

SA and West Africa: Between Democracy and Despair?

President Nelson Mandela looks set to attend the inauguration of Nigeria's President-elect Olusegun Obasanjo on 29 May. Nigeria's democratisation process has placed the spotlight on West Africa, a region overshadowed since independence by a combination of failing states and the usurping of democratic rule by more than 30 *coups d'état*. It is a region of contrasts, with some states managing today to put decades of military rule and political instability successfully behind them, but others less so.

In the region, the Republic of Benin recently staged its third democratic election since 1991. By contrast, the security situation in Sierra Leone — a country now with the lowest life expectancy world-wide — continues to degenerate, with little hope of peaceful negotiations. An estimated 450,000 refugees have poured out of Sierra Leone into Guinea and Liberia over the course of an eight-year conflict characterised by extreme brutality, rape and mutilation. In Niger, the commander of the country's presidential guard unit, Major **Daouda Mallam Wanke**, has been appointed the country's interim head of state following the assassination of President **Ibrahim Bare Mainassara** on 9 April 1999. Mainassara, Niger's first democratically-elected leader in 1996, was gunned down at Niamey military

airport by Wanke's presidential guard. In Guinea-Bissau, the government of President **Joao Bernardo Vieira** was overthrown in a coup d'état on 7 May 1999, resulting in around 100 deaths.

What are the prospects for region-wide stability, and what is the extent of South Africa's interaction with the region?

Background to Regional Developments

The West African region is characterised by extreme diversity of population and economic size, and systems of government. The table below provides an indication of the relative size and political state of select West African states (the freedom rankings refer to: PR, political rights; CL, civil liberties. The lowest possible score is 7, the highest 1):

Country	Freedom House ranking	Next Elections	Population	GDP per capita US\$ (1995)
Benin	2 (PR); 2 (CL)	2001	6.1m	391
Burkina Faso	5 (PR); 4 (CL)	2005	11.2m	165
Cameroon	7 (PR); 5 (CL)	2004	15m	627
Cote d'Ivoire	0 (PR); 4 (CL)	2000	15.4m	736
Equatorial Guinea	7 (PR); 7 (CL)	2003	450,000	388
The Gambia	7 (PR); 5 (CL)	unspecified	1.3m	32
Ghana	3 (PR); 3 (CL)	2000	18.5m	397
Guinea	6 (PR); 5 (CL)	2003	7.5m	442
Guinea-Bissau	3 (PR); 5 (CL)	1999	1.2m	131
Liberia	4 (PR); 5 (CL)	2003	2.8m	1,124
Mali	3 (PR); 3 (CL)	2002	10.1m	223
Mauritania	6 (PR); 5 (CL)	2003	2.5m	401
Niger	7 (PR); 5 (CL)	2001	10m	207
Nigeria	6 (PR); 4 (CL)	2003	108m	587
Senegal	4 (PR); 4 (CL)	2003	9.7m	572
Sierra Leone	3 (PR); 5 (CL)	2003	5m	293
Togo	6 (PR); 5 (CL)	2003	5m	322

SA Regional Relations

Overall South Africa has diplomatic relationships with 164 countries, plus over 70 international bodies. There are 124 countries represented in Pretoria, as well as a number of international organisations. South Africa currently has diplomatic relations with all of Africa, bar Somalia. In West Africa, it has missions in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Nigeria and Ghana.

South African trade ties with the region have expanded dramatically since 1994 (see table below). South African-linked firms are also drawn to West Africa by mining prospects, especially gold mining, in Mali, Ghana and Sierra Leone. In the latter, according to independent estimates, the Koidu (kimberlite pipes) and Sewa River (alluvial) diamond deposits alone are worth an estimated US\$1 billion. In April, Randgold Resources, the London-based exploration company, announced that it would develop the Morila gold mine alongside its current Syama operation in Mali. Randgold plans to spend between US\$75-111 million developing the Morila project.

Current Regional Trends

Robert Kaplan, writing in his book *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* in 1997, noted that:

It was in Sierra Leone that I first considered the possibility that just as states and their governments were meaning less and less, the distinctions between states and armies, armies and civilians, and armies and criminal gangs were also weakening... As a consequence of the mayhem, 400,000 Sierra Leoneans were internally displaced; 280,000 more

had fled to neighbouring Guinea; and another 100,000 had fled to war-torn Liberia, even as 400,000 Liberians fled to Sierra Leone. The third-largest city in Sierra Leone, Gondama, was a displaced persons camp, whose inhabitants were generally healthier than the population at large. With an additional 600,000 Liberians in Guinea and 250,000 more in Cote d'Ivoire, the border regions of these four countries had become largely meaningless.

In Sierra Leone, the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) began its fight against the government in 1991. As a result of the war in which 20,000 people have died, the side-effects and AIDS, life expectancy in Sierra Leone is now just 35, the world's lowest. The leader of the RUF is **Foday Sankoh**, Libyan-trained and, reportedly, a devout Christian who opposes attacks against unarmed civilians. Yet the 20,000-strong rebel force's tactics are characterised by extreme brutality, including lopping off the ears, noses, hands or arms of victims. Today the war is at something of a stalemate: the rebels control roughly two-thirds of the country, including the rich diamond fields that help to finance their war effort. Sierra Leone's democratically-elected president, **Ahmad Tejan Kabbah**, who is sustained in power by the Nigerian-led ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) peacekeeping force, is reportedly keen to restart negotiations with the rebels, though there is (expectedly) little trust shown on both sides.

Analysts speak of the 'Liberian effect' in West Africa. The RUF is allegedly receiving help from **Charles Taylor**, Liberia's president and former warlord. Taylor's government is itself under threat from raids

Country	SA Exports '96 Rm	SA Imports '96 Rm	SA Exports '97 Rm	SA Imports '97 Rm
Benin	7.1	33.7	16.0	7.2
Burkina Faso	12.7	2.6	6.6	4.3
Cameroon	35.9	33.2	133.0	29.1
Cote d'Ivoire	97.3	130.9	113.5	127.3
Equatorial Guinea	5.8	0.01	0.1	0
The Gambia	5.0	0.7	29.0	0.4
Ghana	259.5	16.7	390.2	16.8
Guinea	8.8	0.5	45.5	0.5
Liberia	28.1	1.1	46.2	42.9
Mali	90.0	49.1	64.9	17.6
Niger	1.4	11.3	9.8	5.2
Nigeria	182.9	38.6	202.6	837.8
Senegal	19.1	2.1	12.5	2.7
Sierra Leone	28.0	1.5	32.8	1.7
Togo	26.5	73.6	25.9	104.6

allegedly launched from neighbouring Guinea by the ULIMO movement of **Alhaji Kromah**. The Guinean government has denied any involvement in the attack saying Guinea would never serve as a rear base for attacking another OAU member country. Another faction known as ULIMO-J is headed by the ethnic Liberian Krahn leader, **Roosevelt Johnson**, now believed to be in exile in Nigeria.

The Liberian government commented in early April that it planned to send troops to 'reinforce' its border with Sierra Leone following 'threats' by the ECOMOG force that it would strike at any route used to deliver weapons to RUF rebels. Independent 'Star Radio' said the announcement was made by the Defence Minister, **Daniel Chea**, following charges in April by ECOMOG commander Major-General **Felix Mujakperuo** that the rebels were receiving arms from Burkina Faso via Liberia. Chea said the allegations were 'unacceptable and irresponsible' and that Mujakperuo should apologise, contending that 'Liberians fighting in Sierra Leone are on their own... they have no support from the Liberian government' and that they should be demobilised and sent home.

RUF soldiers have followed a similar *modus operandi* to Taylor's forces — often drugged-out and little more than child-soldiers. After their retreat from the Sierra Leone capital, Freetown, this January, RUF forces abducted between 2,500 and 5,000 children who will probably be sent into battle. There are also reports of Ukrainian mercenaries fighting with the RUF.

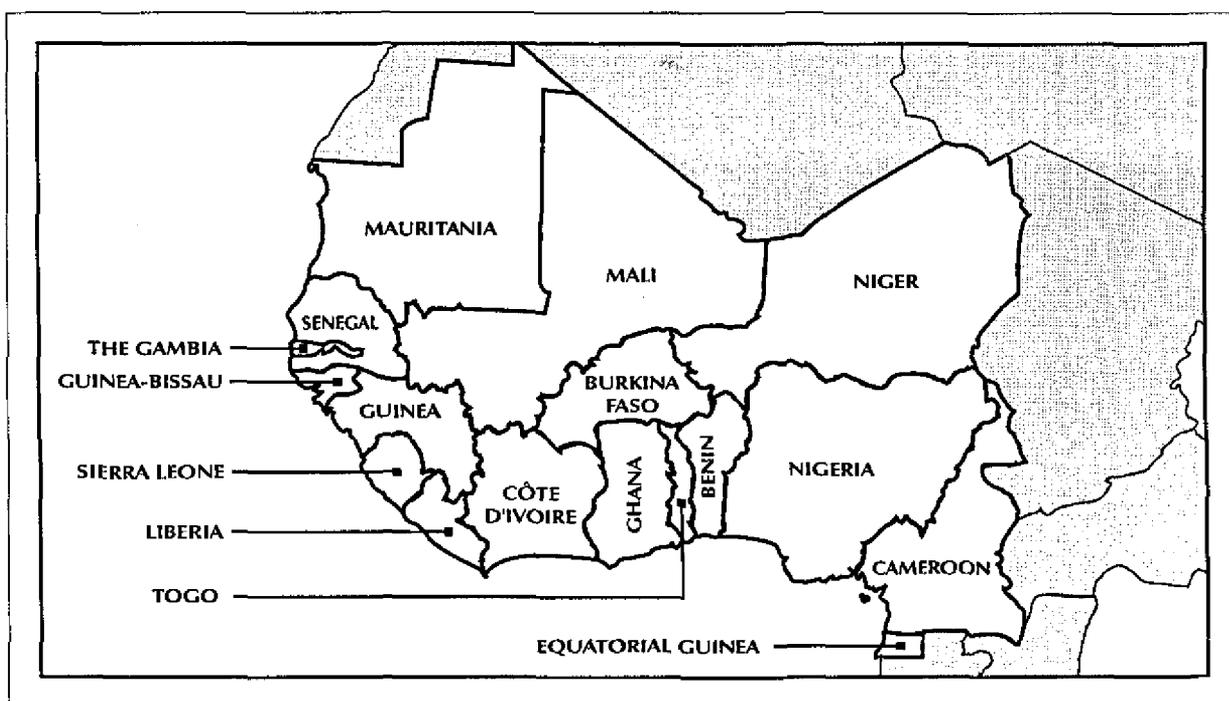
It is little wonder then, that many in Sierra Leone appreciated the stability brought to their country by Executive Outcomes (EO), the South African-linked mercenary force. In May 1995, EO was

contracted to help in the campaign against the RUF, operating as a force multiplier providing technical services, combat forces and limited training. By late January 1996, EO-backed forces had assisted in restoring stability in many areas. But this proved to be short-lived, and the failure to address the root causes of the conflict meant that EO only postponed the inevitable. Following the November 1996 cease-fire, EO withdrew in January 1997. In May 1997, the newly-elected government was overthrown in a coup led by **Johnny Paul Kosoma** who remained in power until a counter-coup restored the government of President Kabbah. Since that time the country has been engulfed in violence, despite the efforts of ECOMOG.

In nearby Guinea-Bissau, tensions surfaced between forces loyal to President **Joao Bernardo Vieira** and supporters of last year's army rebellion, resulting in the May coup.

Following the coup, it was announced that the troops from Benin, Togo, Niger and The Gambia serving with the ECOMOG peacekeeping force would be withdrawn as the need for a continued ECOMOG presence was 'null and void'. However, Gambian National Army commander Lieutenant-Colonel **Samsideen Sarr** said his troops would remain there until ECOWAS decided otherwise.

ECOMOG troops were deployed in January to police the truce between pro-Vieira forces and those of sacked armed forces Chief of Staff Brigadier-General **Ansumane Mane**. Since the coup, Guinea-Bissau's transitional Prime Minister **Francisco Fadul** has apologised to France and Senegal, whose embassies were destroyed or ransacked during the coup. Vieira had sought refuge in each of the two embassies before



fleeing to the Portuguese mission where he is apparently still holed up. General elections, initially slated for the end of March under the Abuja Accord of 1 November 1998, appear now to have been postponed indefinitely.

The Importance of Nigeria

In the region, much hinges on the outcome of the transfer of power from the Nigerian military under General **Abdusalami Abubakar** to the democratically-elected government of **Olusegun Obasanjo**. This is to occur formally on 29 May. As one Nigerian foreign service official has noted: 'The region's stability and success depends on what happens in Nigeria. Nigeria can absorb refugees from West Africa; but West Africa cannot absorb refugees from Nigeria.' Yet until now, Nigeria has been the sick giant of Africa.

What can be hoped for?

Nigerian diplomats hope that **Obasanjo** will, as a first step, be able to instil transparency and accountability into government as a necessary precondition to eradicating corruption and pressing ahead with economic reforms. Although the new President is a former military ruler (having governed between 1976 and 1979 when he handed over power to a civilian government only to see the army take over again in 1983) and thus, for the time being, has the support of the armed forces, he faces immense challenges. These include:

- The difficulties in dealing with Nigeria's colonial legacy, which left behind 250 ethnic groups within artificial borders cutting across and joining tribal boundaries, where the undeveloped state lacks the necessary political framework with which to manage such diversity. There is not only uneven economic development along group lines, but a combination of colonialism and divisive rule have left behind a legacy of vengeance-seeking tribal groups. There is no notion of 'power-sharing' in Nigeria. This is complicated by religious divides: some 50% of Nigeria's 108 million people are Muslims, the remaining 40% are Christians and 10% animists.
- Unravelling the system of patronage encouraged by US\$11 billion worth of oil exports, which has encouraged corruption and nepotism. In Nigeria,

criminalisation has penetrated the very fabric of the state.

- Severe economic distress, where there has been a 75% decline in real income since 1990, compounded by skills flight (ten million Nigerians live abroad).
- Appeasing the military — the praetorians of Abuja — to which **Obasanjo** has indebted himself as they funded and supported his presidential bid.
- Drawing up a new constitution and instilling a human rights culture.

What are the scenarios?

At a recent meeting on *Nigeria: As the Dust Settles...* held at the South African Institute of International Affairs in April 1999, analysts presented a number of possible scenarios for Nigeria. Remembering the adage that 'there are only two political parties in Nigeria, the military and civilians', the view held was generally that **Obasanjo** was the only person for the job at present — 'an indispensable person' — but that he needed to balance his attempts to reform the Nigerian state with the need to consolidate his rule with the military. Three scenarios emerged:

- **Obasanjo** consolidates his power as a military government in civilian clothes.
- A *coup d'état* occurs, leading Nigeria further down the path of self-destruction.
- A real democracy is established, though this would be a long, drawn-out process, requiring a viable constitution and external assistance.

Obasanjo will have to convince the outside world and his people alike that his election was a starting point for a new era in Nigerian politics and not simply 'another trick by the generals'. His saving grace may well be that he has the international image and sympathy to help steer him in the right direction, while his support from the North (he is a Yoruba) could indicate the emergence of a national character.

Niger and Guinea-Bissau's recent coups are indicators of how quickly things can unravel in West Africa; and Sierra Leone and Liberia are reminders both of how difficult it is to put things back together again and the impact on neighbouring states once things do go awry.