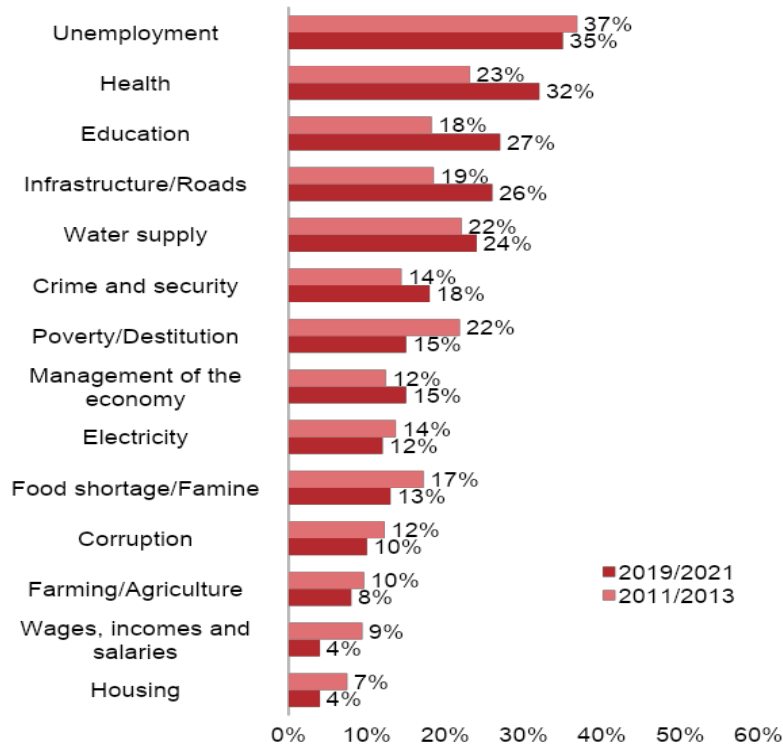
Figure 4. Social Conflict: Protests and Riots in Africa as Percent of Conflict Incidents, 2000–2019

C. Citizen Views and Experiences of Conflict and Instability

1. Insecurity as Most Important Problem

What have been the experiences and reactions of ordinary Africans to these incidents of violence and instability? We now turn to Afrobarometer for some answers.

One of the semi open-ended questions in the Afrobarometer asks respondents: “In your opinion, [w]hat are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address?” Based on the latest Afrobarometer survey, conducted in 34 countries between 2019 and 2021, roughly one-fifth of respondents (18%) rank crime and security among their country’s most important problems. This represents a four-percentage-point increase from 2011 (Figure 5).



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address? [Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows the percentage of respondents who identified each issue as one of their three responses, so the total is more than 100 percent.]

Figure 5. Most Important Problems | 30 countries | 2011–2021

The countries where large numbers of respondents ranked crime and security as one of the most important problems facing their country include Cabo Verde (60%), Burkina Faso (55%), Mauritius (46%), Mali (43%), Nigeria (37%), and South Africa (29%). While several of these countries are struggling to contain rising levels of violence (Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and South Africa), both Cabo Verde and Mauritius are considerably safer and crime is a relatively low risk. Thus, perceptions of insecurity may be best understood within each country’s context.

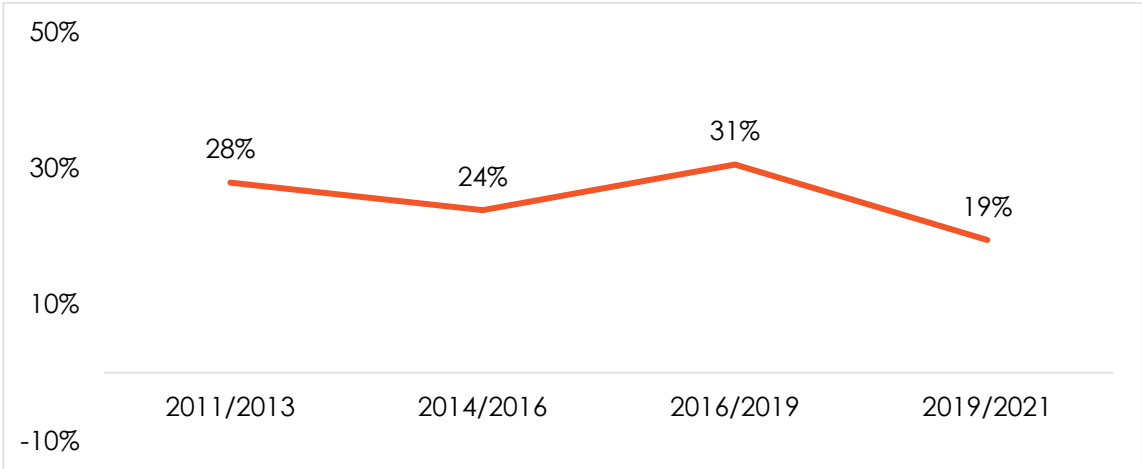
2. Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)

While Africa bears the largest brunt of conflicts from violent extremism, much of it is concentrated in 11 countries—a result that is also reflected in Afrobarometer’s survey responses. In a subset of countries (14) where the question about violent extremism was asked, 16% of respondents stated that they feared violence by extremist groups and 6% reported that they had directly experienced such violence. Fear of violent extremism was highest in Burkina Faso (34%), Mali (30%), Mozambique (26%), Nigeria (24%), and Cameroon (20%). All five countries have experienced significant attacks by VEOs over the past several years. Mali and Burkina Faso have been primary targets for VEOs operating in the Sahel including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), AQIM’s affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), the Islamic State-Greater Sahara

(ISGS), and Ansar ul Islam. In Nigeria and Cameroon, Boko Haram and the Islamic State-West Africa Province (ISWAP) have been active since the early to mid-2010s. In Mozambique, local militants, al-Shabaab, began attacking state security forces in the northern province of Cabo Delgado in 2016.

3. Electoral Violence

With respect to electoral violence, there is some good news. Less than one-fifth (19%) of all respondents in the 34 countries surveyed stated that they feared political intimidation or violence during the last election. Across the 30 countries where Afrobarometer has time series data, fear of violence or intimidation during elections decrease by nine percentage points between 2011 and 2021 (Figure 6).



Respondents were asked: During the last general election campaign in [year], how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say “a lot” or “somewhat”)

Figure 6. Fear of Political Intimidation or Violence during Last Election | 30 countries | 2011–2021

Underneath the average decline over time, fear of election-related violence remains high in Mozambique (41%), Zimbabwe (36%), Kenya (35%), Malawi (32%), and Zambia (31%). Three of these countries—Kenya, Malawi, and Zimbabwe—have experienced recurrent and persistent violence before, during, and after elections. Zambia, which had previously been known for its relatively peaceful elections, has experienced a dramatic increase in violent attacks in the past few elections, driven largely by popular resistance to the strong-arm tactics of the then ruling Patriotic Front party. Mozambique has had some experience with violent elections in the past, but its most recent (2019) election was held as the conflict in Cabo Delgado was beginning to intensify.

4. Social Conflict: Protests and Riots

Public protests and riots have risen dramatically since 2015.¹³ Violent protests often, but not always, manifest when state security forces respond to otherwise peaceful protests with force. Recent examples include protests in South Africa, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali among others.

Across the 34 countries surveyed, exactly 1 in 5 (20%) respondents reported that they feared violence from protests but had not experienced it personally; and 9% reported being fearful and actually experiencing such violence. However, respondents experiencing violence during protests was much higher than the continental average in Gabon (25%), Malawi (16%), Nigeria (16%), Cameroon (16%), and Liberia (14%).

5. Government Performance in Addressing Violence and Crime

With the persistence of conflict and concerns about crime, how do Africans rate the performance of their governments in tackling these issues? In terms of addressing violent conflict, nearly half (47%) of Africans say that their government is doing a poor job. Respondents in Sudan (80%), Gabon (80%), Cabo Verde (75%), Liberia (76%), and Mali (73%) were the most critical of their government's handling of violent conflict. On crime, roughly 34% of respondents believe that their government is doing a poor job of handling or reducing crime. A majority of respondents in Gabon (75%), Sudan (67%), South Africa (61%), Mali (53%), and Lesotho (51%) gave their governments poor marks on fighting crime.

D. Democracy and Governance

There is growing consensus among researchers and activists that democracy is on the retreat globally, beginning in the 2010s.¹⁴ Africa has not escaped this wave of democratic decline that continues to affect the rest of the world. Data and analyses from various sources, including Freedom House, International IDEA, and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, show that the quality of democratic governance is on the decline in Africa in the last two decades, with some countries registering particularly steep declines. Trends in public opinion data from the Afrobarometer are consistent with these trends: only about half of Africans think that their country is a democracy and the proportion of respondents who are dissatisfied with the way democracy works has increased significantly in the last decade. In fact, by 2021, a majority of Africans said that their country is heading in the wrong direction.

In the following sections, we first present expert data from three sources—Freedom House, International IDEA, and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation—on democratic trends in Africa over the last

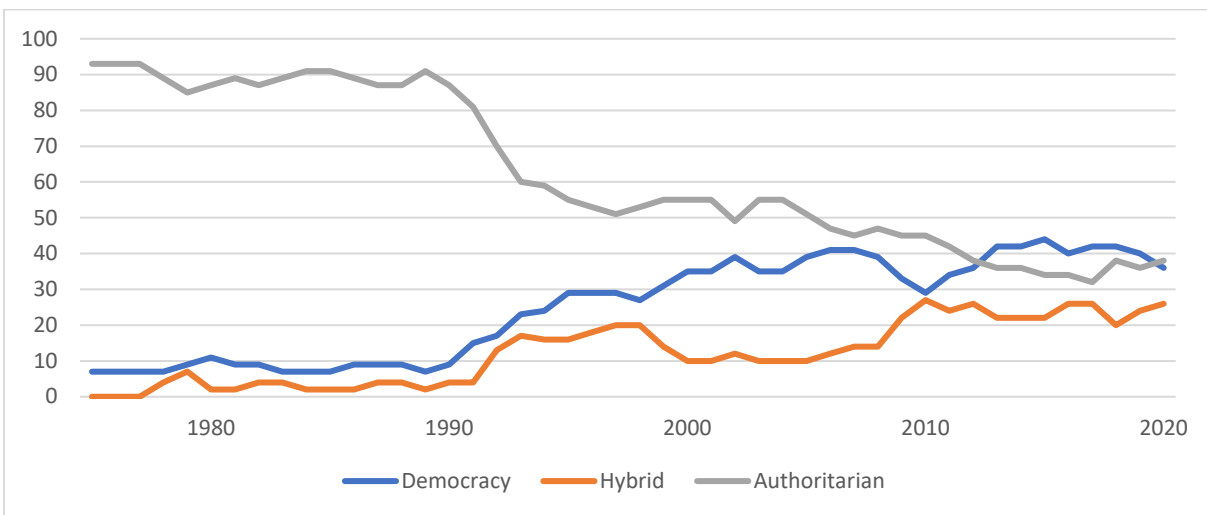
¹³ Raleigh, Clionadh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre, and Joakim Karlsen. 2010. "Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data." *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(5) 651- 660; current ACLED data on: <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>

¹⁴ Nancy Bermeo. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5-19. doi:10.1353/jod.2016.0012; Larry Diamond, "Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes." *Democratization*, Vol 28, Issue 1: 224-42 (2021).

few decades. We then turn to the Afrobarometer to explore trends in public opinions and evaluations of governance and democracy and conclude with two case studies highlighting some of the indicators of early warning signals from the Afrobarometer.

1. Democracy and Civic Freedoms

The 1990s wave of democracy saw a large number of African countries implement political reforms and transition to democracy. International IDEA’s Global State of Democracy Indices show the precipitous decline in the number of autocracies in Africa between 1980 and 1990 (Figure 7).



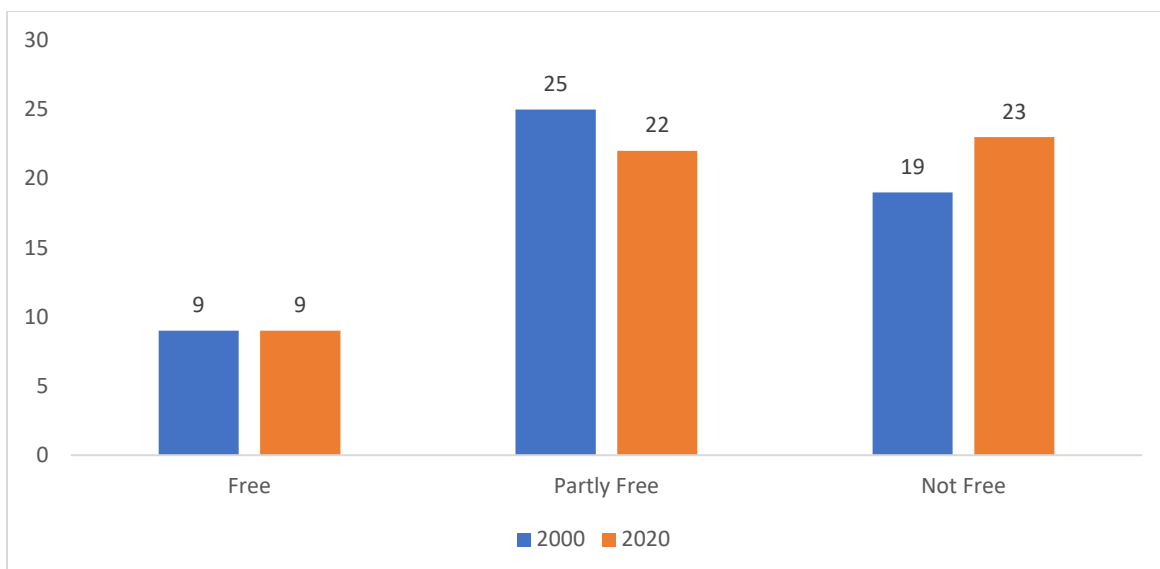
Source: International IDEA (2021)

Figure 7. Global State of Democracy Indices in Africa (1975–2020)

The decline in the number of autocracies and corresponding increase in number of democracies has slowed down since 2000. Between 2013 and 2019, the number of democracies exceeded that of autocracies on the continent, but this trend is beginning to reverse in 2020.

Even though Africa has become more democratic than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, the quality of democracy remains a challenge. In 2000, Freedom House’s annual assessment of political rights and civil liberties categorized nine African countries as “Free.” Of the remainder, 25 were classified as “partly free” and 19 as “not free.” Twenty years later, the number of “free” countries remained at nine. However, the number of countries considered “not free” increased from 19 to 23 while the number of “partly free” countries dropped from 25 to 22¹⁵ (Figure 8).

¹⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>



Source: Freedom House

Figure 8. Trends in Civic Freedoms in Africa: 2000 & 2020

Of the nine countries categorized as “free” in 2000, only seven retained that status in 2020 (Table 1). Mali and Benin, which started as “free” in the new millennium, fell to “not free” and “partly free” in 2020. Two new countries were assessed as free in 2020: Tunisia and Seychelles. Mali’s decline from “free” to “not free” reflects its dramatic fall from a recognized example of democracy to one plagued by three coups d’état (2012, 2020, and 2021).¹⁶ Benin, one of the first countries to implement democratic reforms in Africa, has recently experienced the politicization of institutions, exclusionary electoral tactics, restricted freedom of speech, and crackdowns on civilians.¹⁷ Other countries, while retaining their “free” status over the 20-year span, nevertheless have engaged in actions that could undermine basic human rights and civic freedoms. The Ghanaian parliament, for example, is considering a bill that will restrict the rights of the LGBTQI community in Ghana—a move that is supported by the majority of the population.¹⁸ Similarly, concerns have grown over South Africa’s rising levels of corruption, attacks on civilians by security officials, and gender-based violence.¹⁹

¹⁶ Susanna Wing, “Another coup in Mali? Here’s what you need to know,” *Washington Post*, May 28, 2021 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/28/another-coup-mali-heres-what-you-need-know/>

¹⁷ Freedom House, “Benin,” *Freedom in the World 2021*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/benin/freedom-world/2021>

¹⁸ Freedom House, “Ghana,” *Freedom in the World 2021*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/ghana/freedom-world/2021>; “Supporters, Opponents Face Off Over Ghana’s Anti-LGBT Law,” *Voice of America*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/supporters-opponents-face-off-over-ghana-s-anti-lgbt-law/6309211.html>

¹⁹ Freedom House, “South Africa,” *Freedom in the World 2021*, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/freedom-world/2021>

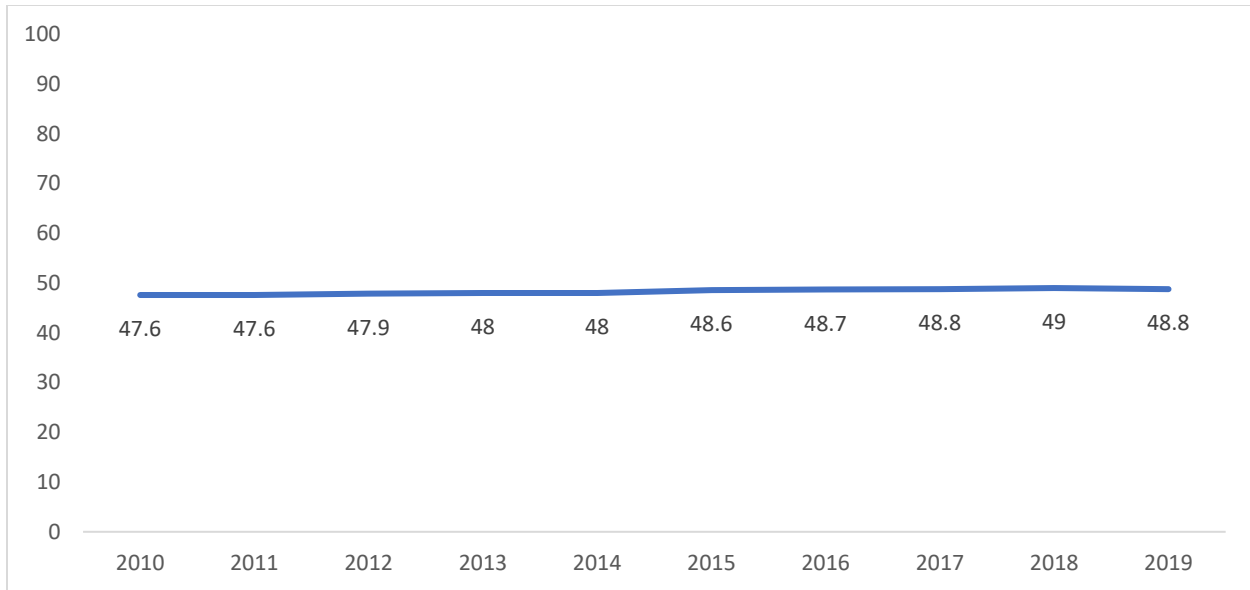
Table 1. Change in Civic Freedoms in Africa’s Leading Democracies: 2000 versus 2020

“Free” Countries in 2000	“Free” Countries in 2020	Changed Category in 2020
Mali		Not Free
Mauritius	Mauritius	
Namibia	Namibia	
Sao Tome e Principe	Sao Tome e Principe	
South Africa	South Africa	
Benin		Partly Free
Botswana	Botswana	
Cabo Verde	Cabo Verde	
Ghana	Ghana	
	Tunisia	
	Seychelles	

Source: Freedom House

Data from the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) also shows a stagnation of the quality of governance on the continent. The IIAG measures overall quality of governance by aggregating government performance in four areas: security and rule of law; participation, rights, and inclusion; foundations of economic opportunity; and human development. As shown in Figure 9, the continental average of governance quality has hovered just below 50 since 2010. However, the continental average masks steep declines in several countries, including Mali and South Africa, the two case-study countries in this chapter. Mali has recorded significant declines in security and political participation while South Africa has recorded declines in security and the public’s perception of governance quality.²⁰

²⁰ Ibrahim Index of African Governance, <https://iiag.online/data.html>



Source: Ibrahim Index of African Governance

Figure 9. Overall Governance Score: 2010–2019

E. Citizen Views and Evaluations of Governance and Democracy

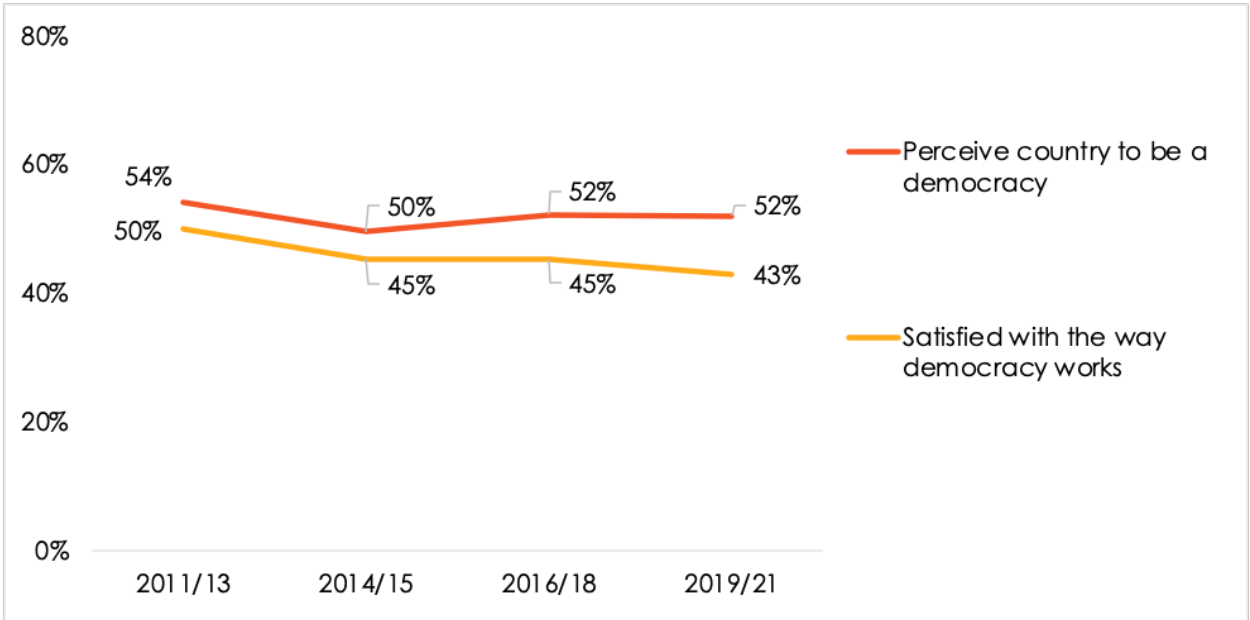
The foregoing sections focused on aggregate expert data on governance and democracy, which is important but reveals only part of the picture. In this section, we draw on Afrobarometer survey data to examine citizen views and evaluations of democracy, governance, and social conditions.

1. Supply of Democracy

Data from the latest round of Afrobarometer’s survey show widespread dissatisfaction with the way democracy works on the continent. Across the 34 countries surveyed, less than half (43%) are “very” or “fairly” satisfied with democracy and only a slim majority (52%) say their country is either a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems. The countries with high proportions of respondents indicating that they were “not at all satisfied” with democracy include Lesotho (58%), Gabon (48%), Mali (47%), Guinea (38%), and Angola (36%). The dissatisfaction of respondents in Lesotho is notable. Unlike the other four countries facing significant instability and generally perceived to be non-democracies, Lesotho has been a relatively stable democracy since the 1990s, although it has experienced political turmoil over the past several years amid high profile resignations, concerns about the military’s involvement in politics, and corruption scandals. It may be that these recent negative political developments are engendering general dissatisfaction among ordinary Basotho.

Overtime trends in popular evaluations of democracy are not encouraging, which is consistent with trends in governance indicators from experts and other sources (Figure 10). The proportion of respondents who rate their country as a full democracy or democracy with minor problems has stagnated at best, and possibly declining marginally over time (54% in 2011 to 52% in 2021).

Meanwhile popular satisfaction with the way democracy works in practice has recorded a substantial decline in the last decade, from 50% in 2011 to 43% in 2021.



Source: Afrobarometer

Figure 10. Trends in Popular Evaluations of Democracy in Africa: 2011–2021

The countries with a majority of respondents stating that they are “fairly” or “very” satisfied with democracy include a surprising mix: Tanzania recorded the highest proportion of satisfied respondents (84%), followed by Morocco (70%). In some of Africa’s long-standing democracies, Botswana, Namibia, and Mauritius, about half of respondents expressed satisfaction with democracy. Other countries with relatively high proportions of satisfied respondents include Ghana (66%), Sierra Leone (56%), and Kenya (55%).

2. Overall Direction of Country

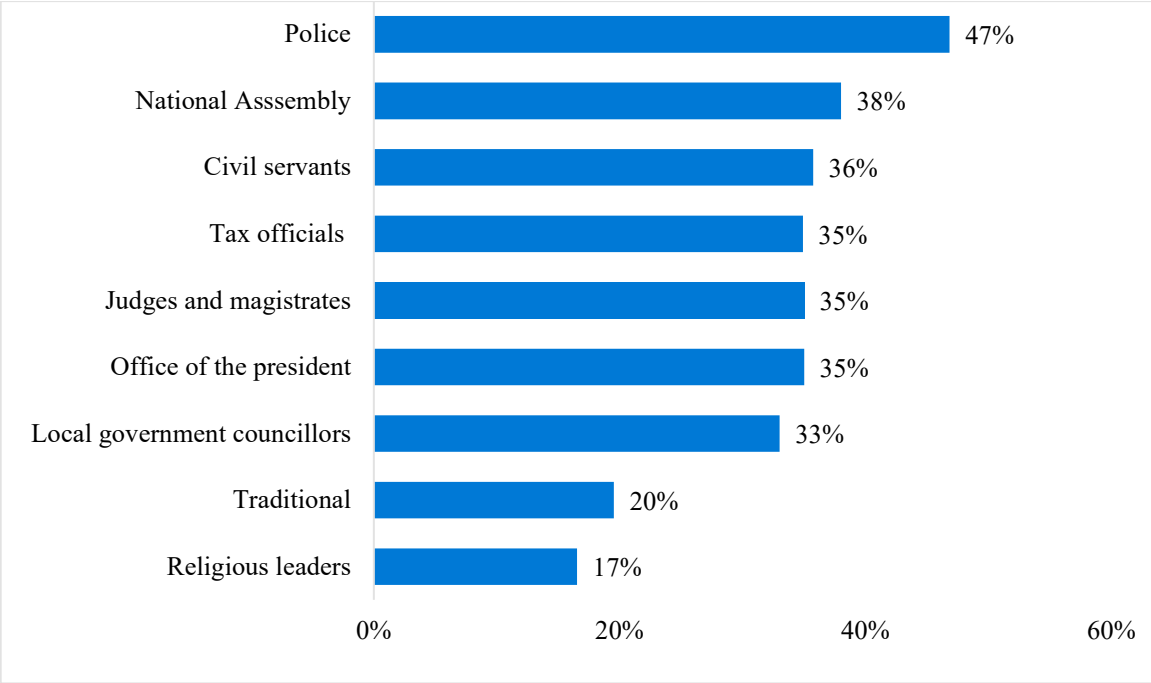
One of the most important indicators of potential social unrest or even violence in the Afrobarometer is popular assessment of the overall direction of the country. One of the very first questions the Afrobarometer asks respondents: “Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?” In 2021, a majority (61%) of Africans stated that their country was going in the wrong direction. This represents a 15-percentage-point increase from 2011. The countries with the largest proportions of respondents stating that their country was headed in the **wrong direction** included Gabon (91%), Mali (86%), Malawi (83%), Lesotho (82%), and Namibia (81%). The case of Gabon is particularly troubling and regional leaders and the international community need to pay close attention. The country has been ruled by a single family since the 1960s. In 2009, President Ali Bongo Ondimba succeeded his father, the late Omar Bongo, who ruled since 1967. Since then, there have been significant allegations of electoral

manipulation and repression. Violent protests have broken out on several occasions during past elections in 2009 and 2016, and more recently in 2021 and 2022, in response to government-imposed restrictions due to the Coronavirus.

Optimism about the future direction of their country is strong in Tanzania (77%), Morocco (70%), Ethiopia (61%), Uganda (60%), and Benin (54%). Ethiopia’s high level of optimism likely reflects the euphoria that greeted the arrival of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, just about one year before the Afrobarometer survey was conducted in that country.

3. Corruption and Popular Trust in Institutions

Perception of corruption and lack of trust in public institutions, especially in the presidency, are the other important indicators of risk of violence or instability. Across the 34 countries surveyed in 2019/2021, more than a third of respondents reported widespread corruption in state and democratic institutions, with the police topping the list at 47% (Figure 11).



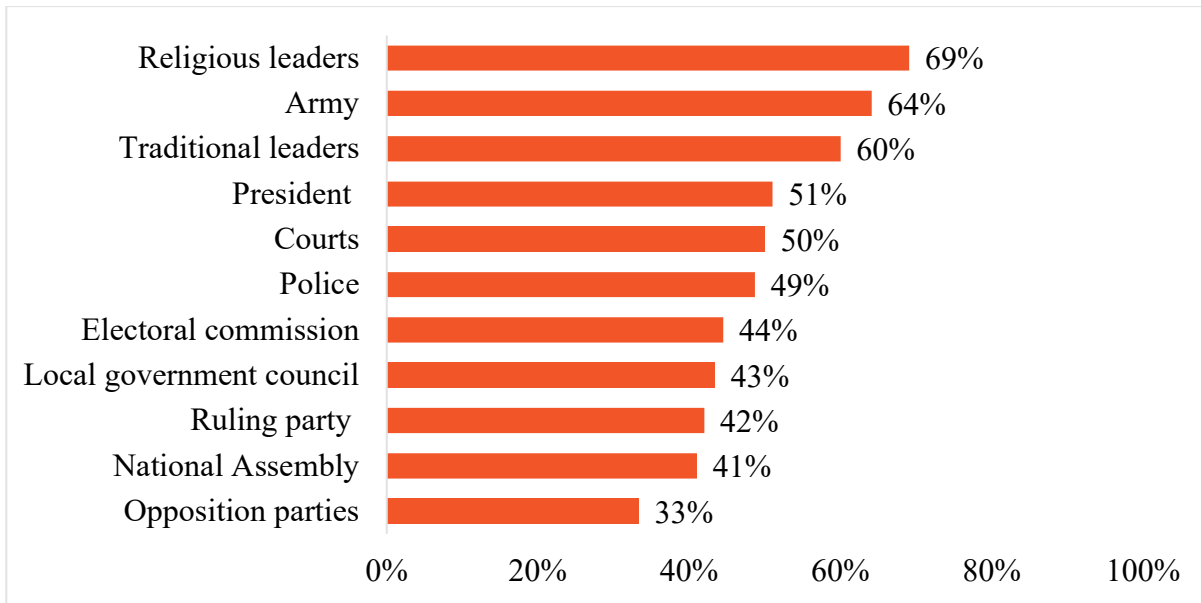
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them" are corrupt)

Figure 11. Perceived Institutional Corruption | 34 countries | 2019/2021

Regarding corruption within the presidency, one of the key predictors of increased risk of violence or instability, a little over one-third (35%) of Africans believed that “all” or “most” officials in the presidency are corrupt. Across the 29 countries where Afrobarometer has consistently asked this question since 2011, the proportion of respondents who believe that there is corruption in the presidency has increased by 10 percentage points. Perceived corruption in the presidency is a

majority view in Gabon (64%), Mali (55%), Lesotho (55%), South Africa (53%), and Liberia (51%).

Popular trust in public institutions and political authorities is generally low across the continent, except for the military. Religious and traditional leaders are consistently the most trusted institutions on the continent while opposition parties are the least trusted (Figure 12).

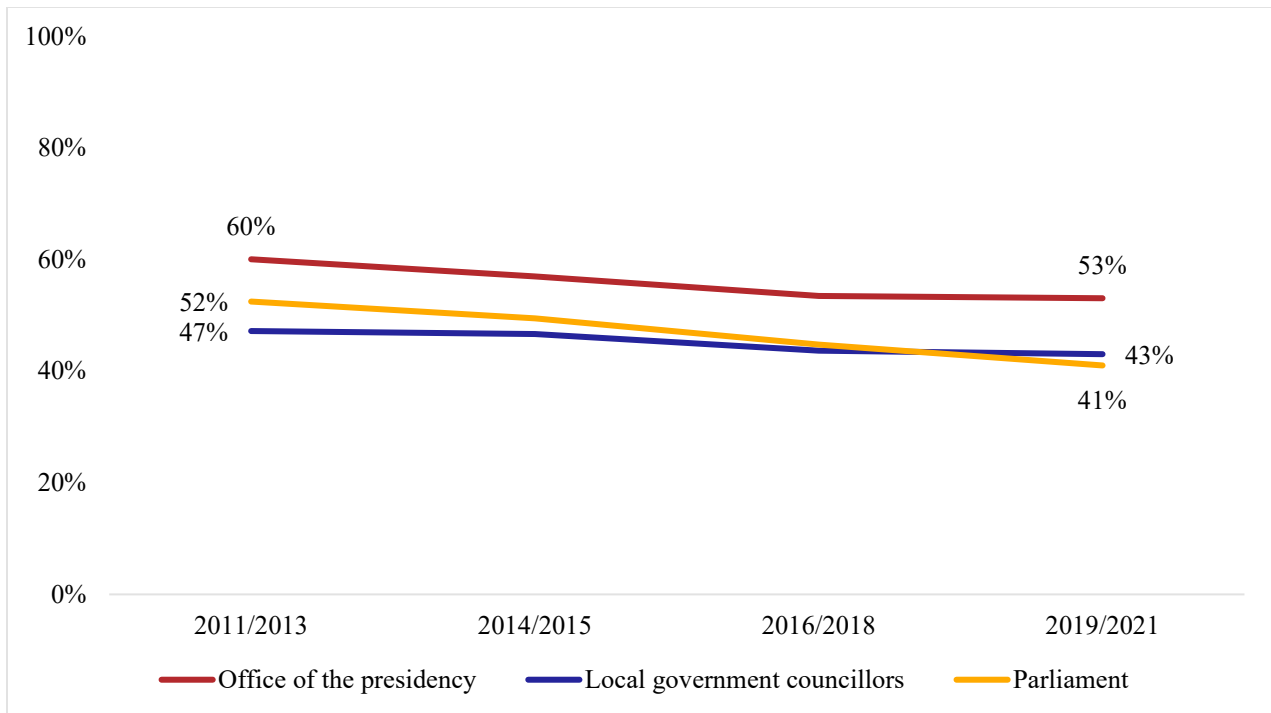


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say they trust them "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 12. Trust in Institutions and Leaders| 34 countries | 2019/2021

Only about half of Africans (51%) express trust in the presidency; in other words, nearly half of Africans (47%) mistrust the president, representing a 10-percentage-point increase over the last decade for the 29 countries where Afrobarometer has data on this question. In fact, consistent with data reported elsewhere,²¹ trust in elected leaders in Africa has declined significantly in the last decade, especially for Members of Parliament (11 percentage points) and officials in the presidency (7 percentage points) (Figure 13).

²¹ Edelman Trust Barometer (2022): https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2022-01/2022%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_FullReport.pdf



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say they trust them "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 13. Trust in Elected Leaders | 29countries | 2011-2021

F. Case Studies

The wave of democracy that swept across Africa in the 1990s created hope that the quality of governance would improve and political violence would reduce. Unfortunately, the growing incidents of political instability and violent protests, including especially the resurgence of military coups may have dimmed those hopes to a large extent. Could this drift towards instability have been predicted in some of the countries? The case study on Mali below offers some insights on this question.

[Downie and Cook](#) (2011) argue that a country's vulnerability to instability is shaped in large part by the depth and intensity of its structural weaknesses and the extent to which governments can manage or mitigate those weaknesses. When structural weaknesses—governance, political, economic, or social—manifest and intensify in any context, the consequences are often broadly felt by ordinary people, which in turn, influences how they view and evaluate their leaders as well as assess current conditions and future prospects of their countries. The Afrobarometer survey captures the evaluations and experiences of ordinary Africans at regular intervals and provides data to track trends of the impacts of structural weaknesses in more than 30 countries. Tracking

trends of the experiences and evaluations of ordinary people is critical for picking up early warning signals of instability.²²

In this section, we examine the case of Mali to illustrate how data from Afrobarometer offered clear warning signals of a looming governance and political crisis. Heeding these warnings may have allowed African and other world leaders to intervene sooner rather than later. We also highlight the case of South Africa where trends in some of the key Afrobarometer indicators seem to signal potential political risk to the incumbent African National Congress (ANC) and perhaps the country's democracy. In fact, the recent poor performance of the ANC in local government elections is consistent with trends in the Afrobarometer surveys over the last decade. Could this be the beginning of a decline of the ANC? What would this mean for South Africa's democratic development?

1. Mali

Maliens from all walks of life [took to the streets](#) in August 2020, demanding that then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita step down.²³ The [June 5 Movement](#)²⁴ that ultimately succeeded in bringing down the government of President Keita was driven largely by popular frustration with the state of the country (Mbewa 2020²⁵). When the military eventually intervened and removed the president, thousands of Malians [celebrated](#) the coup on the streets.²⁶ After refusing calls from the Economic Community of West African States and Western leaders to reinstate President Keita (Ahmed & Petesch²⁷ 2020), the military junta, who previously vowed to steer the country back to elections and democracy, as of December 2021, appear to be dragging their feet ([Africa New](#) 2020).²⁸

The street protests and subsequent celebrations that greeted the military coup were largely predictable based on Afrobarometer data. Results of the survey in Mali, conducted from March to April 2020, which preceded the coup, showed widespread dissatisfaction with prevailing

²² Bratton and Gyimah. 2015. "Political risks facing African democracies: Evidence from the Afrobarometer." <https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Working%20papers/afropaperno157.pdf>

²³ "Protests Continue in Mali's Capital Calling for President to Resign," *VOA News*, August 12, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_protests-continue-malis-capital-calling-president-resign/6194319.html

²⁴ Adama Coulibaly, "June 5 Movement Accused Mali's Military Of Betrayal," *Human Angle Media*, October 21, 2020, <https://humanglemedia.com/june-5-movement-accused-malis-military-of-betrayal-2/>; Mbewa 2020.

²⁵ Mbewa, D. O., "Son of Malian President quits parliamentary role following public protests." <https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/07/14/son-of-malian-president-quits-parliamentary-role-following-public-protests/>

²⁶ "Mali coup: Thousands take to Bamako streets to celebrate," *BBC*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-53868236>

²⁷ Ahmed, B., & Petesch, C. 2020. "Global leaders condemn the coup in Mali amid worry about extremists." *AP*. <https://apnews.com/article/religion-international-news-africa-united-nations-europe-e7053e2260045c2e0afdef8f5fedb737>

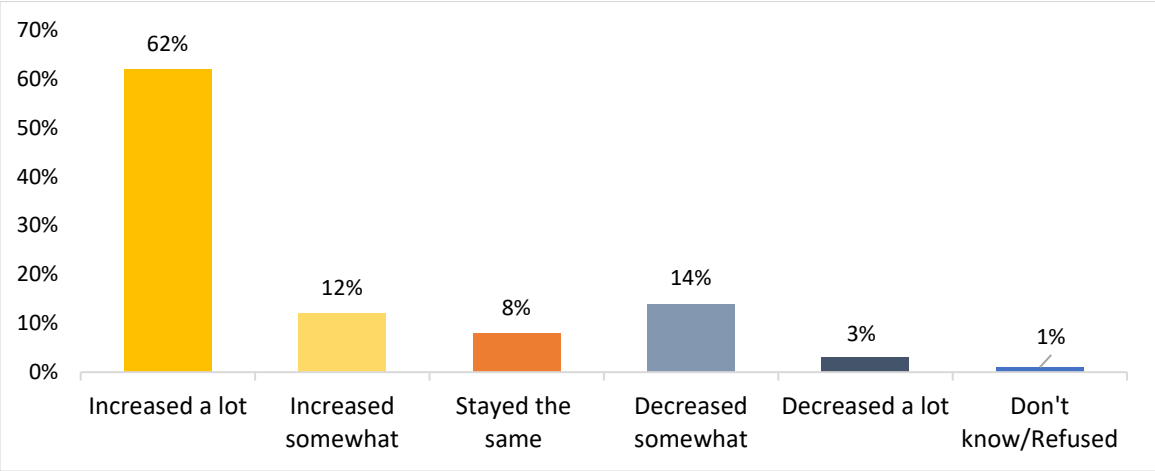
²⁸ "Mali political parties demand junta respect transition schedule," *Africa News*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/11/07/mali-political-parties-demand-junta-respect-transition-schedule/>

conditions, including perceptions that the country was going in the wrong direction, that the economy was in bad shape, corruption was growing, and elected leaders could not be trusted. At the same time, the military was among the most trusted institutions in the country, along with traditional leaders, a sentiment that is common across all 30+ countries that Afrobarometer covers. A combination of deepening dissatisfaction with government performance and worsening economic conditions may have led many Malians to view the military intervention as the best opportunity to halt a downward spiral. However, in the same survey, Malians overwhelmingly endorsed democracy as the preferred form of government and roundly rejected military rule.

In the following sections, we draw on Afrobarometer survey data for Mali to highlight the key indicators that may serve as early warning signals of instability.

a. Corruption

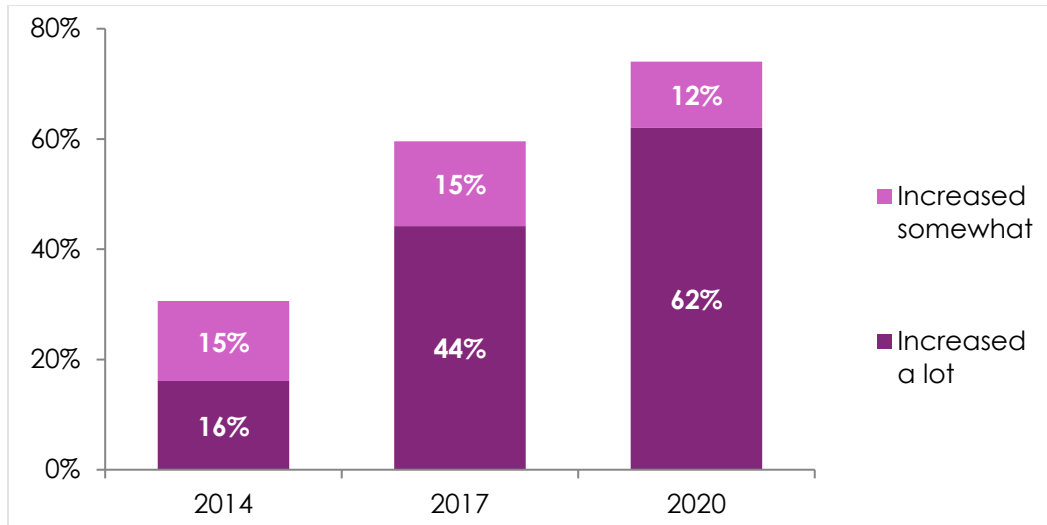
As of April 2020, Malians reported rising levels of corruption, which was one of the main complaints of the June 5 Movement protesters ([Aljazeera](#) 2020; Obaji 2020²⁹), especially after images emerged showing the president’s son partying on a yacht in a foreign country. Nearly three-fourths (74%) of Malians reported that corruption had increased during the year preceding the survey, including more than 6 in 10 (62%) who said it increased “a lot” (Figure 14). This represents a substantial increase from 2014, when only a minority of Malians (31%) reported that corruption was increasing (Figure 15).



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Figure 14. Level of Corruption in the Country | Mali | 2020

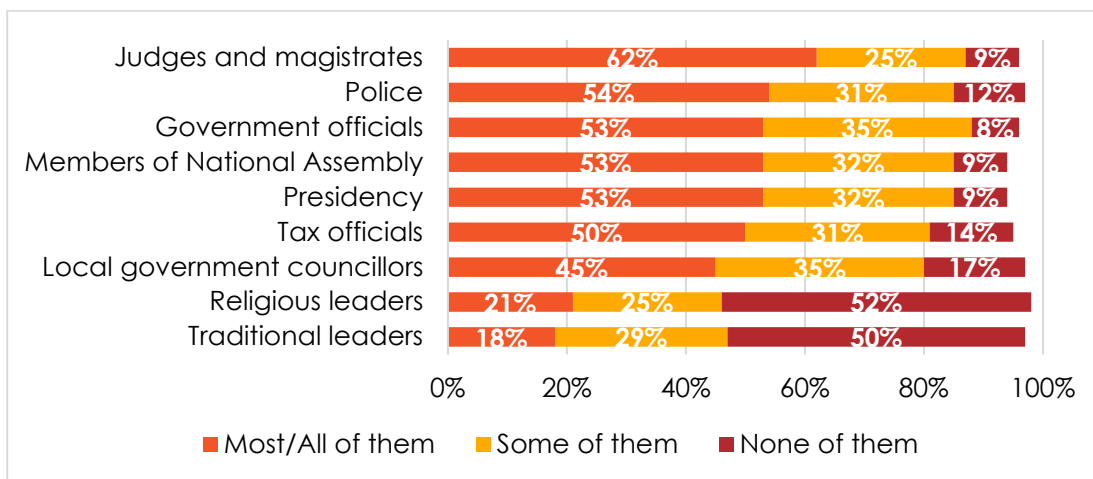
²⁹ Obaji, P. 2020. “A coup won’t end Mali’s corruption and insecurity.” <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/19/a-coup-wont-end-malis-corruption-and-insecurity/>



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Figure 15. Level of Corruption, over time | Mali | 2014–2020

Public perceptions of corruption among key leaders and other public officials were also very high in April 2020. Judges and magistrates were most widely perceived to be corrupt (62%). More than half of respondents also believed corruption was taking place in the president’s office (53%), among other government officials (53%), members of the National Assembly (53%), and the police (54%) (Figure 16).



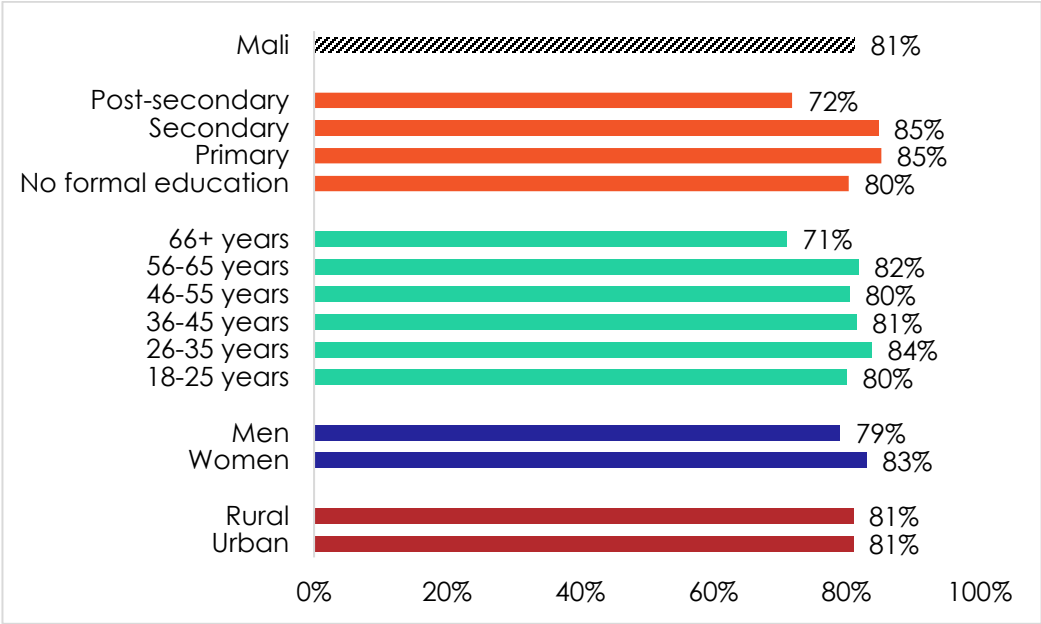
Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 16. Perceived Corruption among Public Officials | Mali | 2020

b. Economic conditions

In addition to widespread perceptions of corruption, Malians also painted a gloomy picture about the economy. More than 8 in 10 (81%) described the country’s economy as bad, including 45%

who said it was “very bad” (Figure 17). These assessments were fairly consistent across demographic groups, although citizens with post-secondary education (72%) and senior citizens (71%) were relatively less critical.

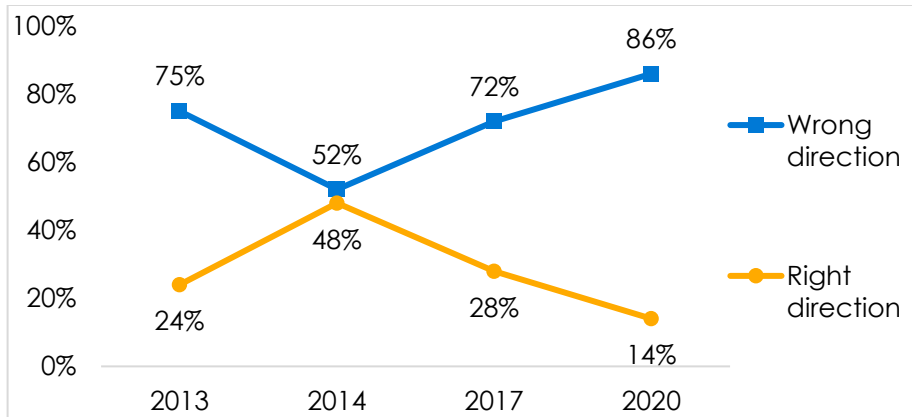


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who said “fairly bad” or “very bad”)

Figure 17. Negative Assessment of Country’s Economic Situation | By Socio-demographic Group | Mali | 2020

c. General direction of country

In the same survey, almost 9 out of 10 Malians (86%) said the country was “going in the wrong direction,” a remarkable 34-percentage-point increase from 2014 when only a slight majority (52%) held that view (Figure 18).

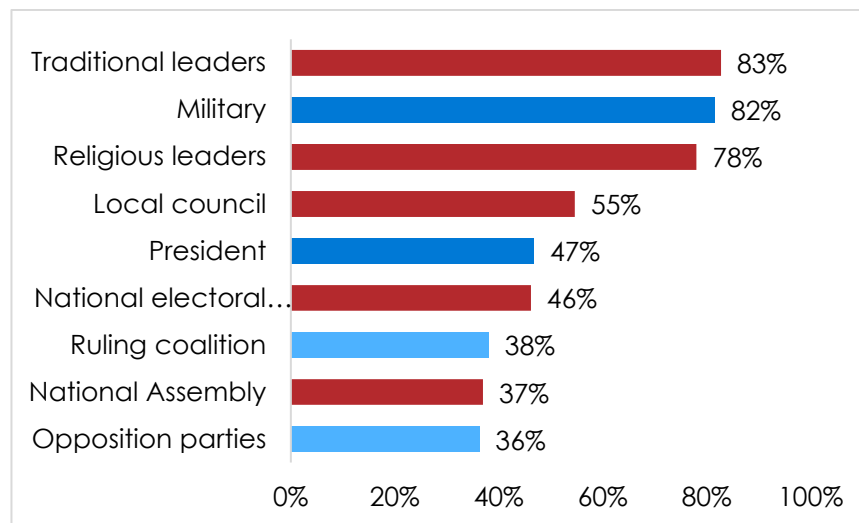


Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 18. Direction of the Country | Mali | 2020

d. Trust in the military and civilian leaders

Meanwhile, most Malians trusted the military; in fact, the military was the most trusted public institution, matched only by traditional leaders. More than 8 out of 10 citizens (82%) said they trust the military at least “somewhat,” including 62% who expressed “a lot” of trust in the armed forces. In contrast, the president enjoyed the trust of fewer than half (47%) of Malians, while even fewer expressed confidence in the National Assembly (37%) (Figure 19). Trust in the military is generally very high in most surveyed countries, possibly a result of the infrequent interaction between the military and civilians compared, for example to the police, and the near universal association of the military with high levels of discipline.



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Figure 19. Popular Trust in Institutions and Leaders | Mali | 2020

The foregoing analysis suggests that when there is a consistent (and especially sudden) increase in the proportions of respondents reporting that corruption has increased in the past year, that the country is going in the wrong direction, and that overall economic conditions are bad, those constitute clear signals of heightened risk of instability. Moreover, when these indicators are trending in the wrong direction and the military emerges as the most trusted public institution, then a military coup is likely to be viewed favorably by citizens.

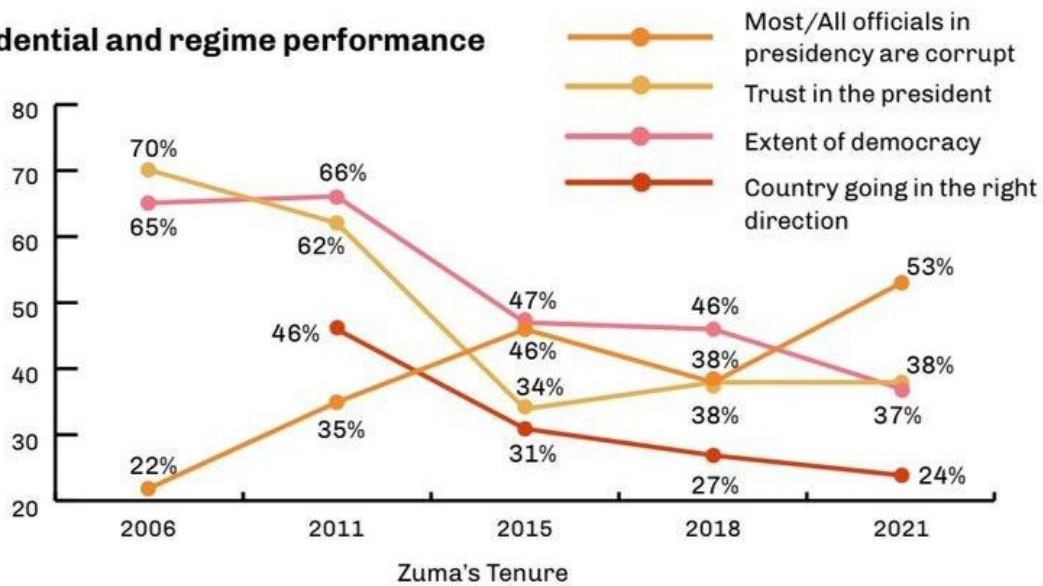
While acknowledging the potential of these signals to disrupt or derail a country's democratic and governance trajectory, it is worth reiterating Downie and Cook's (2011) argument that a country's vulnerability to instability depends on the government's ability *and institutional architecture* to manage or mitigate extant structural weaknesses. Countries like Mali and Burkina Faso may succumb to the fallout from structural weaknesses, but other countries with relatively stronger and more resilient democratic institutions may be able to withstand and mitigate such weaknesses; and the pressure of popular frustration with structural weaknesses may manifest in other ways, including, for example, the incumbent government losing political power or the country becoming increasingly autocratic as incumbent leaders use a strong-arm approach to retain and consolidate their power. These are relevant hypotheses that are worth a deeper exploration in future research. However, the following case study on South Africa may offer initial pointers and an opportunity for testing these hypotheses.

2. South Africa

When Afrobarometer surveys started in South Africa in 2006, popular attitudes toward democracy, governance, and the economy were largely positive across several measures. For instance, trust in the president and assessments of the extent of democracy in South Africa were solid majority views, while perceptions of corruption in the presidency comprised a small minority of views.

When Jacob Zuma was elected in 2009, popular assessments of government performance took a steep dive and South Africa has not (yet) recovered from the sharp declines during the Zuma tenure. Trust in the president and evaluations of the extent of South Africa's democracy are currently quite low: less than 40% of those surveyed think South Africa is a full democracy. Meanwhile the proportion of South Africans who think that the country is going in the right direction has fallen sharply from about 50% in 2011 to less than a quarter in 2021. Moreover, perceived corruption in the presidency is a majority view (53%) for the first time since 2006. Figure 20 traces these declining indicators in South Africa.

Presidential and regime performance



Source: Afrobarometer, a non-partisan African research network that conducts nationally representative surveys on democracy, governance, and quality of life. Face-to-face interviews with 1,200-2,400 people in each country yield results with a margin of error of +/-2 to 3 percentage points.



Additionally, in the most recent survey, South Africa recorded a 27-percentage-point increase in popular dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in their country (from 39% in 2011 to 66% in 2021), the third highest increase on the continent. Finally, although a majority of South Africans reject military rule in the most recent survey, it is worth noting that the rate of rejection (65%) is below the continental average (74%). South Africans are thus relatively more accepting of military rule than their counterparts in the “average” African country.

These negative sentiments in South Africa are quite concerning; if these trends were recorded in a country with relatively less robust political and economic institutions, we may have witnessed a military or other non-democratic attempt to unseat the government. In the case of South Africa, it remains to be seen what the consequences might be. Drawing on the [framework](#) developed by Bratton and Gyimah (2015), these trends could result in at least two outcomes.³⁰ First, the ANC might eventually lose power at the national level; popular frustration with government performance and the way democracy works may drive South Africans to vote the ANC out of

³⁰ Michael Bratton and E. Gyimah Boadi, “Political risks facing African democracies: Evidence from Afrobarometer,” Working Paper No. 157, Afrobarometer, May 2015, <https://afrobarometer.org/sites/default/files/publications/Working%20papers/afropaperno157.pdf>

power in a future election. In fact, the ANC's poor performance³¹ in the 2021 local government elections (Lynsey Chutel, 2021) may be a sign that the party is heading for defeat at the national level if these trends in popular frustrations persist. A second possible outcome is that the ANC, in its quest to hold onto power, resorts to autocratic tactics, leading to an erosion of the country's democratic norms and institutions. A significant deterioration or collapse of democracy in South Africa would have ripple effects in the Southern Africa region and possibly across the continent, a risk that key stakeholders must pay close attention to. That said, given South Africa's comparatively robust institutions, the first scenario where the ANC loses power in a national election, is probably more likely, even though one cannot completely rule out the latter outcome.

G. Conclusion

The last 5 years have witnessed a precipitous deterioration in Africa's security landscape, driven in large part by organized violence, and lately, military coups. Other forms of conflict—electoral violence and popular protests—have stagnated at best, and in some cases worsened.

On the receiving end of this security turbulence are ordinary citizens. Afrobarometer's latest survey in 34 countries shows growing concerns about security, especially in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Cameroon where violent extremist organizations continue to operate. For the first time in the last decade, a majority of respondents in Burkina Faso (55%) ranked security and crime as the most important problem facing their country, displacing health to second place. In fact, the leaders of the recent military coup in Burkina Faso have cited concerns about growing insecurity and violent extremist activities as the reason for toppling the government of President Roch Kabore (Marsi 2022),³² which seemed to resonate with the public. And in Mali, crime and security tied with education, ranked by 43% of respondents as the most important problem facing their country.

Meanwhile the global wave of democratic retreat is also taking a toll on the continent. Similar to other regions, popular trust in political leaders, especially the presidency and satisfaction with democracy have declined significantly. Expert data from various sources point to declining quality of governance and democracy on the continent, which is also reflected in public opinion data. By 2021, only about half (52%) of Africans rate their country as a "full democracy" or "democracy with minor problems"; and less than half (43%) are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country, which represents a significant (seven percentage points) decline from a decade ago. Additionally, perceived corruption in key institutions, notably the presidency, has also increased by about 10 percentage points from 2011.

³¹ Lynsey Chutel. 2021. "A.N.C. Suffers Worst Election Setback Since End of Apartheid." *NYT*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/04/world/africa/south-africa-election-anc.html>

³² Federica Marsi. 2022. "Burkina Faso: Military coup prompts fears of further instability."
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/27/burkina-faso-military-coup-prompts-fears-of-further-instability>

The two forces—insecurity and declining quality of democracy and governance—may have dimmed the hopes of a majority of Africans about the future direction of their country. When asked whether they think their country is going in the right or wrong direction, nearly two-thirds (62%) of respondents said their country was going in the wrong direction, representing a 16-percentage-point increase from 2011.

Sharp and sudden declines in these important indicators of governance and democracy can have far-reaching consequences. The cases of Mali and South Africa underscore the need for governments and key stakeholders to pay close attention to trends in public attitudes data. In Mali, the outbreak of street protests and subsequent coup in 2020 may have seemed unexpected on the surface, but the signals were captured comprehensively in the 2020 Afrobarometer survey: by April 2020, most Malians believed that corruption was increasing, were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with prevailing economic conditions, did not trust the incumbent government, and thought that the country was going in the wrong direction. Meanwhile the military was one of the most trusted institutions in the country.

We also highlight South Africa because the trends in public attitudes are worrying to say the least. Perceived corruption in the presidency is a majority view for the first time since 2006; trust in the president and rating of South Africa's democracy have declined; and most South Africans think the country is going in the wrong direction. South Africa's institutions are likely sufficiently robust to prevent a significant or rapid democratic erosion, and citizens may register their protest at the ballot box in a future election, but these sharp shifts should serve as early warnings that the country is under significant political strain.

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