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GOVERNANCE



## Governing Digital Engagement

Civilian Oversight and Institutional Failure in West and Central Africa

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**Cover Image:** Protesters at the #EndSARS protest in Lagos, Nigeria on October 13, 2020 © Ayokanmi Oyeyemi

# Executive Summary

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Digital connectivity has broadened political participation across West and Central Africa, yet it has coincided with a marked erosion of civilian authority. Between 2020 and 2023, the region experienced an unprecedented wave of military interventions.

This brief argues that digital mobilisation is not the cause of instability; rather, it exposes and amplifies pre-existing institutional weaknesses. Civilian institutions have failed to adapt to the scale and immediacy of digitally mediated engagement, producing a widening legitimacy gap—particularly among youth, the most active digital cohort.

Evidence shows that declining trust in legislatures, weak oversight, and limited avenues for structured participation create conditions in which military interventions encounter muted resistance. Online dissent becomes politically consequential only when institutions cannot absorb, process, or respond to citizen demands.

The analysis identifies three core failures: episodic representative channels, elite-centred political parties, and weak enforcement of accountability.

Comparative experiences from Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa demonstrate that institutional adaptation—rather than suppression of digital engagement—can restore credibility.

The brief proposes four policy pathways: restoring representative credibility, aligning incentives and enforcement, strengthening digital governance, and rebuilding public trust.

The central task is clear and unvarnished: stability will not be secured by constraining digital voice but by rebuilding the institutional capacity to govern it.

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## Introduction

Digital connectivity has expanded political participation across West and Central Africa, yet this expansion has coincided with an unprecedented erosion of civilian authority. Between 2020 and 2023, the region recorded eight successful military interventions, more than in the entire preceding decade. This pattern has emerged not because digital mobilisation generates instability, but because existing political institutions have struggled to govern dissent within an increasingly connected society.

Civilian governance in West and Central Africa lacks institutional mechanisms capable of absorbing digitally mediated participation, producing a legitimacy gap that lowers resistance to unconstitutional interventions. Young citizens, now the most digitally active cohort, encounter institutions unable to translate engagement into credible accountability. The result is a widening legitimacy deficit.

Internet penetration in sub-Saharan Africa rose from approximately 24 per cent in 2015 to over 40 per cent by 2023. Young people constitute the majority of new entrants into the digital space, and they use online platforms to articulate grievances, monitor public officials, and demand performance from institutions that frequently lack the capacity or incentives to respond.

The Afrobarometer Round 9 Survey reports that trust in parliaments across surveyed African countries averages just 37 per cent, with youth trust consistently lower. This gap between expectations and institutional performance has become structurally significant.

Contemporary coups do not rely on ideological claims or public enthusiasm for military rule. Instead, they exploit governance vacuums. Where accountability mechanisms falter, and political elites appear insulated from public scrutiny, digital mobilisation amplifies perceptions of state failure. In this context, military actors frame interventions as corrective measures rather than regime takeovers.

The public response is frequently ambivalent, less a demand for military governance than a reflection of weakened confidence in civilian authority. The policy challenge is therefore institutional. Digital mobilisation exposes accountability gaps that already exist; it does not create them. When legislatures overlook structured public input, when oversight bodies fail to produce visible consequences, and when digital governance oscillates between regulatory absence and punitive restriction, the credibility of civilian leadership declines. The resulting legitimacy deficit reduces resistance to extraconstitutional alternatives.

Restoring the authority of civilian governance requires institutionalising youth participation, professionalising digital governance, demonstrating accountability through measurable outcomes, and strengthening regional deterrence mechanisms. The central task is not controlling digital dissent, but rebuilding the institutional capacity to govern it.

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## **Institutional Failures Underpinning the Crisis**

The resurgence of coups since 2020 reflects a systemic governance failure: civilian institutions have not adapted to the scale, speed, and transparency of digitally mediated political participation.

Analysis reveals three structural gaps that exacerbate the effects of digital mobilisation:

### **Episodic Representative Channels**

Between electoral cycles, most legislatures lack formalised mechanisms for structured youth participation. Legislative processes, including committee oversight and budget hearings, are largely inaccessible between elections. Absence of routine channels for youth participation shifts engagement online, where it accumulates without formal resolution.

### **Elite-Centred Political Parties**

Political parties function increasingly as elite-centred organisations. Youth wings are mobilisational rather than deliberative, offering minimal influence on policy or decision-making. The political system, therefore, loses a core mechanism of civic intermediation, reducing opportunities for structured dialogue between citizens and political elites.

### **Weak Oversight and Enforcement**

Corruption or governance failures are widely publicised online, but anti-corruption bodies rarely produce visible consequences. This gap erodes public confidence and reinforces narratives of elite impunity.

Online dissent becomes consequential only when these gaps converge. The failure lies not in digital engagement, but in institutions' inability to process and govern it.

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## Evidence from the Field

Data across multiple sources highlight four empirically observable patterns.

**Table 1: What the Evidence Shows: Digital Mobilisation as a Signal of Institutional Failure**

Pattern	Evidence	Implication
<b>Declining Institutional Trust Predicts Coups</b>	Countries with coups 2020-2023 (Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan &, Niger) had youth trust in legislatures often below 40%.	High participation exists, but gendered segmentation limits overall productivity and social contributions.
<b>Digital Penetration Amplifies Visibility, Not Causation</b>	Internet penetration varied: Niger 17%, Burkina Faso ~20%, Mali 33%, Guinea 34% (ITU, 2023).	High mobilisation occurs after institutional performance deteriorates; connectivity exposes, rather than generates, crises.
<b>Youth Distrust is Systemic</b>	Surveys across Africa, Latin America, & South Asia show younger cohorts consistently perceive institutions as less responsive.	Online mobilisation intensifies where responsiveness is low, reinforcing legitimacy gaps.
<b>Digital Protest Signals Crises</b>	Social media analyses (UCDP, ITU) show spikes in protest hashtags weeks before political breakdowns.	Early warning: digital engagement indicates stress on institutional capacity.

Across cases, the evidence points to the same conclusion: digital mobilisation accelerates existing legitimacy erosion; it is a signal, not a cause, of political instability.

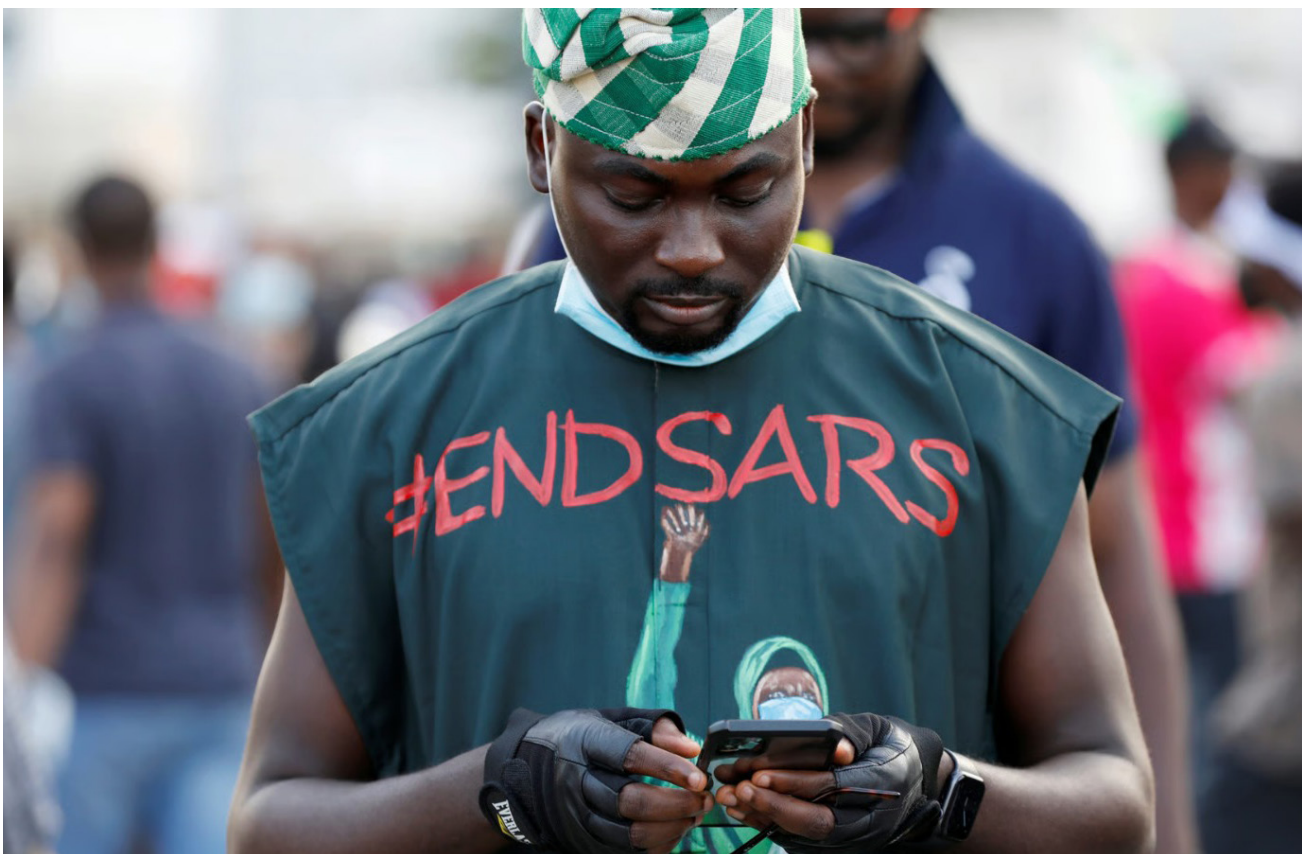
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## Drivers of Institutional Stagnation

The institutional constraints sustaining this governance failure derive from entrenched incentive structures.

- 1. Provider Incentives:** Parties and legislators face weak incentives to broaden participation; youth inclusion can threaten internal control, while digital consultation introduces scrutiny for which institutions are not structurally prepared.
- 2. Regulatory Weakness:** Communications regulators oscillate between lax oversight and punitive shutdowns. Internet shutdowns implemented in several affected countries temporarily suppress mobilisation but reinforce perceptions of authoritarian drift.
- 3. Market Distortions:** Digital platforms reward rapid amplification over deliberation. Political actors exploit these dynamics to mobilise supporters or delegitimise opponents, increasing polarisation and weakening formal institutions.
- 4. Bureaucratic Tolerance for Shortcuts:** Ministries and oversight bodies operate with low consequences for nonresponsiveness.
- 5. Status Quo Beneficiaries:** Elites benefit from opacity; a more accountable digital governance environment would undermine their discretion and expose mismanagement.

These factors slow institutional adaptation even when leaders recognise the risks.



The tumultuous #ENDSAR protest that rocked Nigeria in 2020 was boosted by X, Instagram and Facebook

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## Comparative Insight

Several countries facing similar dynamics have strengthened institutional resilience without suppressing digital mobilisation. Their experiences offer instructive governance lessons.

### Ghana

Ghana institutionalised public input through mandatory pre-budget consultations and strengthened parliamentary oversight committees. These reforms created predictable channels for public engagement, reducing reliance on informal mobilisation. Critically, enforcement capacity in the Auditor General's office increased, providing visible consequences.

### Kenya

Kenya introduced structured digital public participation mechanisms linked to legislative processes. Consultation frameworks were integrated into county-level governance, ensuring that digital submissions formed part of formal deliberation records. The integration, rather than the isolation of digital tools, proved effective.

### South Africa

South Africa's Independent Communications Authority developed public-facing reporting on content moderation and digital platform compliance. Transparency reduced perceptions of arbitrary regulation and strengthened institutional legitimacy. Parliamentary committees also expanded scrutiny over executive action, particularly in security governance.

**Table 2: Governing Digital Participation: Comparative Lessons from Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa**

Country	Mechanism	Policy Implication
Ghana	Mandatory pre-budget consultations; empowered parliamentary oversight; Auditor-General enforcement	Predictable channels for engagement reduce informal mobilisation; visible consequences restore trust.
Kenya	Structured digital participation linked to legislative processes	Integration of digital submissions into formal governance enhances accountability.
South Africa	Public reporting on digital platform compliance; expanded parliamentary scrutiny	Transparency reduces perceptions of arbitrariness; oversight credibility strengthens legitimacy.

Across these examples, success derived not from controlling youth mobilisation but from building institutional capacity to govern participation.

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Three consistent lessons emerge:

**1. Participation must be procedural, not symbolic:** When public input shapes committee work, budget cycles, or oversight actions, institutions retain credibility even during polarisation.

**2. Regulatory clarity reduces distrust:** Transparent, proportionate digital governance prevents escalation and reduces justification for extraconstitutional intervention.

**3. Visible accountability outcomes restore legitimacy:** where oversight institutions demonstrate consequences, digital mobilisation becomes a complement, not a substitute, for institutional governance.

These comparative insights reinforce the core principle that controlling youth mobilisation is unnecessary. Institutions that adapt maintain stability even under intense digital engagement.



Demonstrators in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, hold a picture of Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba on Jan. 25, 2022.

**Photo:** Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images

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## Policy Pathways for Reform

Reform does not require new agencies. Existing institutions can restore legitimacy by strengthening four governance pillars.

### A. Restore Representative Credibility

**Actions:** Quarterly youth consultations in parliamentary committees; publish political party rules; integrate digital submissions into legislative workflows.

**Responsible Institutions:** National legislatures, political parties, and electoral management bodies.

**Sequencing:** Short-term (12–24 months).

**Metrics:** Number of digital submissions reviewed, youth satisfaction surveys.

**Tradeoff:** Increased scrutiny may slow committee processes.

### B. Align Incentives and Enforcement

**Actions:** Expand open-budget platforms; strengthen follow-up on corruption; increase parliamentary oversight of executive/security institutions.

**Responsible Institutions:** Ministries of Finance, parliaments, and anti-corruption agencies.

**Sequencing:** Medium-term (2–4 years).

**Metrics:** Percentage of corruption allegations acted upon; number of oversight reports published.

**Tradeoff:** Political resistance from entrenched interests.

### C. Strengthen Digital Governance Integrity

**Actions:** Transparent reporting on content moderation; incorporate digital literacy in curricula; and clarify regulatory standards for platforms.

**Responsible Institutions:** Ministries of Education, communications regulators, and courts.

**Sequencing:** Short- to medium-term (1–3 years).

**Metrics:** Public awareness surveys; reduction in arbitrary shutdowns or regulatory complaints.

**Tradeoff:** Regulatory clarity may constrain discretionary executive action.

### D. Rebuild Public Trust

**Actions:** Participatory monitoring of development projects; align youth employment with national plans; enhance regional early-warning consultations.

**Responsible Institutions:** Local governments, ministries of labour, regional economic communities (e.g., ECOWAS).

**Sequencing:** Medium-term (3–5 years).

**Metrics:** Citizen trust surveys; uptake of participatory monitoring; timeliness of early-warning responses.

**Tradeoff:** Requires sustained fiscal commitment.

**Sequencing Note:** Aligning incentives (B) is a precondition for rebuilding public trust (D); digital governance clarity (C) supports both pillars.

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## Conclusion

Digital mobilisation is not a threat to democratic stability; weak institutions are. Civilian authority erodes when representative bodies cannot absorb participation, oversight mechanisms fail to enforce consequences, and digital governance lacks transparency.

In this environment, online dissent is a symptom, not a source, of institutional strain. Legitimacy declines where governance cannot mediate political voice, regulate digital engagement, or deliver enforceable accountability. Institutions that adapt to digitally connected societies preserve stability; those that do not accelerate legitimacy decay.

### Author

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### INEC Reschedules 2027 General Elections to Jan 16

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has announced a revised timetable for the 2027 general elections, bringing forward the dates for both national and state polls.

Under the new schedule, presidential and National Assembly elections will now be held on January 16, 2027. Governorship and State Houses of Assembly elections are set for February 6, 2027.

The commission had earlier fixed the presidential and National Assembly polls for February 20, 2027, while governorship and state assembly elections were scheduled for March 6, 2027.

INEC said the adjustment follows the repeal of the Electoral Act, 2022, and the enactment of the new Electoral Act, 2026, which necessitated a review of the electoral timetable.

<https://www.premium-timesng.com/news/top-news/859957-updated-inec-reschedules-2027-general-election-releases-new-election-timetable.html>

### Nigeria's GDP Grows by 4.07% in Q4 2025

Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by 4.07% year-on-year in real terms in the fourth quarter of 2025, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

The bureau disclosed this in its latest GDP report for Q4 2025, released on February 27.

The figure represents an increase from the 3.76% growth recorded in the corresponding period of 2024, indicating a modest improvement in economic performance.

The National Bureau of Statistics is the country's principal agency responsible for the development and management of official statistics, serving as the authoritative source and custodian of Nigeria's data.

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2026/02/nigerias-gdp-grows-4-07-in-q4-2025-as-services-oil-lift-economy-nbs/>

### Benue Records 10 Health Worker Deaths in Lassa Fever Outbreak

The Benue State Government has confirmed that 10 health workers have died following a recent outbreak of Lassa fever, including five medical doctors.

The development was disclosed in a report by African Independent Television (AIT) on February 27.

According to the state epidemiologist, Asema Msuega, Benue has recorded 250 suspected cases of the disease, with 45 confirmed through laboratory tests. New data from the state epidemiology unit indicate

an increase in infections.

Msuega described the infection rate among healthcare workers as alarming, suggesting possible human-to-human transmission and attributing the trend to gaps in infection prevention and control practices within health facilities. The situation in Benue comes amid rising concern over Lassa fever infections nationwide.

<https://www.premium-timesng.com/health/health-news/860220-lassa-fever-benue-record-death-of-10-health-workers-five-doctors-affected.html>

### Federal Government Approves N48bn for Engineering Upgrades in 12 Universities

The Federal Government has approved N48bn for engineering upgrades across 12 selected universities nationwide.

The Minister of Education, Dr Tunji Alausa, disclosed this on Monday at the inauguration of the Implementation Committee on Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) Special High-Impact Intervention Projects in Abuja.

He said the intervention would be used either to upgrade existing facilities or construct new engineering workshops where necessary. He added that an additional N20bn had been provided under the 2026 TETFund guidelines for similar upgrades in other selected universities.

According to him, each of the beneficiary institutions will receive N4bn.

<https://guardian.ng/education/fg-approves-n48bn-to-upgrade-engineering-faculties-in-12-varsities/>



## Cameroon Frees Former Officials After 20-Year Corruption Sentences

Cameroon has released two former senior public officials, Roger Belinga, former head of the Cameroon Housing Corporation (SIC), and Gérard Ondo Ndong, former director of the Special Inter-communal Equipment and Intervention Fund (FEICOM), after they each completed 20-year prison sentences for embezzlement of public funds.

At the height of their careers, both men occupied influential positions in agencies central to infrastructure development and local government financing. Their arrests and subsequent convictions were widely viewed as a defining moment in Cameroon's governance history, signalling a tougher stance on financial misconduct among senior officials.

No formal pardon was granted, as their release follows the completion of their judicial sentences.

<https://fr.apanews.net/news/sante-washington-et-niamey-scellent-un-accord-de-1793-millions/>

## Niger Signs \$179.3M Health Agreement With US

The United States and Niger have signed a bilateral health cooperation memorandum of understanding valued at \$179.3 million over five years under the US

"America First" global health strategy.

The five-year partnership between Washington and Niamey, worth \$179.3 million, aims to strengthen efforts to combat malaria, improve maternal and child health, and enhance epidemiological surveillance in Niger.

According to a statement from the US State Department, Washington will provide up to \$107.4 million to support Niger's efforts in fighting malaria, strengthening maternal and child healthcare, and improving disease surveillance and epidemic response.

For its part, the Nigerien government has committed to mobilising an additional \$71.9 million in domestic resources over the course of the agreement, signalling a gradual move towards local ownership of health programmes.

<https://fr.apanews.net/news/sante-washington-et-niamey-scellent-un-accord-de-1793-millions/>

## Chad Signs €15M Budget Support Agreement with AFD

Chad and the French Development Agency (AFD) have signed a €15 million budget support agreement aimed at strengthening macroeconomic stability and supporting two key sectors: the modernisation of transport infrastructure and the cotton industry.

The agreement was signed on February 25 in the presence of the Minister of Finance, Budget, Economy, Planning and International Cooperation, Tahir Hamid Nguilin; the French Ambassador to Chad, Éric Gérard; and the AFD Director in N'Djamena, Philippe Chedanne.

The funding is divided into

two components: €11.6 million for the rehabilitation of the runway at N'Djamena's Hassan Djamous Airport, and €3.4 million for the Cotton Sector Support Fund (FSSC).

<https://tchadinfos.com/2026/02/25/tchad-une-convention-dappui-budgetaire-de-15-millions-deuros-signee-avec-lafd-pour-les-infrastructures-et-le-secteur-cotonnier/>

## Benin Launches UNDP Project to Boost Women's Leadership

Benin has marked a key step in promoting women's leadership with the launch of the Project to Support the Development of Women's Skills for Improved Representation in Decision-Making Bodies (PAVCR-FRID), held on February 24 with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

At the centre of the initiative is the Compendium of Women's Skills, a platform designed to identify, structure and showcase women's expertise to improve their access to decision-making roles in both public and private sectors.

The tool is intended to address the persistent under-representation of women in leadership, despite their demographic weight and contribution to economic and social life.

Speaking at the launch, UNDP Resident Representative in Benin, Titus Osundina, said women's participation in governance is a democratic necessity and a driver of institutional effectiveness.

<https://lanation.bj/actualites/renforcement-de-la-gouvernance-le-benin-mise-sur-lexpertise-des-femmes>



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