

Polarisation and Democracy in West Africa



Authors

Prof E. Gyimah-Boadi
Dr Kamal Yakubu

August 2025

© 2025 Media Foundation for West Africa, Media
for Peace and Social Cohesion Programme

FA678, Aar-Bakor Street, Ogbojo, Accra, Ghana

Telephone: +233 302 555327

Website: www.mfwa.org

Email: info@mfwa.org

Publisher

Media Foundation for West Africa

Authors

Prof E. Gyimah-Boadi

Dr Kamal Yakubu

Editor

Dr Kojo Impraim

Download an electronic copy of *Polarisation and Democracy in West Africa* from <https://www.w.mfwa.org/publications/reports>

Disclaimer

All rights reserved. Requests for review copies and other enquiries concerning this publication are to be sent to the Media Foundation for West Africa. The responsibility for facts, opinions and cross-references to external sources in this publication rests exclusively with the contributors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Media Foundation for West Africa.

Foreword

The phenomenon of affective polarisation has resulted in political attitudes and behaviours that progressively override social and cultural ties, and other factors that ordinarily enhance social cohesion, peace and development. The growing incidence and implications of affective polarisation make persons in opposing political camps literally hate each other and unwilling to build consensus on policy-making. Increasingly, political actors prioritise partisan and group loyalties over national interest. Affective polarisation adversely affects stability and functionality of democratic governance. In West Africa, it is one of the major underlying causes of policy paralysis.

The West Africa sub-region was once touted as a beacon of democratic progress, most-well-organised regional grouping, and relative stable on the Africa continent. However, in the last five years, the region has been characterised by democratic backsliding, growing incidence of terrorism and extremism, insurgence of military coups d'état, increasing number of inter-ethnic conflicts and occasional elections-related violence. Associated with the democratic recession are also shrinking civic spaces, repressive media environments, information pollution, and limited prospects for meaningful and solution-oriented dialogues. The region is also faced with state threats underpinned largely by foreign information manipulation interferences (FIMI) and bad actors. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is also facing credibility gaps, coupled with the withdrawal of the membership of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from the bloc in January, 2025, after the three countries had formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This has complicated ECOWAS' internal cohesion and weakened its objective of regional unity, integration, peace and political stability.

It is in this context that the *Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)* has initiated a quarterly webinar series on "Polarisation and Democracy in West Africa". The flagship initiative which falls under one of its programme, *Media for Peace and Social Cohesion (MfPSC)*, critically examine the evolution of affective polarisation in West Africa; profile and amplify polarisation as an underlying cause of many of the critical challenges confronting the region; engage, mobilise and build a community of depolarisation actors; and collectively work

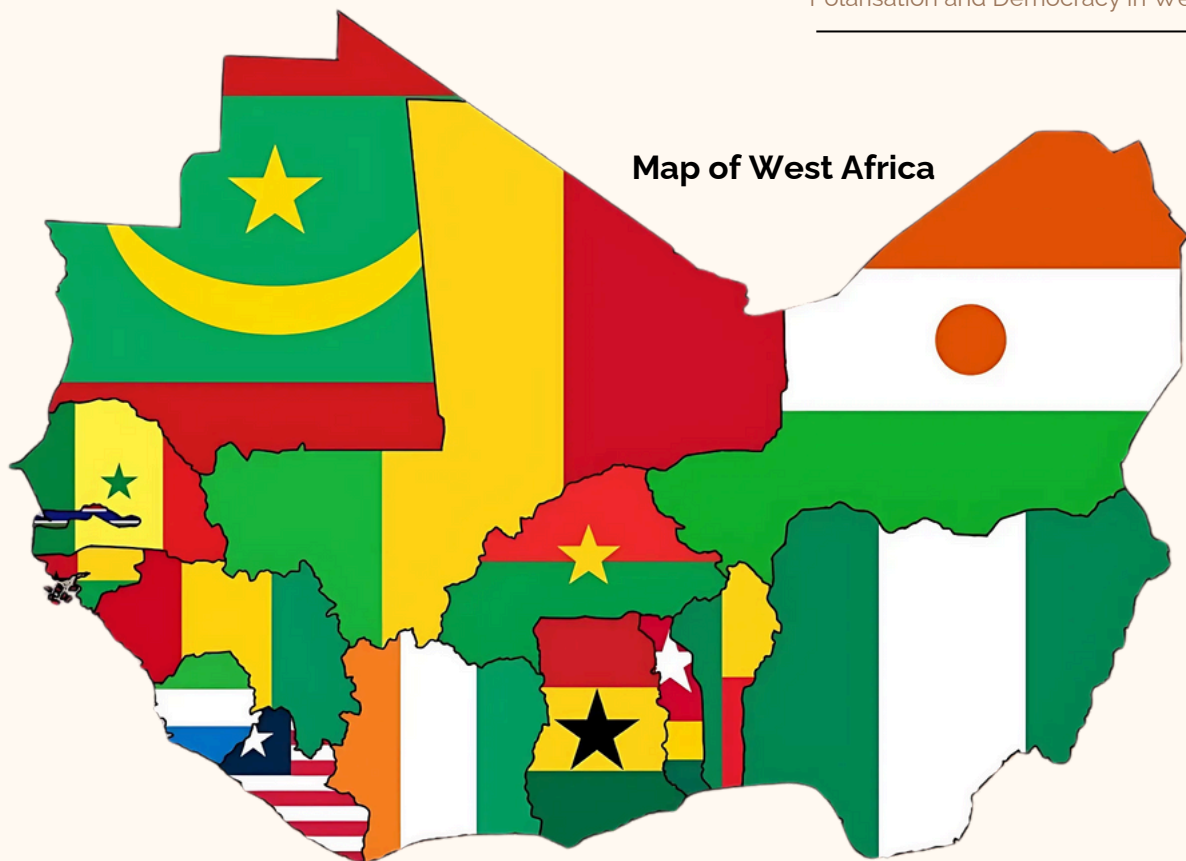
towards depolarisation as part of the solutions spectrum towards consensus building, democratic consolidation, peace and development in West Africa. The webinar is anchored on evidence-led and contextually-responsive research, discussion papers, guest presentations, and policy briefs on the insidious threat that polarisation poses to social cohesion, peace and democracy.

The research reports for the webinar are published to contribute to strengthening democratic norms, and policy actions on depolarisation in West Africa. This seminal research and presentation on polarisation and democracy in West Africa was authored by Professor E. Gyimah-Boadi and Dr. Kamal Yakubu and edited by Dr. Kojo Impraim. Future research and presentations will examine a number of issues including state threat, mis/disinformation and polarisation – effects and consequences; ECOWAS in a changing geopolitical context; democracy, institutions and governance; media, peace and security; among others.

As Member States of ECOWAS continue to strive at achieving an enhanced culture of tolerance, inclusiveness and social cohesion, depolarisation is fundamental to peace and democratic consolidation in West Africa. This analytic paper serves as wake-up call and a road map for action. It is my hope that insights and recommendations provided herein will guide policy discussions, inform strategic interventions and contribute to achieving a cohesive, resilient society and democratic governance.

I commend the research team, editor and creative designers for their diligence in producing this seminal work. I encourage stakeholders to engage the findings; with the urgency it deserves.

Sulemana Braimah
Executive Director
Media Foundation for West Africa



Polarisation and Democracy in West Africa

Introduction

Distinguished colleagues, esteemed guests, dear friends, ladies and gentlemen. It is a privilege to be before you today to reflect on an issue that is not only central to the state of our politics in West Africa; but, also critical to the survival of democracy in the region itself, polarisation.

We begin from a premise that may seem obvious; yet, is often overlooked: polarisation is not an anomaly in human society. It has been with us since the dawn of organised life. Wherever human beings have formed communities, divisions of some kind have existed; divisions of opinion, interest, identity, and allegiance. They are as much a part of our social DNA, as cooperation and solidarity.

But while polarisation may be natural, it is not benign. When opinions, beliefs, or political attitudes in a society move toward extremes and create deep divisions between opposing groups, it can be corrosive. It can erode trust, fray the bonds of belonging, and create conditions in which collective action becomes almost impossible. And when it metastasises into political or social hostility, it can break nations apart. It is in this sense that we call it an abhorrent tradition.

If we accept this, then our task as citizens, policymakers, and leaders becomes clear: we must prevent, reduce, and, where possible, eradicate the most destructive forms of polarisation. We should, in fact, judge the quality of a governance system by its ability to do exactly that.



Polarisation as a pre-existing condition in West African nations and societies:

Too often, discussions about West Africa's divisions start with colonialism, as though our societies were once models of unity. This is a comforting but misleading perspective. The truth is that West African societies have always been diverse, often remarkably so. In Nigeria alone, there are more than 350 ethnic groups; in Ghana, 72. Across Sierra Leone, Liberia, Senegal, and other nations, the pattern is similar. West African nation is a mosaic of diverse peoples, languages, faiths, and traditions.

Religious diversity is just as striking. Predominantly Christian Ghana and Nigeria are home to large Muslim communities, while in places like Benin, a substantial proportion of the population adheres to traditional religion.

And beyond ethnicity and religion, there are the divides of geography and economy; between rural and urban communities, between resource-rich and resource-poor regions, and between the proletariat (the have-nots) and the bourgeoisie (the haves).¹ These differences have long shaped the opportunities people can access, the political power they can wield, and the sense of belonging they can claim. For women, youth, ethnic and religious minorities, and many peripheral regions, the experience has too often been one of exclusion and marginalisation.

Long before colonialism, the land itself shaped our diversity. Geography divided us; the coastal belt from the inland, the forest zones from the savannah, and the highlands from the lowlands. These ecological boundaries influenced where people settled, how they lived, and what they valued. Limited transportation and communication technologies in those eras meant that even communities separated by a short distance might live as strangers, with distinct languages, customs, and political systems.²

Then came the colonial powers, and with them, a reshaping — and in many cases a deepening — of these divisions. Boundaries were drawn with more concern for administrative convenience than for cultural coherence. Ethnic groups were divided between countries, while unrelated communities were grouped into a single state. Colonial rule was experienced unevenly — some regions saw intensive missionary activity and educational investment, while others were left as hinterlands, with little infrastructure or opportunities. Direct and indirect rule reconfigured traditional authority, creating rivalries between royals and commoners, rulers and subjects, and between age groups.³

The colonial economy produced its own forms of division within African territories. Mining towns, plantation zones, and port cities received concentrated investment and infrastructure, becoming highly productive

1 Ake, C. (1978). *Revolutionary pressures in Africa*. London: Zed Press

2 Mazrui, A. (1980). *The African condition: a political diagnosis*. London: Heinemann.

3 Mamdani, M. (1996). *Indirect Rule, Civil Society, and Ethnicity: The African Dilemma*. *Social Justice*, 23(1/2 (63-64)), 145–150. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766931>

enclaves tied directly to the demands of European and Arab markets. Surrounding rural hinterlands, by contrast, were left underdeveloped and served primarily as labour reserves. Their economic role reduced to supplying cheap and migratory workers to the enclaves. This spatial arrangement entrenched stark regional inequalities, reinforcing the notion that some areas were “destined” to be producers of raw materials. In contrast, others functioned as “beneficiaries” of whatever limited development the colonial powers deemed profitable. The resulting patterns of uneven development did not end with independence; they laid the foundations for persistent economic imbalances, social stratification, and polarisation, as well as dependency in the postcolonial state.⁴



Post-colonial disappointments

Polarisation in many African states today cannot be understood without tracing its roots to the post-independence political order and the economic trajectories that followed. Independence brought euphoria and a surge of optimism about self-determination. Still, it also ushered in profound and persistent challenges. Many of the governance models adopted in the early decades after colonial rule replicated or even deepened pre-existing cleavages, substituting one form

⁴ Rodney, W. (1972). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications.

of elite dominance for another.⁵ Authoritarian rulers often anchored their legitimacy in narrow ethnic, regional, or patronage networks, monopolising political and economic power, and entrenching exclusionary systems. Centralised political structures concentrated decision-making in national capitals, denying grassroots communities meaningful participation and marginalising minorities from influence over public affairs. Deep-seated cultural hierarchies, gerontocracy, male dominance, and deference to elite authority, went largely unchallenged; keeping youth, women, and other underrepresented groups on the periphery of political and economic life.

From the late 1970s through the 1990s, successive economic downturns, mounting debt burdens, and the structural adjustment programmes of the Bretton Woods institutions further constrained state capacity to deliver services and distribute resources equitably. In many West African nations, the austerity measures entailed in the structural adjustment programmes of the Bretton Woods institutions dismantled social safety-nets, widened inequality, and eroded trust in public institutions.

Indeed, rapid urbanisation, the rise of digital technologies, and shifting global power dynamics have significantly altered the political landscape in West African nations in recent years. Yet, the centralisation of power, elite capture of resources, and zero-sum competition for state control continue to shape political life.

These structural conditions have not only entrenched inequality; but, also intensified polarisation. Exclusionary governance and economic marginalisation reinforce identity-based divisions, deepening mistrust between groups and eroding any shared sense of national purpose. The result is a political arena where citizens increasingly view rivals not as legitimate opponents; but, as existential threats, and where disputes over policy or resources quickly take on ethnic, regional, or generational overtones.⁶

5 Young, C. (2012). *The postcolonial state in Africa: Fifty years of independence, 1960-2010*.

6 Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



The Wave of Democratisation

The wave of democratisation that swept across West Africa in the 1990s was greeted with optimism. It was widely viewed as an opportunity to replace decades of authoritarianism and military rule with more participatory and accountable governance. New constitutions promised equality before the law, outlawed discrimination, and enshrined broad civil and political rights. Electoral systems were consciously designed to promote inclusion and manage diversity: Nigeria's informal arrangement known as the “zoning” or “rotation” principle, which is internal to political parties—especially the dominant People's Democratic Party (PDP), and to some extent, the All Progressives Congress (APC) to rotate the presidency among regions and ensure minimum support across states was intended to prevent domination by any single ethnic bloc; and Ghana's ban on ethnic- or religious-based parties sought to avert the politicisation of identity incorporated extensive constitutional safeguards for minorities and proportional representation to avoid the marginalisation of smaller groups.

West Africa's new era of democratisation empowered Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). It strategically connected them to formal mechanisms of governance, which helped to transform governance from a technical, and institutional exercise into a lived practice of inclusion. Where such actors are

⁵ Young, C. (2012). *The postcolonial state in Africa: Fifty years of independence, 1960–2010*.

⁶ Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

active and supported, they have helped reduce polarisation by ensuring citizens experience fairness in governance; creating space for shared civic identities beyond identity-based divisions.

It has also enabled the emergence of youth-led movements, feminist coalitions, and grassroots civic organisations to challenge entrenched systems of exclusion and oppression; harnessing social media and transnational networks to demand inclusion, transparency, and justice⁷. They include #EndSARS in Nigeria, the youth-led *Occupy Julorbi* protests against the Akufo-Addo government's corruption, the #FreeSenegal protests against corruption and constitutional manipulation in 2021 after the arrest of Ousmane Sonko,⁸ and the Burkinabè uprising (*Le Balai Citoyen*) that ousted Blaise Compaoré⁹, to Guinea's mass mobilisations against Alpha Condé's third-term bid in 2019-2020¹⁰, and the M5-RFP coalition in Mali.¹¹

Polarisation in West Africa: the democracy disadvantage

Unfortunately, democratic politics in West African nations have not always lived up to their promise of delivering adequate social cohesion and political or economic inclusion. Even more concerning, in some cases, it has contributed to increased polarisation.

Indeed, multi-party elections have exacerbated social tensions and increased fragility in some West African nations. For example, a deadly civil conflict was sparked in the Ivory Coast when Konan Bedie and his cronies invented the idea of "Ivoirite" and the so-called Article 35 to bar opponents from contesting the polls. Severe instability did follow the multi-party transition polls in Sierra Leone, Togo, and arguably Nigeria.

Polarisation has deepened in some West African countries; notably, Togo, due to the phenomenon of perpetual incumbency, lack of power alternation,

7 Branch, A. & Mampilly, Z. (2015) *Africa uprising: popular protest and political change*. Cape Town: BestRed. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11910/9771>

8 [Senegal opposition MP released on bail as protests rock country](#) | [Senegal](#) | The Guardian

9 [Civil Society, Coups, and the Future of Burkina Faso - The SAIS Review of International Affairs](#)

10 [Guinea protests turn bloody in fight to stop president's third term](#) | [Governance](#) | The Guardian

11 [Five Things to Know About Mali's Coup](#) | [United States Institute of Peace](#)

entrenched ruling party dominance, gross abuse of power, and the manipulation of constitutions to extend presidential tenure.

Some national reconciliation projects and transitional justice programmes, inspired by the South African Truth Commission and other post-regime accountability measures, have been perceived as a form of political vendetta and witch-hunting of opponents, and have helped to deepen rather than address the problems of exclusion.

Thanks in part to relative inexperience with liberal democratic practices, consensus over the basic rules of democratic competition tends to be weak; “winner takes all” approaches and crude application of the principles of democratic rule tend to characterise politics in West African democracies.

In general, there has been a tendency for political parties to form along ethnic and other sectarian lines, for candidates to mobilise voters along these lines, and for voting to follow pronounced ethnic patterns in some countries.

Reflecting their inability to articulate convincing policies and programmes, and the “issueless” nature of election campaigns, there has been a tendency for parties and candidates vying for power in multiparty elections to emphasise personalities (which amplifies home region/town attributes).

Opposition parties tend to assume a high-strung posture against the government, and relations between the ruling and opposition parties are characterised by mutual loathing (partly reflecting residual bitterness over past political repression).

In addition to weak administrative capacity, West African election management authorities and judiciaries often lack adequate independence, which undermines their trustworthiness and legitimacy. The actions, inactions, decisions, and indecisions of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and the courts tend to favour the incumbent president and party at the expense of the opposition. Their inability to resolve election disputes speedily and fairly promotes “do or die” attitudes among poll contestants; creating an incentive for parties and candidates to focus on being declared winners by hook or by

crook, and to use their control over state power and incumbency to ward off post-election challenges.

Thanks mainly to inadequate training and weak professionalism, journalists may engage in thoughtless sensationalism and promote ethnic, sectarian, and other partisan agendas, which threaten the integrity of the democratic process in their countries and overall stability within their nations. At the same time, regulatory frameworks remain largely predatory or ineffective.

While civil society mobilisations have bridged divides, they have, at least sometimes, also provoked state repression and backlash politics, further intensifying the cycle of polarisation.





A look at the empirical data: Are West African nations getting more ethnically polarised in the era of multiparty democracy?

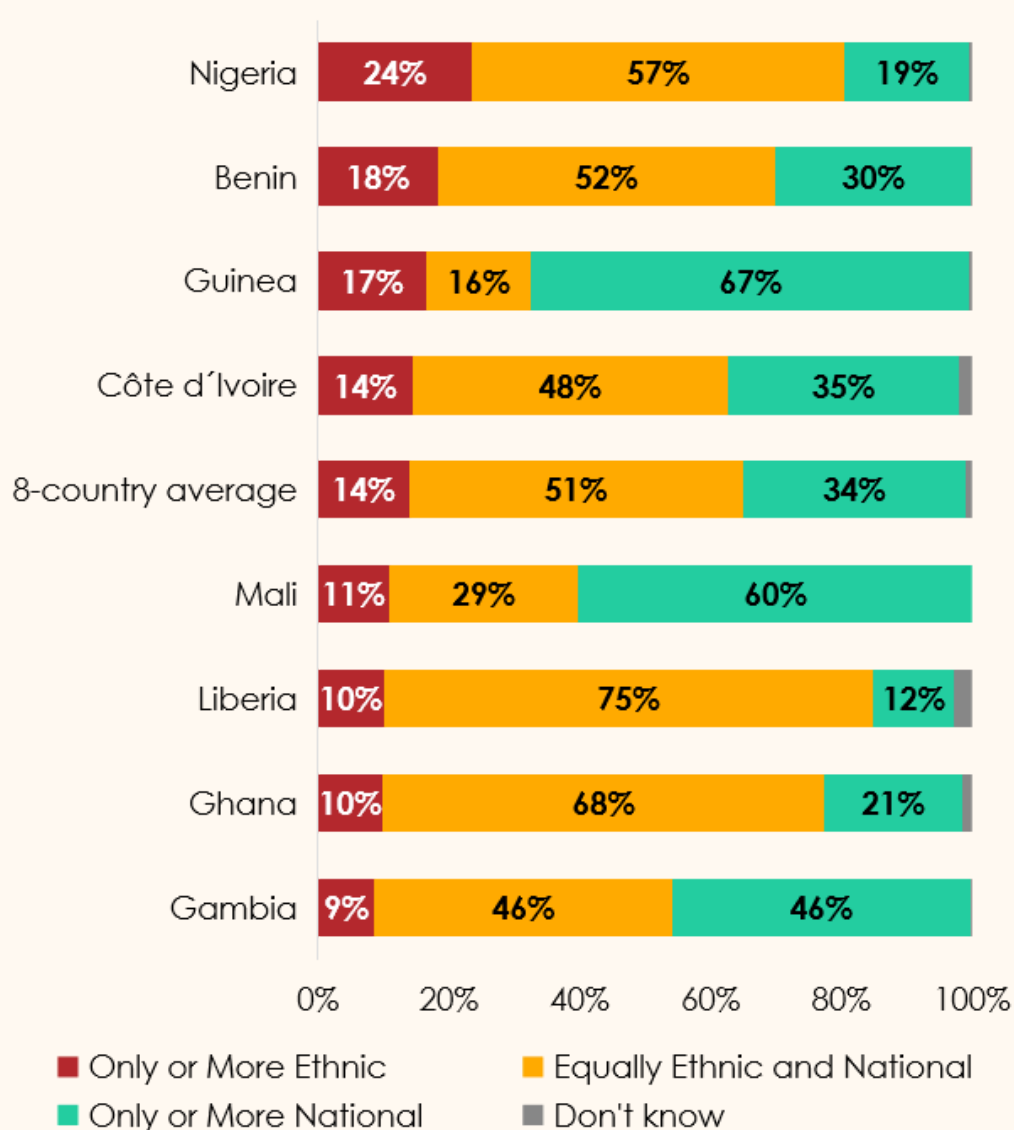
Let us now ask a vital question: what does nationally representative survey data tell us about polarisation?

The answer, as revealed in the latest Round 10 Afrobarometer survey, conducted between 2024 and 2025, offers a nuanced story—one that challenges simplistic assumptions about ethnic polarisation under multiparty democracy.

1. Identity: balancing ethnicity and nationhood

When citizens are asked whether they see themselves primarily in ethnic or national terms, the most common answer across West Africa is strikingly balanced: *half say they identify equally with both*. In Ghana, for example, more than two-thirds of the population identifies itself in this “dual” space (they say they feel equally Ghanaian and Akan, or Ghanaian and Ewe), while in Liberia, the proportion is even higher. Only a small minority in any West African country claims to feel “only” or “more” ethnic than national. This suggests that, even amid diversity and political contestation, a shared sense of nationhood remains resilient.

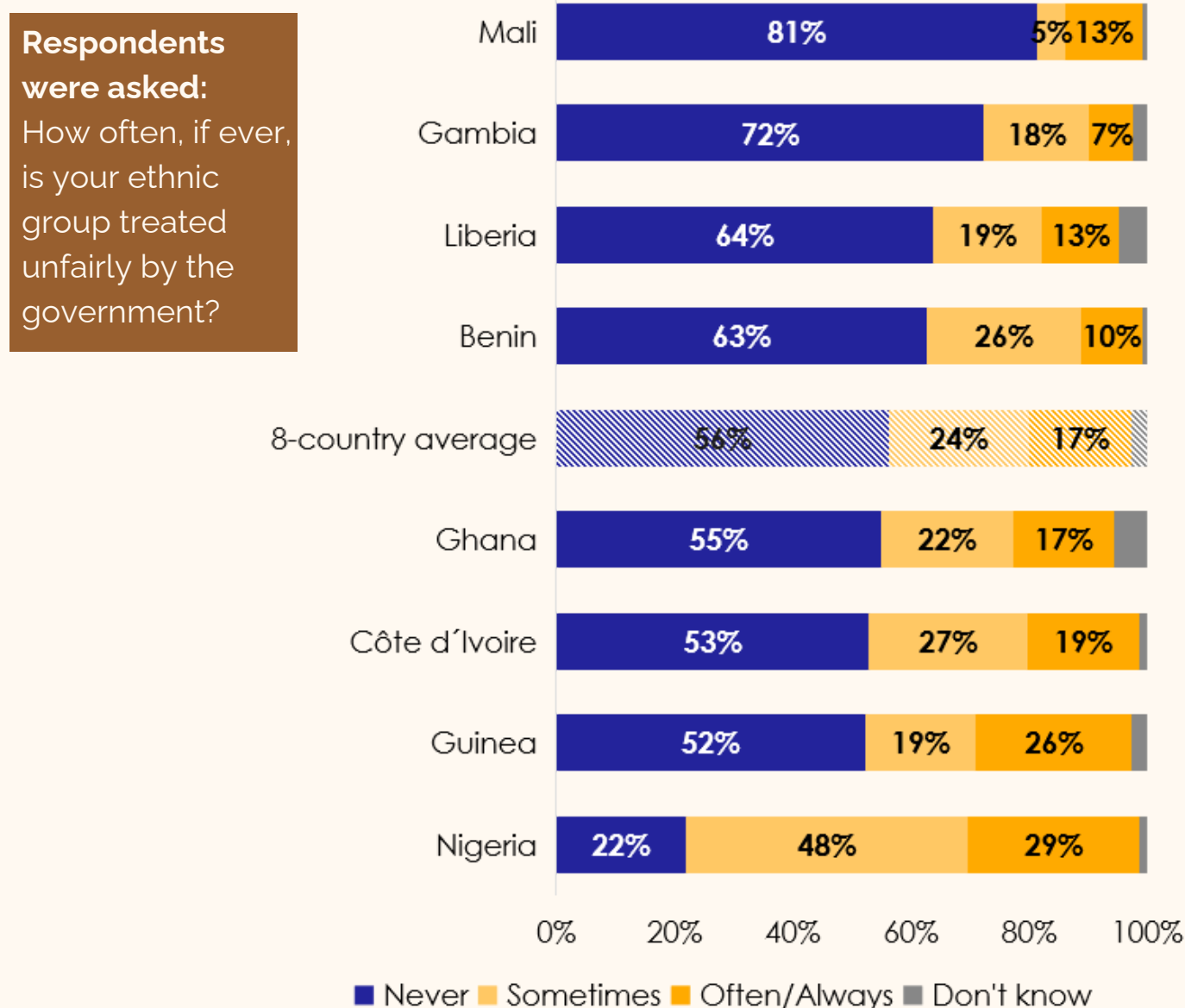
Respondents were asked:
Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a [citizen of the respondent's country] and being a [member of the respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?



Source: Round 10 Afrobarometer Survey, 2024-2025

2. Perceptions of unfair treatment

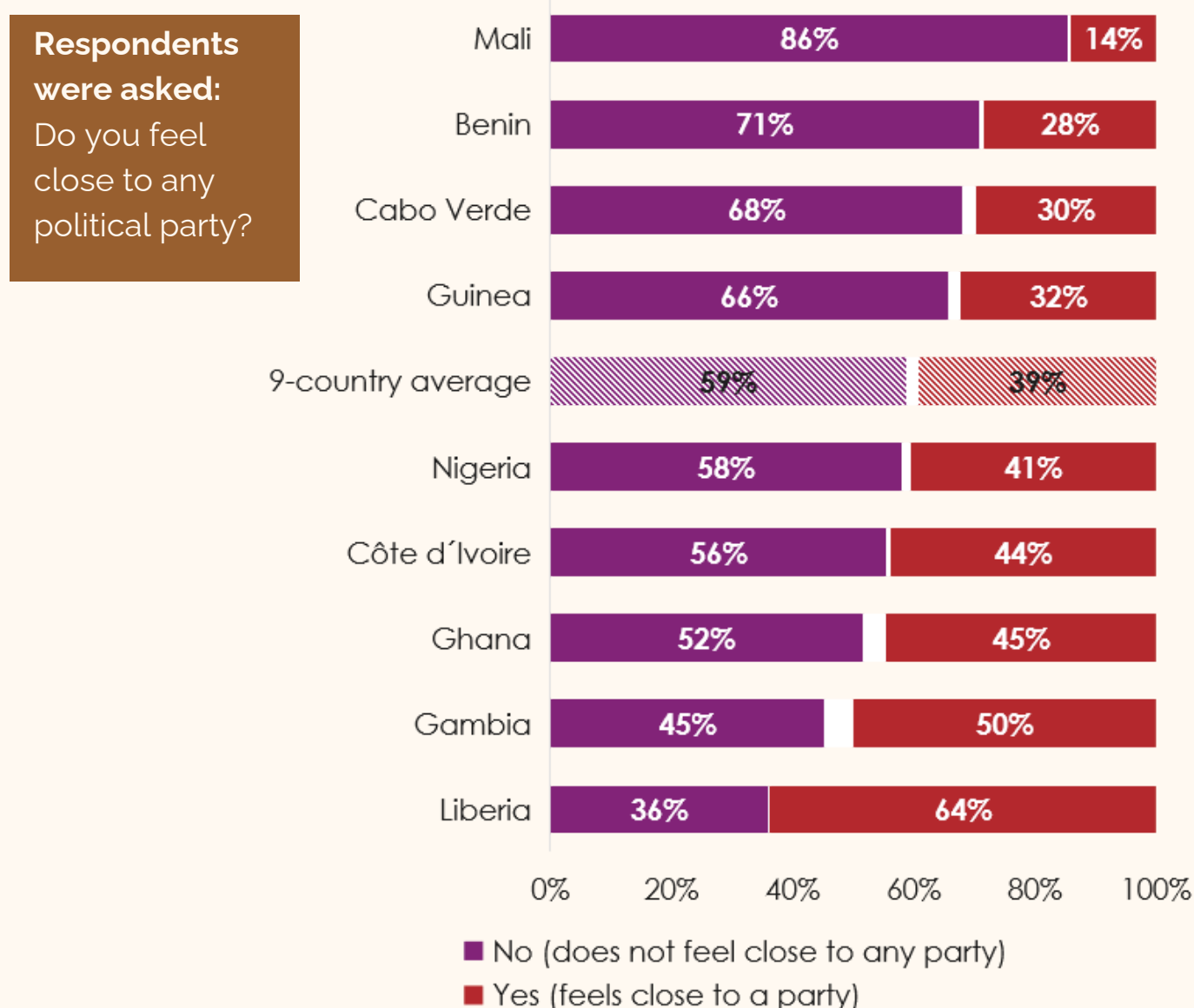
Identity alone does not capture lived experience. When respondents were asked if their ethnic group is ever maltreated by the government; more than four in ten West Africans say this happens at least “sometimes.” In Nigeria, nearly half report such discrimination frequently or occasionally; and in countries like Guinea and Ghana, close to a third share this concern. The pattern is consistent: even where citizens hold strong national identities, perceptions of bias and exclusion remain widespread — a reminder that belonging is not just about symbols; but, also about fairness in practice.



Source: Round 10 Afrobarometer Survey, 2024-2025

3. Political partisanship and identity

Partisanship adds another layer. Across the sub-region, most citizens actually do *not* feel close to any political party. In Mali, more than 80% of the population distances itself from party identification, while in Ghana and Nigeria, majorities also fall outside partisan loyalty. Among those who identify with parties, the overlap with ethnic identity is notable: citizens who see themselves as “more or only ethnic” are only slightly more likely to affiliate with a party than those who lean towards a national identity. This means ethnicity and partisanship intersect, but not in the deterministic way we often assume.



Source: Round 10 Afrobarometer Survey, 2024-2025

4. The broader picture

What emerges from these findings is neither a tale of deepening ethnic fault lines nor a romantic narrative of harmony. Instead, it is a story of tension and complexity: citizens hold onto both ethnic and national identities; yet, remain alert to discrimination. They distrust parties, yet political competition often reactivates old divisions. Multiparty democracy has not eradicated polarisation — but neither has it condemned West Africa to ethnic fragmentation.



Charting a path forward to depolarisation: more democracy

And yet, hope remains. Afrobarometer data have consistently shown that despite frustrations with governance, Africans remain deeply committed to democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives.¹² In the latest Afrobarometer surveys, conducted between 2024 and 2025, two-thirds (66.5%) of respondents across 35 countries indicated that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. A similar percentage (66.7%) of respondents indicated that they strongly disapprove or disapprove of military rule. The implication is that, to align with the wishes of the average citizen, democratic principles and practices must be incorporated into the governance structures of West African nations.

¹² [African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective – Afrobarometer](#)

Fortunately, there is no shortage of innovative, democratic-consistent approaches to governance in West African nations that point the way forward. Some are rooted in local traditions, while others have been adapted from comparative experiences and global best practices.

Strengthening local governance through genuine devolution of political, administrative, and fiscal powers can bring decision-making closer to citizens, diffusing tensions that often arise when distant central governments are perceived as unresponsive or biased. Large and diverse states can explore federal or quasi-federal arrangements — as in Nigeria's federal system — granting meaningful autonomy while safeguarding national unity.

Power-sharing agreements, when carefully designed to avoid gridlock, can ensure that no single group monopolises authority. At the same time, minority protections are embedded not only in the constitutional text; but, also in everyday political practice; enforced through accessible courts, independent human rights bodies, and vigilant civil society monitoring.

Political parties, too, can be re-engineered to build broad, cross-ethnic coalitions by linking public financing or electoral incentives to demonstrated diversity in leadership and voter outreach.

Fair resource distribution, particularly when constitutionally-grounded — both material (infrastructure, services, jobs) and symbolic (recognition, representation) — can affirm every citizen's place in the national project.

Justice systems can emphasise restorative approaches over retributive ones, providing opportunities for reconciliation in post-conflict settings and addressing historical wrongs without perpetuating cycles of revenge.

Nationality and citizenship laws can be reformed to reflect Africa's complex histories of migration, kinship, and interdependence rather than narrow exclusionary criteria that deepen “insider-outsider” divides.

Economic policy, too, must do more than grow GDP. It must ensure that the benefits of growth are widely shared, using targeted social protection, regional investment equity, and fair access to markets to narrow the structural inequalities that fuel polarisation.

Civic education — in schools, community spaces, and through the media — can foster a culture of citizenship rooted in empathy, mutual respect, and a commitment to the common good.



Above all, the African continent can draw on its own democratic traditions — the *Kgotla* of Botswana, where open community assemblies deliberate until consensus is reached; the *palaver tree of West Africa*,¹³ where disputes are resolved through inclusive dialogue; the ideals of the Akan Adinkra *Nkronti-ne-Akwamu* symbol, which captures constitutional checks and balances as a central element of the Akan traditional political system; Liberia's institution of the National Orator, which provides a platform for a designated citizen to speak freely and openly about the nation's triumphs and deficiencies annually; *Fambul Tok* in Sierra Leone, where community reconciliation unfolds around truth-telling bonfire circles,¹⁴ and other indigenous forums that value reconciliation over domination, and importance of speaking truth to power. These are not abstract ideals but living practices that, if revitalised and scaled, can provide culturally resonant pathways out of polarisation and toward a more cohesive, and inclusive future.

13 The Palaver Tree and the Notions of National Tribunal and Republican Confessional: Reclaiming the African Conflict Resolution Ethos in National Dialogues – ACCORD

14 [CON1222_Accord_23_11.pdf](#)

Concluding remarks

Polarisation may be an old companion of human society, woven into our histories of power, identity, and belonging, but it need not dictate our future. West Africa's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity is a source of richness — a mosaic of cultures, histories, and worldviews — not a curse. But diversity becomes a strength only when it is nurtured through inclusive governance and a shared sense of national purpose. Democracy offers the tools to achieve this balance: constitutions that protect rights, electoral systems that reward coalition-building, independent institutions that check abuse, and civic spaces where dialogue can replace confrontation. Yet, these tools work only if we commit to designing and using them with inclusion, fairness, and mutual respect at their core.

The challenge before us is not simply to preserve democracy as a label or a ritual of periodic multiparty elections, but to make it meaningful in the daily lives of our citizens — to ensure that democracy is felt in fair access to opportunity, in equal protection under the law, and in leaders who serve rather than rule. True democracy should be a force that unites rather than divides, that heals the wounds of history rather than deepens them, and that transforms our remarkable diversity into our greatest strength.

If we can do this, West Africa will not only secure its democratic gains; but, also illuminate a path for others — a living example that diversity, when managed with vision and humility, can be the engine of resilience, creativity, and shared prosperity. We can demonstrate to the world that polarisation, rather than being a terminal condition, can be reframed as a starting point for building bridges, forging common ground, and envisioning a shared future.



MEDIA FOUNDATION FOR WEST AFRICA

Aar-Bakor Street, Ogbojo

Telephone: +233 (0) 302 555 327

Twitter: @TheMFWA

Facebook: Media Foundation for West Africa

info@mfwawest.org

www.mfwawest.org



[@themfwa](https://twitter.com/themfwa)



www.mfwawest.org



[themfwa](https://facebook.com/themfwa)