

9 - Problems of Independent West African States

Most West African leaders were very optimistic about their countries' future at independence. They hoped to transform their newly independent countries so that their citizens would enjoy the fruits of independence, as colonial rule had brought only few benefits to the majority of the people. And indeed, some started well. They formulated good policies for the social and economic development of their people. School enrolment, for example, increased substantially in the first decade of independence. The road network was expanded and hospitals and clinics were built. However, these impressive developments were soon overshadowed by many problems, some of which have still not been solved. We shall discuss below the major problems that have affected West African countries since the attainment of independence.

Problems of national unity and cohesion: Overview and Case Studies

West African rulers have faced serious challenges in trying to unite their people. These rulers inherited states that had been created by European colonialists which consisted of different ethnic groups, religions and interests. The colonial regimes had created national boundaries which brought peoples together who would otherwise be separated (for example, the Fante and Asante in Ghana) and separated peoples who would otherwise be together. Today, some of the Ewe live in Ghana, some in Togo and some in Benin. The Senufo are found in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. The Soso are in Sierra Leone and Guinea while the Kissi are now located in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia.

Unfortunately, West Africa's leaders have not made greater efforts to unite the different communities in their countries. Thus, members of each group have tended to identify themselves more with their ethnic group rather than with their country and loyalty to the ethnic group is often more important than loyalty to the state. Sometimes political leaders even consciously promote ethnic discord in order to fulfil their selfish desires. Creating a viable nation-state (unity in diversity) from these different communities has been difficult for most West African leaders.

The political parties in most independent West African states have compounded the problem. These parties, especially those formed during the period of the nationalist struggle for independence, were mostly ethnic or regionally based organisations. Nationalist leaders had appealed mainly to their regions or ethnic groups for support. Even after independence, these parties continued to operate like regional rather than national parties. This has led to serious political problems, especially during election periods. The reason is that politics in post-independent countries centres around the distribution of resources, not on ideologies. Whatever party is in power tends to allocate huge resources to their strongholds and appoint people from their regions to strategic positions, to the detriment and annoyance of

people from other regions. It undermines the unity and stability of these states and is sometimes the primary cause of internal conflicts.

Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's two main political parties, the All People's Congress (APC) and Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), for example, have suffered from being labelled regional parties. Although the parties have made efforts to expand their support base, the APC is still perceived as a north-western based party and SLPP as south-eastern. This problem is common in many other West African countries.

Nigeria

In Nigeria, ethnic/regional animosities resulting in part from perceived dominance of one group over the other led to a bitter civil war in 1966. Nigeria's three main ethnic groups, the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba and the Igbo, competed intensely for prominent positions in the post-colonial era. The Hausa/Fulani who lived in the north, were mainly Muslim and because of their large population, dominated Nigerian politics. The Yoruba in the southwest also had a significant Muslim population and were prominent in the economy. The Igbo in the southeast were mostly Christian and because of their superior Western education, occupied strategic positions all over Nigeria. This created resentment among especially the northerners and in January 1966, anti-Igbo sentiments erupted in the north when a group of mostly young Igbo military officers killed the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, and established a military regime with an Igbo, General Aguiyi Ironsi, as Head of State. Bitterness mounted and many Igbo living in the northern towns were massacred. In July, a group of northern officers murdered Ironsi and installed Lieutenant-Colonel Yakubu Gowon (a northerner but Christian) as Head of State. Thereafter, the military governor of the Eastern Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (an Igbo), took steps to withdraw his region from the Nigerian Federation. Secession was formally declared in May 1967, when Ojukwu proclaimed the independence of the new state of Biafra.

Biafra contained almost all the oilfields which provided a substantial amount of Nigeria's wealth. Nigeria's military leaders were resolute to preserve the unity of the country and this led to a very bloody civil war from 1967-70. Ojukwu led the Biafran forces, while Gowon was in charge of the Federal army. After nearly four years of bitter fighting which resulted in many casualties on both sides, the Federal troops prevailed. Ojukwu fled to Côte d'Ivoire but later returned to Nigeria. General Gowon did not punish those who had sided with the rebel republic of Biafra. Strenuous efforts were then made to preserve Nigerian unity and it has been a shaky unity since.

Côte d'Ivoire: the 'west' vs the 'north'

Côte d'Ivoire has also suffered problems of national unity. During the long rule of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny (1960-93), he had encouraged the migration of foreign workers and labourers from the north of Côte d'Ivoire (including workers from Burkina Faso) to support the expansion of cocoa plantations in the west of the country. This policy led to anti-immigrant feelings which were made worse as the global price of cocoa fell and the country entered a recession in the 1990s.

At the same time, Houphouët-Boigny bowed to pressure and opened up the political space. Laurent Gbagbo of the *Front populaire ivoirien*–FPI (Ivoirian Popular Front) became his main rival. Gbagbo drew much of his support from groups in the cocoa producing areas. In the ensuing elections, which were characterised by vote rigging, Houphouët-Boigny won by 82 per cent. Following Houphouët-Boigny's death in 1993, Henri Konan Bédié became President. Bédié capitalised on the anti-immigrant feelings to build solid support. He introduced the idea of *Ivoirité* (Ivorianess) in order to exclude 'foreigners' from the north. He passed a law which prevented his main challenger Alassane Ouattara, who had once served as Prime Minister in Côte d'Ivoire and who was a northerner, from participating in the 1995 elections. Ouattara's exclusion from the political process marked the start of increasing political marginalisation and heightened regional tensions, which led to a military coup by General Robert Guéi in 1999.

Ouattara was again prevented from participating in the October 2000 elections. Guéi and Gbagbo contested and although it was widely thought that Gbagbo had won, Guéi refused to leave office. Massive protests ensued and eventually Guéi fled, bringing Gbagbo into power.

Gbagbo sought to consolidate his position by again marginalising the northerners. In September 2002, several northern army officers tried to overthrow his government. These officers, led by Guillaume Soro and their supporters, formed the *Forces Nouvelles de Côte d'Ivoire* (New Forces) and quickly gained control of the northern half of the country, plunging Côte d'Ivoire into a civil war. The war only came to an end in 2007 when Gbagbo and Soro signed the Ouagadougou Agreement. Soro was appointed Prime Minister.

Ouattara finally took part in the October 2010 elections against Gbagbo and defeated him. However, Gbagbo refused to accept the results and this led to violent clashes between Ouattara's supporters and those of Gbagbo. With the backing of French troops, Côte d'Ivoire's forces overpowered the Gbagbo loyalists. Gbagbo was eventually captured and thereafter, Ouattara became President. The conflict had greatly damaged Côte d'Ivoire's economy. It also led to the death of about 3000 people.

Pervasive influence of the former colonial powers

The European countries that had colonised West Africa namely Britain, France and Portugal, had grudgingly granted independence to their colonies, due to internal and external pressures. In spite of independence, these European countries and other Western nations still desired to influence in one form or the other the politics, economy and culture of their former colonies, and often in alliance with West Africa's rulers. The first Presidents of independent postcolonial nations, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Touré of Guinea

(Conakry), were strongly against this practice. They wanted their countries to completely cut off the yoke of colonialism.

But this was to be achieved at a very high price. When Sekou Touré decided to reduce considerably his country's ties with France, the French practically destroyed Guinea. They damaged public infrastructure and took away to France whatever valuable property they could lay hands on. They also later refused to allow Guinea access to the common currency used across their former colonies, the CFA, which was tied in value to the French franc, as it now is to the Euro. Kwame Nkrumah offered a lot of material assistance to Guinea during that country's first few years of independence.

Nkrumah coined the term neo-colonialism to refer to the indirect political, economic and social control of African nations by their former colonial overlords. Some West African leaders tried to add political meaning to their country's independence and at the same time remove vestiges of colonialism by joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The NAM was formed by countries who did not want to be directly involved or connected with the intense Cold War rivalry between the post-war super powers, the Soviet Union and the United States of America.

In addition, some leaders formulated ideologies akin to socialism, which they believed would help their people. Nkrumah called his new ideology Nkrumaism. His Convention People's Party (CPP) stated that the guiding principles of Nkrumaism were: social justice, Pan-Africanism, self determination, African personality and, anti-imperialism.

In order to implement the Nkrumaism ideology, Nkrumah turned to Eastern countries in the Soviet Bloc for assistance. In this way, he became closely aligned to the Soviet Bloc. The USA did not like Nkrumah's close ties with the Soviet Bloc, because the Americans wanted West African countries and many others in Africa and elsewhere to be under the influence of the USA and its Western allies. It is believed that the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) may have played an important role in the overthrow of Nkrumah in 1966. It is significant that Nkrumah was overthrown by the Ghanaian army on 24 February 1966, when he was on a State visit to North Vietnam and China.

Neo-colonialism and economic underdevelopment

In spite of the abundant natural resources that most West African countries possess, they are still economically poor and under-developed. The living standards of the people are very low and basic social services are deplorable. The reasons for this unsatisfactory state of affairs are many and some of them will be discussed later in this chapter. However, certain people think that the roots of the major socio-economic problems facing West African countries today can be traced back to the colonial period and the influence of neo-colonialism.

During the colonial period, most West African countries concentrated on the production and marketing of one or two export (cash) crops: groundnuts in Senegal and Gambia; cocoa and

palm kernels in Sierra Leone; palm oil and cocoa in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Gold Coast (Ghana); and palm oil and kernels and cotton in Nigeria. West African economies were also structured to be permanently dependent on Western nations. They were consigned the role of primary producers for processing in the West. The terms of trade in the Western-controlled international market discriminated against African nations who were unable to earn enough to develop their economies. The World Trade Organisation (WTO), for example, draws trade rules between nations and these rules are generally more favourable to the developed countries. Obtaining better terms for West African products in the international market has been very difficult.

Also, the prices of agricultural goods have been falling in the international markets since the 1970s. For example, the fluctuating price of cocoa in the 1970s and 1980s nearly ruined the Ghanaian economy, which is heavily dependent on cocoa exports. Côte d'Ivoire, also a major cocoa exporter, experienced similar difficulties. At the same time, the cost of imported goods continued to rise when the price of primary products was falling. The mining sector has also been plagued with difficulties. Almost all the major minerals in West Africa are mined by foreign companies and these companies generally have very favourable concessions. They pay little tax to the government and there is hardly any linkage between the mining sector and other sectors of the economy.

West African countries have also been saddled with the debt burden. In their desire to provide needed services for their people and initiate capital projects, West Africa's leaders resorted to massive borrowing with high interest rates, from abroad. Nkrumah took huge loans from the World Bank, the United States and Britain for the Akosombo hydro-electric project. The costs of construction soared far beyond the estimates. The result was to cripple Ghana, which was just emerging from colonial rule, with a huge foreign debt. By 1992, Ghana's external debts stood at \$30 billion. Practically every West African country has huge external and domestic debts and paying interest on these debts alone sometimes consumes an appreciable percentage of the country's revenue.

Authoritarian regimes

West African rulers have generally abandoned the high ideals they had pronounced on assuming power. All of them, without exception, promised to uphold democratic values and principles and the rule of law. Very quickly, most resorted to autocratic rule and were very intolerant of opposing political views and opinions. They saw dissent or opposition as a threat to stability and an obstacle to development. They undermined the governance structures left behind by the colonialists and some instituted one-party regimes.

Kwame Nkrumah, who had pioneered West African independence, led the way. Like many new African states, Ghana suffered from regional factionalism, and Nkrumah saw some strong economic groups like the wealthy farmers, who were regionally concentrated, as a danger to social unity. In 1964, faced with growing resentment and afraid of internal opposition, Nkrumah pushed a constitutional amendment that made Ghana a one-party

state, and himself the life president. Thereafter, he became increasingly repressive and isolated himself from the common people.

In Francophone West Africa, Houphouët-Boigny of Côte d'Ivoire and Sékou Touré of Guinea installed near single-party regimes even before formal independence. By the mid-1960s almost all the Francophone countries had instituted single-party governments. In Anglophone West Africa, Sierra Leone followed Ghana in 1978. Supporters of one-party rule put forward interesting but unconvincing arguments.

1. Multi-party democracy was foreign to Africa. In precolonial Africa, they argued, people practised a single party form of government.
2. There were limited human resources in the newly-independent countries and it was necessary, therefore, for everyone to come together for rapid socio-economic and political development.

The political argument was not historically correct. There were no political parties in precolonial Africa. African kings and queens governed by consensus and there were several checks against tyrannical rule. These checks were totally absent in West Africa's one-party systems. In practice, one party became one-person rule, for the parliaments simply rubberstamped the actions of the Executive President.

Rather than promote inclusive politics, one party rule in essence fostered the politics of exclusion. It led to the marginalisation of whole groups and regions. One-partyism bred political injustice, disrupted the rule of law and corrupted principal state organs like the judiciary, military, police and the Civil Service. Under the one-party system, real or imagined enemies were eliminated by legal and extra-legal means. The system also rewarded sycophancy and punished honesty, hard work, patriotism and independent thought. One party rule thus contributed immensely to the underdevelopment of postcolonial West Africa.

The military as political rulers

Another major threat to development in West Africa has come from the military. Unlike Guinea-Bissau which fought a long war of independence against Portugal (1963-74), the armies in West Africa did not play any significant role in the liberation struggle. The colonialists had used the soldiers as instruments of suppression. They, together with the Police, often ruthlessly put down popular protests against colonial rule. Post-independence leaders generally viewed the military with some suspicion.

Post-colonial West Africa has had more than its fair share of military coups. The 1960s were called the decade of coups in the sub-region. Once coups started they became like a wild Harmattan bushfire, sweeping through the entire sub-region. The coup syndrome began in Togo in January 1963, when the army deposed and killed President Sylvanus Olympio and in October of that year, the Chief of Staff of the Dahomeyan Army Christophe Sogho overthrew President Hubert Maga in order to prevent a civil war. Then it was Upper Volta's

turn. Following large-scale popular unrest in January 1966, Lieutenant-Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana deposed President Maurice Yaméogo. Nigerian army leader General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi seized power also in January 1966 and killed Prime Minister Tafawa Balewa. He too was overthrown and killed by General Yakubu Gowon in July that same year. In Ghana, Lieutenant-General Emmanuel Kwasi Kotoka and other senior army officers toppled President Nkrumah in February 1966, when he was on a state visit to China. Nkrumah sought refuge in Conakry, Guinea where his friend Sékou Touré made him honorary co-president of Guinea. Two years later in April 1968, lower-ranking military officers overthrew the National Reformation Council (NRC) junta of Sierra Leone and installed a civilian government headed by Siaka Stevens. In Mali, a young officer Lieutenant Moussa Traoré ousted the government of President Modibo Keita in November 1968. Since then, it has been one coup after the other.

Why has the military been so quick in toppling civilian governments? There are various reasons.

1. The failure of civilian governments to properly manage the affairs of state, which often results in severe political, economic and social problems for the people. Political repression including the arbitrary use of power, ethnic conflicts, economic mismanagement and corruption have sometimes been cited by the army for their intervention.
2. The ineffectiveness of the central government in the face of crisis situations, such as bitter party or inter-regional rivalry. The 1966 coup in Upper Volta led by General Lamizana is a typical example.
3. The refusal of governments to allow peaceful political change through the ballot box or through other constitutional channels.
4. When the army as an institution feels threatened by the actions of the central government. This perceived or real threat partly explains the motive for the 1997 military coup in Sierra Leone. Top army officers resented the right-sizing of the army and the high-profile role of the civil militia (especially the *Kamajors*) in the prosecution of the civil war, which began in March 1991.
5. Greed/selfishness on the part of the soldiers.

Results of military coups

1. *Little regard for the National Constitution:* As soon as a civilian government is overthrown, the military junta puts aside the Constitution, proscribes all political activities and rules by decree. This is a very undemocratic behaviour on the part of the military rulers.
2. *Human rights abuses:* Military rulers have little regard for the rights and freedoms of the individual. The arbitrary arrest, detention and killings of politicians and others connected with the ousted regime and massive destruction or looting of property are disturbing features of military rule.
3. *The fallacy of rescuing the state:* In the majority of the coups that have occurred, the military has sometimes deemed it a national and patriotic obligation to rescue the

country from total collapse and restore lost national prestige. But this is not always the case. Most military regimes have turned out to be more corrupt, oppressive and self-seeking than the civilian governments they toppled.

4. *Broken promises:* Military regimes have tended to quickly forget their initial proclamations. These include cleaning up the mess the politicians left behind, improving the economic and social conditions of the people, and returning to the barracks within the shortest possible time. In the majority of cases, military leaders have converted themselves into civilian dictators through manipulation of the democratic system and flawed elections; a good example is the rise to power of Yahya Jammeh in The Gambia as an elected president, following the initial coup in 1994.

Two notable military junta leaders who attempted to save their countries from total collapse were Flight Lieutenant Jerry J Rawlings of Ghana and Colonel Thomas Sankara of Upper Volta. Rawlings staged a successful coup on 31 December 1981. His first coup attempt in 1979 had failed. The 1981 coup was staged in the wake of severe social and economic conditions in Ghana. Ruling by decree, Rawlings streamlined the economy and revived critical sectors like the transport system and the factories, which had become idle for many years. He achieved substantial economic gains, but at a considerable social price, in high unemployment, reduced medical and social services and cuts in educational expenditure, in line with the International Monetary Fund's prescriptions. These austerity measures hit especially the urban populace very hard. Students and workers protested, but Rawlings was resolute to push through his reform policies. Rawlings subsequently removed his military uniform and became a civilian politician. He formed the National Democratic Congress (NDC) in 1992, legalised political parties and organised presidential and parliamentary elections, which he won. President Rawlings retired in 2001 after serving two consecutive terms as provided for in the Ghanaian Constitution.

Thomas Sankara seized power in 1983 in a popularly-supported coup. He desired to eradicate corruption and French dominance in Upper Volta. He renamed the country Burkina Faso ("Land of Upright Men") and embarked on aggressive economic and social policies designed to make Burkina Faso self-reliant. A small but powerful class in Burkina Faso in league with outsiders, plotted Sankara's downfall. He was assassinated in a coup led by one of his close friends, Blaise Compaoré in 1987. Compaoré, who was very friendly with the French, reversed many of Sankara's policies and reforms.



Thomas Sankara (1949 - 1987) in 1987. Courtesy of Bruno Jaffré.

In general, military rule in West Africa has been disappointing. Apart from their inability to solve the political, social and economic problems the soldier-rulers set out to tackle in the first place, the behaviour of the military once in power, has not been very different from the civilian politicians they overthrew. Soldiers have been known to be more of wealth-seekers, property grabbers and bribe-takers. They have openly engaged themselves in self-enrichment activities through the barrel of the gun and through intimidation. General Sani Abacha of Nigeria was known to have embezzled millions of dollars of his country's money.

Problems of unemployment, under-employment and civil wars

All West African countries, without exception, have had serious employment problems and the youth have been the greatest victims. Between 60 and 75 per cent of the population of most West African countries consists of young people. The youth are able-bodied but unskilled, jobless and alienated. They pose grave security and political challenges because they are ready and willing to take up arms in exchange for cash, recognition, looted property and "wives". They live in appalling slum conditions in the vastly expanding cities of the sub-region and constitute potential material for mob action in times of political and economic crises.

West Africa's youths are also highly mobile and cross-border recruitment of young people for armed conflict is all too common. In the civil wars that have plagued West Africa since the last quarter of the 20th century, the youth have been the main perpetrators of violence and bloodshed. These deadly conflicts have resulted in:

1. the massive destruction of lives and property;
2. the internal displacement of people;

3. a region-wide refugee crisis, poverty and disease;
4. the proliferation of small arms and light weapons;
5. human and drug trafficking and
6. illegal exploitation of natural resources and banditry.

The causes of these wars include poverty, youth unemployment, human rights violations, bad governance and corruption, ethnic marginalisation and small arms proliferation. Two fairly recent internal deadly conflicts that have gravely impacted the overall development of their countries are the civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The wars in Liberia

Liberia plunged into its first nasty civil war in 1989 with the invasion of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The war had its origins in 1980 when Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe's ethnically-inspired bloody coup overthrew President William Tolbert's True Whig party government. The True Whig party, comprising predominantly of Americo-Liberians, had governed Liberia since independence in 1847, to the near exclusion of the other groups. The coup leader-turned-president Doe became increasingly authoritarian and corrupt. He quickly lost the support he had initially gained. Taylor, whose father was an Americo-Liberian, had held a very lucrative position in the Doe administration but was sacked in May 1983 for embezzlement. He later escaped from a prison in the USA, went to Libya and with support from Libya, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, launched a rebellion against Doe in December 1989.

Although Doe was eliminated by the leader of another rebel group, the civil war dragged on. With the active intervention of the West African peacekeeping force ECOMOG, which had been put together in the wake of the Liberian civil war, the violence abated, leading to a ceasefire and elections. Taylor won the 1997 elections and became President, but this seeming peace was short-lived as longstanding and simmering ethnic tensions, corruption, subjugation and abject poverty of the people thrust the country back into a second civil war in 1999. During the five-year war, the country was besieged by violent confrontations between Taylor's NPFL, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL).

The signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003 led to the attainment of appreciable peace and stability in Liberia. International pressure forced Charles Taylor to resign as President on 11 August 2003, as he was perceived to be the main perpetrator of the violence in his country. Taylor went on exile to Nigeria but was later apprehended and tried by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for his role in the Sierra Leone rebel war. The trial took place in The Hague (Netherlands). Taylor was found guilty and is currently serving a 50-year jail term in Britain.

Rebel war in Sierra Leone

Less than two years after the outbreak of the Liberian civil war, violent conflict erupted in neighbouring Sierra Leone in March 1991, and was led by a cashiered officer, Foday Sankoh, who desired to overthrow the APC civilian government led by Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh. Sankoh's rebellious group was called Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Sankoh received considerable military and logistics support from Charles Taylor, Libya and Burkina Faso. During the decade-long war, his fighters intermittently took control of the diamond mining regions. They sold the diamonds through Charles Taylor to buy more weapons (blood diamonds) to continue their war of annihilation. ECOMOG troops assisted the Sierra Leone army to put down the rebellion.

The Sierra Leone Army seized power on 29 April 1992 in protest against appalling conditions in the battlefield. They then set up a National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) with 26-year old Captain Valentine Strasser as Chairman. Under pressure from the international community and Sierra Leonean groups, the NPRC conducted presidential and parliamentary elections in 1996 and peacefully handed over office to a newly-elected government headed by a retired United Nations official Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the SLPP.

Despite the elections, the war dragged on. Lacking little national support but dangerously armed, the RUF resorted to committing gross human rights violations against defenceless Sierra Leoneans. After several peace agreements interspersed by another military coup from May 1997 to April 1998, the war was officially declared over in February 2002. Meanwhile, rebel leader Foday Sankoh and two of his key commanders, and civil militia and junta leaders had been apprehended and faced charges in the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Sankoh and a civil militia leader Hinga Norman, died in detention, while the other accused men were found guilty and given long prison sentences to be served in Rwanda.

The rebel conflict, arising from corruption, bad governance, social injustice, and breakdown of democratic institutions, resulted in the killing and maiming of about 50,000 people, and the wanton destruction of infrastructure and other important social services.

Other insurgencies

There have also been revolts affecting Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea Bissau and Senegal. The prolonged Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups, particularly the Ogoni and Ijaw. The Niger Delta groups seemed to benefit very little from the oil economy, while their land was being polluted and their economic activities seriously disrupted by the operations of the oil companies. The conflict has led to several kidnappings of expatriates, casualties and the increased use of sophisticated weaponry by militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), thereby heightening insecurity within Nigeria and across the sub-region.

The Boko Haram insurgency which began in northern Nigeria in 2002 and which hinges upon religion and economic deprivation, has claimed many lives, displaced thousands of people

and posed security concerns in the sub-region. Ending wars and conflicts in West Africa has been very difficult, due to their complex multiple causes, multiple actors and the nature of the conflicts.

Unequal development within states and boundary disputes

One negative outcome of the artificiality and arbitrariness of the colonial divisions was that the states that were created were of different sizes with unequal natural resources and economic potentialities. Mali and Nigeria emerged as very large countries, in comparison to Gambia, Sierra Leone, Togo and Benin. Some, like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, are landlocked and relatively poor and so economic and social progress is slow and difficult in these countries. The artificial boundaries have occasionally led to border disputes, for example, between Ghana and Togo, between Sierra Leone and Guinea (the Yenga dispute) and between Nigeria and Cameroon (in the Bakassi Peninsular) which have worsened the relations between the conflict countries.

Population explosion, diseases and drought

Uncontrolled population growth has proved to be one of the most important barriers to economic development in post-independent West Africa. It has contributed to massive migration to the urban areas. Cities like Lagos, Accra, Abidjan, Freetown, Dakar and many others have grown enormously since independence. These cities spread without planning and developed vast slums. They also lacked expanding industrial sectors able to utilise the rural migrants. Consequently, these migrants formed the urban underclass.

Another serious impediment to development in West Africa is disease. Tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever prevail and they have seriously impacted the productive capacity of especially rural and poor people. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic was added to an already gloomy picture.

There is also the problem of drought in the Sahel countries, which began in the late 1960s. Drought has been caused mainly by the expansion of the Sahara Desert and human activities. Long periods of drought badly hit Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger and northern Nigeria. With little or no rain sometimes for years, crops and animals perished. Drought led to famine. Many people died of malnutrition, lack of resistance to diseases and hunger. Coping with the drought situation diverted considerable portions of the already meagre resources of the drought-stricken West African countries to drought relief.

Corruption and mismanagement

Large-scale corruption and mismanagement of public funds have also been key barriers to progress and security in the West African sub-region. Corruption has thrived best in

countries where critical institutions like Parliament, the judiciary and civil society are weak, and where political patronage is standard practice. People engage in corrupt practices because of low salaries, poverty and greed. There are many types or manifestations of corruption.

Grand or political corruption

It involves higher level officials and larger sums of money. This may include kickbacks to win big public procurements or contracts, embezzlement of public funds, and companies paying thousands of dollars to government leaders or politicians to obtain business contracts. The main players of grand corruption are normally state ministers, governors, members of parliament, and even presidents.

State capture

State capture refers to a situation whereby some powerful individuals (called god fathers) support a political party so that they can influence the policies and decisions of that party (such as ministerial or ambassadorial appointments, or the award of big contracts) when it is in power.

Administrative or petty corruption

Administrative or petty corruption describes everyday low-level abuse of power that citizens and businesspeople experience within the state bureaucracy, such as demand for small bribes or gifts before certain services, which are supposed to be free, are rendered.

Effects of corruption

Corruption, whether grand or petty, is unethical and unacceptable as it affects the smooth running of society.

1. It undermines social values because people find it easier and more lucrative to engage in corruption than to seek legitimate employment.
2. It limits economic growth because corruption reduces the amount of public resources and impedes the efficient use of government revenue and development assistance funds.
3. It discourages private investment.
4. Corruption increases the costs of doing business and wastes resources. It also results in poor service delivery.

5. Corruption deepens poverty and makes it difficult for ordinary people to get ahead as the result of their own efforts. Corruption affects the poor badly, who not only suffer from the lack of services and efficient government, but who are also powerless to resist the demands of corrupt officials.
6. It perverts the cause of justice. Corruption in the police and the judiciary compromises the rule of law.
7. Corruption endangers the security of the state as corrupt border guards allow weapons and other dangerous goods to pass freely.

In the 1970s and 1980s especially, West African countries were forced to take huge loans from lending institutions like the IMF, in the face of severe economic and social conditions in their countries. The IMF was convinced at the time that economic and social progress in West Africa was slow because its leaders maintained a huge and unproductive workforce, wasted money on uneconomic projects and poorly managed their economies. A necessary condition for receiving IMF loans was for each recipient country to take concrete steps to right-size its work force, prudently manage the economy and drastically cut down on social expenditure. These reforms were called Structural Adjustment. One negative effect of reducing social expenditure was that the provision of social services like schools and hospitals declined massively, thereby negatively impacting the living standards of the people.

Conclusion

Post-colonial West African countries have made considerable progress since independence. They have improved social services and expanded the infrastructure considerably. However, most countries in the sub-region have not made as much progress as was expected at independence. There are still huge problems and until West Africa's leaders in concert with their citizens take strong measures to solve these problems, West Africa will find it difficult to catch up with the rest of the world.

Joe Alie