



Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire: Geopolitical upheaval and democracy under strain

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1. Introduction

The regional neighbourhood of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, two of West Africa's most stable democracies, has become increasingly volatile. What began as a rebellion in northern Mali in 2012 metastasised into a transnational conflict, with a shifting array of jihadist groups, armed militias, secessionists, and criminal networks competing for power, land, and resources. A decade of French, European, U.S., and United Nations (UN) interventions produced few gains, leaving behind a trail of unfulfilled promises and social frustration. What followed instead was a wave of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, replacing fragile democratic governments with authoritarian military juntas (Bøås & Haavik 2025; Bøås 2025).

Increased hostility towards Western partners and the assertive entry of 'new' external actors such as Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States have contributed to reshaping of the previous security arrangement in the region. Russia is causing alarm, particularly in the West, through the deployment of Wagner/Africa Corps mercenaries and the launch of disinformation campaigns on social media. These campaigns were perfected in the Central African Republic (CAR) and later implemented in the Sahel. The departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) also sent shockwaves through West Africa. The key issue to examine is therefore the implications this may have for coastal states like Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

Drawing on empirical data from fieldwork carried out in Accra and Abidjan in June 2025, this report highlights a set of cross-cutting and interlinked issues that Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire have to navigate. These issues straddle domestic and regional spheres and do not always manifest in similar ways. Nevertheless, they shape both the constraints and possibilities facing the two countries as they seek to maintain political stability. These are:

1. Protecting democratic legitimacy: democracy and stability – but for whom?
2. Sovereignist narratives and regional polarisation: ECOWAS vs AES schism
3. Generational and class divides: young vs. old, elites vs. marginalised youths
4. The security threat in the northern areas

Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire remain more stable and institutionally robust than their Sahelian neighbours, but their apparent resilience masks internal fragilities. In Ghana, open political competition is increasingly viewed as an elite-driven system that fails to deliver tangible results, while in Côte d'Ivoire, post-conflict peace and rapid economic growth have been accompanied by democratic erosion under President Ouattara's extended tenure. Thus, in both countries, state legitimacy is under strain, raising questions about whether political stability is sustainable. A central element in this regard is the region's youth. Both countries have large and growing young populations who feel excluded from political life and economic opportunities. This generational divide between aging elites and frustrated youth

is reinforced by inequality and unemployment, providing fertile ground for political contestation and polarisation both offline and online.

Regional polarisation further complicates the picture. The rift between ECOWAS and the AES has redefined political alignments in West Africa, undermining regional cohesion. This is further impacted by sovereigntist narratives that frame political struggle as one between an old, Western-backed order and a new wave of independence-minded young leaders. In this discourse, Côte d'Ivoire is perceived as the emblem of the 'old francophone order', with President Ouattara cast as the archetype of elite continuity protected by France. Ghana, by contrast, has sought to act as a mediator, balancing dialogue with the AES juntas against its commitments to ECOWAS, but this balancing act also carries legitimacy risks. Both countries, therefore, find themselves caught in a broader battle of narratives where demands for sovereignty, dignity, and renewal heavily influence politics.

The northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana face mounting security threats as jihadist groups expand southward from the Sahel. While the former managed to halt attacks in 2020-2021 and the latter has so far navigated the complexities and avoided large-scale violence, both countries remain vulnerable to infiltration, logistical use and rear base activity by militant groups, including the Al-Qaida-affiliated group *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM). Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana's security strategies combine military containment with socio-economic development, but internal grievances, fiscal constraints, and weakened regional cooperation limit effectiveness. What is clear is that their greatest vulnerability does not lie in external factors alone, but in the potential convergence of internal weaknesses with regional instability and malign foreign interference. Both countries face insurgent threats on their northern borders and contested legitimacy at home as an intensifying narrative conflict seems to erode trust in democratic leaders and institutions.

Looking ahead, this report ends by identifying three possible trajectories: An optimistic scenario sees both countries adapting to challenges, stabilising their economies and fiscal budgets, and sustaining their role as coastal anchors of political stability. A status quo scenario suggests that fragile stability will persist, but legitimacy will continue to erode. In the worst-case scenario, domestic discontent combines with regional crises to undermine the stability and credibility of both countries.

The empirical material on which this report is based stems from a combination of desk research and in-depth interviews with various stakeholders from the region. These include representatives from local NGOs, multilateral institutions, EU delegations, political party members, both local and international fact-checking organisations, national broadcasting networks, local journalists and journalist associations, as well as regional experts and academics. For reasons of security and participant preference, the identities of some interviewees are not disclosed in this report. Together, this material provides both regional and country-specific insights into the challenges facing Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, identifying key differences and situating them within a broader regional context.

2. Background

2.1 Regional crises: insurgencies, coups, and the retreat of the West

The Sahel sub-region to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana's north has experienced a decade of momentous change. As the insurgency that began in 2012 in Mali gained strength, jihadist-inspired violence spread across the so-called *Tri-border* area – affecting much of neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. In response, France, the United States, and the European Union (EU) escalated their interventions in the Sahel. France spearheaded the military response through 'Operation Barkhane', the UN deployed the peacekeeping force MINUSMA, and the U.S. launched training and counterterrorism initiatives such as Operation Flintlock in Niger, as well as building a drone base in Agadez.

As the conflict evolved, the primary threat came from the jihadist groups JNIM and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS). Both expanded their operations across porous national borders, exploiting local grievances, land disputes, ethnic divisions, and the absence or abuse of state authority. The result was a vicious cycle of violence eroding social cohesion and creating an environment conducive to further political violence (Kroknes et al. forthcoming).

Despite vast investments and a dual-track approach, combining security and development assistance through EU frameworks and multilateral institutions, the situation continued to deteriorate. In practice, hard counter-terrorism measures dominated, while civilian development projects and genuine efforts at state-building remained either elusive or relatively ineffective. By 2020, observers described the year as the direst yet, marked by record-high numbers of attacks, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and sharp increases in food insecurity, while poverty remained entrenched (Schmauder 2020). Meanwhile, trust between France and its Sahelian partners collapsed, with France increasingly viewed through the lens of *Françafrique* – a paternalistic and neocolonial presence, seeking to 'undermine national sovereignty' (Borrel et al. 2021) – as insecurity continued to worsen. Two successive coups in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021) left the country under military rule, and when France and Western partners condemned the junta, Mali expelled French troops and withdrew from the G5 Sahel framework. In their place, Bamako turned to Russia's Wagner Group, marking a decisive geopolitical shift away from Western partners toward Moscow. Military coups followed in Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023). A key driver of the rift between coup regimes and the regional order was the sanctions regime imposed by ECOWAS. Originally designed to deter unconstitutional power grabs, the sanctions soon expanded into broad restrictions that furthered anti-ECOWAS sentiment and reinforced the junta's need to diversify and ramp up pre-existing narratives of external interference. Feeling increasingly alienated and isolated, this accelerated the alignment of coup states into the AES and their decision to leave ECOWAS. It is within these developments that the door for new external actors has been kicked open.

2.2 The emergence of “new” geopolitical players

The Sahel may be described as a “perfect storm” where insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts, illicit migration, and fragile and unsettled polities combined with external rivalries converge (Bøås 2025). In this shifting landscape, new geopolitical actors are emerging. The AES states have distanced themselves from Western security partnerships while the closure of USAID under President Trump – once a pillar of American soft power – has left a void for geopolitical competitors to fill. In the Sahel, Russia has proven itself as an actor willing to fill the void that emerged after the exit of the West and the UN. Moscow, by combining its expertise and experience in operating within niche security markets and utilising private military contractors (PMCs), exemplified by its deployment of Wagner mercenaries combined with disinformation campaigns, has taken advantage of this. These deployments can be traced to the Central African Republic, where Wagner personnel not only guard the president but also serve as senior advisors, with Bangui functioning as a hub for regional dissemination of disinformation.

Through “Russian Houses” – cultural centres established across Francophone Africa – Russia promotes influence by hosting exhibitions on annexed Ukrainian regions, lectures, conferences, and language courses aimed at African youth. These centres are run by the African Initiative, a Kremlin-funded outlet linked to former Wagner officials, which also recruits young African journalists. In Mali, it financed postgraduate scholarships for top journalism students in Bamako (Ehl & Ghaedi 2025). Such efforts echo Soviet-era strategies of leveraging civil society and local media as inexpensive tools for influence (Cull et al. 2017). In Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, both Russia and China now invest more heavily in information operations than Western actors like the EU, deploying more sophisticated disinformation toolkits to expand their legitimacy at the West's expense. Most of the Chinese information operations are led by the trans-African information centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

At the same time, China has cemented its role as Africa's largest trade partner and creditor – through loans extended to countries participating in the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative – and is a rapidly growing trade partner for Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Ghana is already the country in Africa with the most external debt owed to China and is the fourth-most-indebted African country to the IMF. An issue related to China as a creditor is the interest rates which are not publicly disclosed, reducing transparency and limiting the accountability of borrowing governments. China utilises its economic power to indirectly influence the policies of its clients. To draw an example, the Ghanaian parliament has passed multiple law amendments which grant monopolies to Chinese companies in certain sectors by giving tax exemptions. The key question is whether China will eventually face a reckoning as many African governments struggle to meet the high interest rates. As a Ghanaian political analyst said “(...) we do not hold any illusions about the Chinese, but we are in need of such

international partners and when we see the West fail us, we turn to China. But such alliances come with a high cost.”¹

Unlike China, Russia has a much more limited economic capacity in Africa, with its influence concentrated in Sahelian juntas, CAR, Libya, and Sudan based on a form of a geostrategic approach operating on a shoestring budget (see Bøås & Strazzari 2025). Its missions focus on small-scale regime protection and counterinsurgency operations rather than large-scale interventions and development. Yet within this niche, the fall of Syria's Assad regime in 2024 has raised doubts about Moscow's reliability as a security guarantor, highlighting how the war in Ukraine drains resources from other arenas (Lefdal 2024). While Russia has announced new missions in Anglophone West Africa, its ability to replace U.S. influence or align with China remains uncertain. Instead, Russia relies on low-cost tools to sustain and project its influence.

Turkey has positioned itself as Africa's leading drone supplier, with the Bayraktar TB2 providing a cheaper alternative for states seeking to strengthen defence and counterinsurgency capabilities. Beyond military sales, Ankara also expands its soft power through religious and cultural diplomacy by funding the construction of the National Mosque in Ghana – the second largest in West Africa – and through connectivity, with Turkish Airlines now operating daily flights to Istanbul. The UAE, alongside Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has become a major investor in African farmland to secure long-term food sovereignty, with Abu Dhabi alone acquiring 400,000 hectares across Ghana, Namibia, Morocco, Sudan, and Nigeria (Koslowski 2024). At the same time, the UAE is pushing tech diplomacy: in May 2025 it announced a \$1 billion investment in Africa's largest AI and technology hub in Accra, projected to attract more than 11,000 global companies by 2028 (The Voice of Africa 2025). While positioning Ghana as a continental hub for digital innovation, the project raises enormous energy demands, leading President Mahama to commit new funding for petroleum exploration and opening of oil fields to meet future needs. The UAE is also indirectly entangled in Ghana's informal gold economy. Loopholes in Emirati customs regulations – where hand-carried gold is not eligible for declaration – facilitate favourable conditions for transnational networks to launder assets with little oversight.

2.3 Disinformation as a tool of influence in the post-truth era

Information warfare has become a defining feature of global politics (Broda & Strömbäck 2024), and Africa is no exception, but rather a frontline (Mare et al. 2019). The Sahel is the epicentre where Russian-linked actors – most prominently the former Wagner Group, now the Africa Corps (Stanyard 2025) – have combined a niche security presence with wide-ranging information operations (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies 2024). These efforts aim to amplify local voices of discontent and social entrepreneurs (Wesolowski & Gatanazi

¹ Interview with political analyst, Accra, June 2025.

2023) and have enabled Russia to ‘punch above its weight’ in competition with more resourceful Western actors. While not new in the Russian arsenal, their campaigns have seen some of the most prominent exploitations of the post-truth condition, where the force of a message derives less from its factual accuracy than from its ability to resonate emotionally and align with pre-existing grievances (McIntyre 2018). Disinformation thus functions less as a producer of ‘novel truths’ than as an amplifier of long-standing discourses of anti-colonial resistance, sovereignty, and resentment of Western paternalism (Bøås & Strazzari 2025).

Our Ivorian informants (respondents 1, 2, 3, and 4) and one Ghanaian interviewee mentioned that people have been spreading stories, sagas, mysteries and rumours for a long time, and hinted that this is a cultural trait in both Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana: *“It is indeed embedded in our culture that stories are spread from mouth to mouth, it’s not something new. (...) the power of social media has amplified the phenomenon, and multiple platforms can be used to craft stories.”*²

These amplification dynamics are most notable on digital platforms, where algorithms reward content that provokes engagement, meaning emotionally charged narratives travel faster and further than more nuanced, fact-based counter-narratives (Marwick & Lewis 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). In the Sahel, Russian-linked campaigns have leveraged these dynamics by promoting a discourse that portrays the West and its interventions as ‘neocolonial failures’, including but not limited to anti-French sentiments. Much of the rhetoric also portrays Russia, and Putin personally, as a reliable partner who has the strength and willingness to stand against a Western-led international order. These sentiments have not emerged out of thin air but draw on locally existing ideas about the historic role of the Soviet Union as an alternative partner to European powers and the US.

This strategy has long been a part of the Russian informational warfare toolkit. During the Cold War, the Soviets infiltrated African media outlets and disseminated narratives through the authorship of local freelancers. In West Africa, Russia amplifies locally existing grievances by supporting local voices and agencies who possess legitimacy and trust in societies to achieve geopolitical goals (i.e., undermining Western engagements in the region). Establishing collaborations with powerful voices, including the Pan-African influencers Kemi Seba, Nathalie Yamb, and as noted by an Agence France-Presse (AFP) journalist working on disinformation in Abidjan: *“this guy Ibrahima Maiga with over a million followers on social media, who is backed by the new regime in Ouagadougou.”*³ They have varying degrees of ties to the Kremlin, while others have few or no discernible links, yet remain providers of useful narratives to amplify. Other low-cost operations include free-of-charge news content from Russian state-sponsored news agencies, including *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* (RT). This provides Kremlin-linked outlets market advantage, thus

² Interview with Canal France International (CFI), Abidjan, June 2025

³ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

outperforming international agencies with subscription policy (e.g., Reuters, AFP and Associated Press (AP)).

While such amplification is not a new Russian strategy, it has reached new heights due to the increased digital nature of media consumption. West Africans, and youth in particular, are increasingly active on digital platforms (see Chimboza 2024; Cheeseman et al. 2020), and low-cost digital operations are strengthened through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning tools (Gilbert & Gilbert 2025). Amplification is illustrated in the figures below:

Figure 1: The pathway of the amplification strategy.

GRIEVANCES (E.g., declining social mobility, deteriorated security environment)



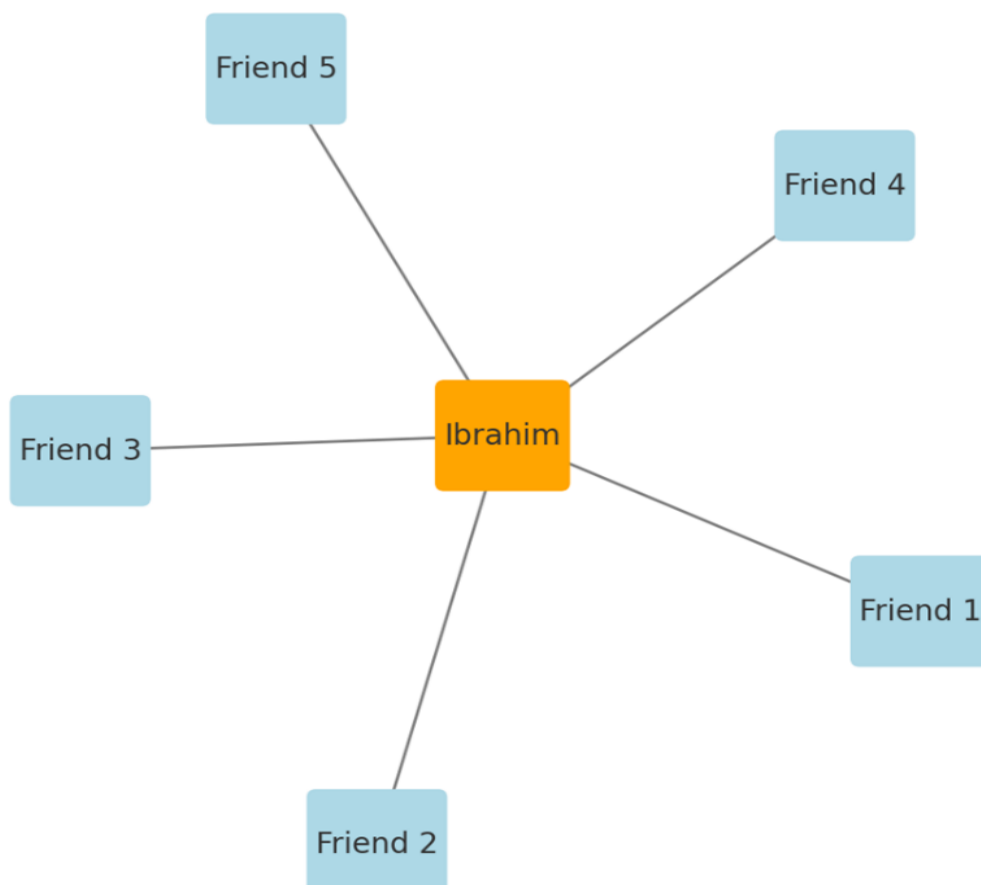
LOCAL VOICES/AGENCIES (Pan-African influencers, freelancers, local outlets)



AMPLIFICATION (By external actors, e.g. Wagner group)

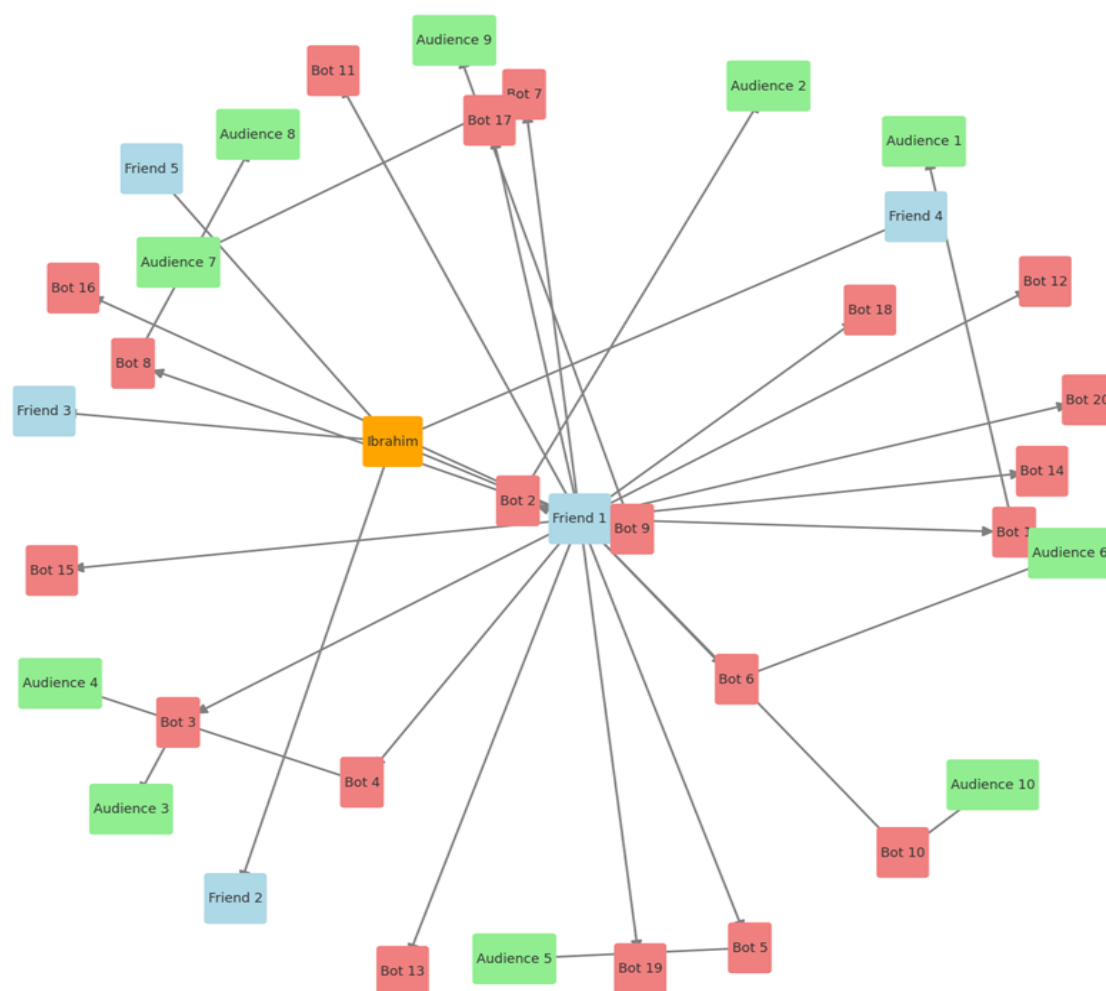
Through bot networks that can retweet, like, and spread posts, narratives can be amplified online. This amplification takes place through signal boosting. To visualise how a novel narrative spread by person X, here Ibrahim sitting in Cocody (Abidjan), to his few followers (5) on a social platform such as X (figure 2). Without being picked up artificial boots, it only reaches these five, and those they may share it with. In the illustration below (Figure 2), it only reaches these five, and it is not disseminated further.

Figure 2: Narrative spread from user to user on digital platforms.



In Figure 3, we show what happens when a set of ‘bots’ who are using machine learning tools and platform-provided tools (Application Programming Interface) automatically picks this up and amplifies it, spreading it to multiple and unconnected audiences. As it gains virality, it is also spread both by like-minded thinkers and others who unwittingly take part in the amplification (Han et al. 2022; Marigliano et al. 2024; Ng & Carley 2024). Thus, a relatively fringe voice of discontent may, through third-party amplification, reach much larger audiences.

Figure 3: Narrative spread on digital platforms including bots



The effect of amplification of disinformation remains uncertain – in particular, whether it actually changes the political opinions and behaviour of individuals and groups – but research suggests that confirmation bias and selective exposure make individuals more likely to accept narratives that fit their lived experiences (Flynn et al. 2017; Kunda 1990; Taber & Lodge 2006). In much of the Sahel, this is one of marginalisation, poverty, and governance failure. This suggests that Russian-linked disinformation is most effective where it amplifies local discontent rather than inventing it. This was perfected by the Wagner-affiliated, Paris-educated sociologist Dmitri Sytyi, who leads the Russian cultural centre in Bangui (Schwikowski 2024).

The ‘amplifier effect’ of Russian influence, therefore, depends heavily on local agency: activists, youth movements, and political entrepreneurs who adopt and adapt these narratives for their own purposes. This makes disinformation not simply a matter of foreign manipulation but a hybrid phenomenon, emerging from the interplay between external and domestic actors. Throughout our interviews it became clear that, while Russian “fingerprints” follow several disinformation campaigns online, an increasing number of young Ivorian, Ghanaian, and crucially Burkinabé individuals operate as autonomous actors who have grown highly adept to the new media ecosystem.⁴

2.4 Côte d'Ivoire – the Ouattara paradox

Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict trajectory illustrates a paradox of peace and growth underpinned by creeping democratic erosion. After enduring a brutal civil war in the early 2000s, the country re-emerged as one of West Africa's fastest-growing economies and a key regional hub. However, this stability is built on fault lines that stretch back to the death of the long-time state leader Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1993.

Houphouët-Boigny had cultivated a multicultural, pan-African vision for Côte d'Ivoire, rooted in openness and inclusion – a pragmatic approach for an economy dependent on migrant labour during the boom years of cocoa and agriculture in the 1960s and 70s. After his death, however, this inclusive idea was reinterpreted through the concept of *Ivoirité*. What began as a broad concept of belonging was gradually weaponised into an exclusionary tool, delegitimising rivals and disenfranchising large segments of the population, particularly northerners, Muslim communities, and the migrant labourers – often Burkinabé – historically central to the cocoa economy (McGovern 2011). This shift laid the ideological groundwork for the instability and violence of the late 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in the First Ivorian Civil War (Babo 2017). Interviews with fact-checkers as well as opposition figures in Côte d'Ivoire highlighted that these divisions remain a latent fracture line, exploited in political propaganda and disinformation campaigns.⁵

Since assuming power in 2011, Alassane Ouattara, himself once excluded under the ethnocentric interpretation of *Ivoirité*, has presided over a decade of stability and economic dynamism (Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI) 2024). Côte d'Ivoire has posted some of the highest growth rates on the continent, regained investor confidence, and reasserted its role as a regional motor of the West African economies, according to World Bank data. Yet, Ouattara's long tenure has also entrenched concerns about constitutional manipulation and elite consolidation (ICG 2020, 2025). According to opposition leaders, the third and fourth-term bids represent a “*constitutional coup*,” directly undermining democracy in Côte

⁴ Interview with AFP journalist; CFI official; Cellule Anti-Fake News official, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁵ Interview with Réseau des Professionnels de la Presse en Ligne de Côte d'Ivoire (REPRELCI) journalist; Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire representatives – Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (PDCI-RDA) representatives; Cellule Anti-Fake News official, Abidjan, June 2025.

d'Ivoire.⁶ Interviewees further underline that the regime's resilience is closely tied to Ouattara himself, with little evidence of succession planning, raising fears of a dangerous vacuum should he suddenly exit the scene *"(...) no one knows what happens when the old man dies... (...) It is a future no one has planned for."*⁷

Ouattara's 2020 third term bid to run for President, followed by further restrictions on Presidential contenders such as the former Credit Suisse chief Tidjane Thiam – based on an interpretation of his ineligible Ivorian citizenship – fuelled an already polarised political landscape. The perception is that while Ivorian democracy delivers on elections, it falls short of genuinely fair and competitive. Economic gains, while real, remain unevenly distributed (BMZ 2024), leaving many – particularly young and rural populations – excluded. Respondents repeatedly stressed that high youth unemployment feeds frustration, as many young Ivorians feel excluded from the country's economic growth. Despite impressive GDP figures, opportunities for upward mobility remain scarce, and youths increasingly perceive the system as captured by an entrenched elite.⁸

By twice extending his rule beyond presidential term limits, Ouattara has placed Côte d'Ivoire at the centre of debates about ECOWAS's credibility, accusations of double standards, and the limits of liberal democracy. ECOWAS' 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance commits member states to term limits and pluralism, but enforcement is perceived as uneven. While military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger triggered sanctions and threats of military intervention, constitutional revisions in Abidjan and elsewhere have largely been met with silence. Multiple interlocutors emphasised that this perceived double standard undermines ECOWAS's legitimacy and fuels the discourse of it being a *"hypocritical marionette of France and the West"*.⁹

Civil society groups emphasised that while coups trigger sanctions, constitutional overreach is tolerated, fuelling resentment across the AES bloc.¹⁰ Despite a surface of calm that currently defines Côte d'Ivoire's political environment, the underlying dynamics outlined above suggest that a post-Ouattara succession or transition will represent a critical stress test – not only for the country's democratic institutions, but for its frail social cohesion and resilience to malign manipulation.

The security situation in the north of Côte d'Ivoire has remained largely stable, despite past attacks that reached close to the economic centre of Abidjan, most notably the Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Grand Bassam attack in 2016 (BBC 2016). Similarly, although the jihadist group Katiba Macina sought to establish a foothold in the northern Côte d'Ivoire

⁶ Interview with PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁷ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁸ Interview with United Nations Development Programme official; PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁹ Interview with AFP journalist; UNDP official; PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

¹⁰ Interview with Cellule Anti-Fake News official, Abidjan, June 2025.

between 2020 and 2022, the Ivorian state – through substantial security investments and deployments – demonstrated its capacity to halt such incursions (Tull, 2024).

Côte d'Ivoire's demographic profile also poses a challenge. With relatively high fertility rates (4.3) and more than 40 % of the population aged between 0 and 14 according to World Bank data, the country experiences a youth boom. However, formal labour markets are likely unable to absorb this expanding cohort: around 90 % of young workers remain in informal or precarious employment, and opportunities for social mobility are limited (Kramo 2022; Kouamé & Kadjo 2024). A growing frustration among Ivorian youth due to lack of education, opportunities and a scarce job market has the potential to derail the Ivorian success story. This combination of demographic pressure, blocked mobility, and political exclusion risks transforming Côte d'Ivoire's youth dividend into a destabilising force, fuelling grievances that may resurface during contested elections or moments of state fragility.

2.5 Ghana – a fading democratic success?

Ghana has typically been hailed as West Africa's democratic success story. This reputation is deeply rooted in a history of competitive elections, peaceful transfers of power, and institutional continuity since the early 1990s. After an initially tumultuous period after independence marked by coups and military rule from the 1960s to the 1980s, Jerry John Rawlings initiated a transition that culminated in the 1992 constitution and the establishment of the Ghanaian Fourth Republic. The constitution came against the backdrop of economic turmoil and three consecutive failed coup plots against Rawlings between 1982-84. Rawlings pursued democratic and economic reforms and aligned Ghana with the Bretton Woods Institutions due to growing international pressure and the Western commitment to democratisation as a prerequisite for continued aid (see Marinov & Goemans 2014).

The 1992 constitution allowed Rawlings to consolidate his rule through an electoral system designed to keep his political party, the *National Democratic Congress* (NDC), at the centre of Ghanaian politics. The current Ghanaian constitution is therefore built on Rawlings's legacy which strongly favours the political power of the executive, and the election laws facilitated the institutionalisation of the two-party system.

Rawlings' decision to leave office after reaching his term limit in 2000 is regarded as the birth of Ghana as a 'beacon of democracy' and the cementation of a democratic mode of governance. As a representative of the Institute of Democratic Governance (IDEG) stated: "(...) so our democratic birth and start came in the year 2000."¹¹ Since then, power has alternated regularly between the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the rival New Patriotic Party (NPP), with no party securing more than two consecutive terms. This pattern

¹¹ Interview with IDEG representative, Accra, June 2025.

has reinforced Ghana's image as a competitive democratic system with NDC and NPP at the centre.

However, beneath this image, a more complex reality emerges. While maintaining this nominally competitive electoral process, Ghana's political system is also characterised by a high degree of elite continuity – essentially an increasingly elitist and detached political class, closed off from most Ghanaians. This dominance of the executive and political bodies is a legacy of the Rawlings era, with the two-party system becoming increasingly closed to outsiders. Political competition often revolves around patronage within a highly corrupt system, leading to the creation and maintenance of a political-business cycle (Odijie & Imoro 2021).

A persistent “criminal entanglement” links political elites and criminal networks, deeply rooted in gold and narcotics smuggling. Gold moves through systemised smuggling networks through Togo and Burkina Faso into Mali, before being laundered in Dubai. Between 2019 and 2022, it is revealed that Ghana lost an estimated \$11 billion to gold smuggling (see Swissaid 2025). These flows are tied to transnational networks also engaged in coastal drug trafficking (de Lugo et al. 2025). Ghana's political system has largely failed to crack down on these networks, while corruption has been reinforced and socio-economic grievances – particularly among youth – remain unaddressed.

Consequently, illicit gold and drug trafficking have become priorities for the current Mahama administration. One of its first reforms was the creation of the Ghana Gold Board (GoldBod) tasked with centralising the gold sector and granted exclusive rights to buy, sell, and export gold and minerals. However, through our interviews, there was expressed great concern that the current regime will be unable or unwilling to handle the scope of these issues (EU Delegation interview¹²). Despite Mahama is showing willingness to play a ‘hardline’ approach towards thwarting corruption as a prerequisite to fix the battered economy, there is still absence of robust legal frameworks to battle the ‘flow of dirty money’ in Ghanaian politics – especially in the domain of election campaign financing coupled with poor donor transparency (Ghana Center for Democratic Development 2022).

Ghana's vulnerabilities extend into the security domain. Its northern borderlands are increasingly exposed to spillovers from Burkina Faso, where jihadist groups like JNIM and ISGS operate. Accra has adopted a calibrated security posture: restricting mobility through curfews and transport bans in some northern towns, while deliberately avoiding direct confrontation with militants to prevent retaliation. This strategy has reduced immediate risk but tacitly allows Ghana's territory to function as a logistical and recovery zone for Sahelian insurgents (de Bruijne et al. 2024). At the same time, illegal gold mining (‘galamsey’ activities) and smuggling networks undermine state authority, erode revenues, and blur the lines between political elites and organised crime. Despite the entrance of the GoldBod reform, enforcement capacity remains limited. To exemplify, the EU Delegation to Ghana

¹² Interview with representative from the EU Delegation, Accra, June 2025.

mentioned in our interview that the implementation of the fully funded EU-project 'West African Police Information System' (WAPIS) – designed to strengthen information-sharing and coordination among law enforcement agencies in West African states through a centralised electronic database – proved difficult: *"In Ghana, its rollout has lagged and it proved difficult to implement. Why? This raises questions about whether the obstacles stem from ignorance, incompetence, or entrenched corruption."*¹³

In the information space, Ghana's openness is both an asset and a liability. A vibrant media and civil society complicate authoritarian-style manipulation, but they also create fertile ground for amplified disinformation narratives. Russian-style campaigns that emphasise sovereignty, anti-elite grievances, and disillusionment with Western partners resonate with Ghana's large, frustrated youth population. In the 'post-truth' media environment, where emotionally charged narratives travel faster than fact-based counterarguments, these dynamics risk deepening scepticism toward both domestic elites and external partners: *"(...) such content utilises deepfakes through AI technology, (...) yet, people in general know about disinformation and understand that tools are needed to tackle them"*.¹⁴

Foreign policy reflects these pressures. Mahama has positioned Ghana as a mediator between ECOWAS and the AES, appointing Larry Gbevlo-Lartey as special envoy and engaging directly with the Sahelian juntas. Just two months after his inauguration, which Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso attended – Mahama toured Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. At the same time, the long-stalled Boankra Inland Port project has advanced rapidly under his leadership and nears completion. Once operational, it will strengthen Ghana's role as a regional logistics hub and provide leverage to improve ties with the landlocked Sahelian regimes. Together, Mahama's Sahel visits, the AES liaison, and the acceleration of the port project signal that relations with the juntas are at the top of Ghana's foreign policy agenda.

Ghana's pragmatism seeks to limit spillover risks by maintaining dialogue with the AES-regimes that challenge ECOWAS's normative framework. This balancing act highlights the dilemma of defending democratic legitimacy while navigating a fragmented regional order shaped by rival blocs and external patrons. Although Ghana aims to bridge AES putschists and ECOWAS, trust between the two fractions – Accra and AES – remains limited given Ghana's status as a key member state and Mahama's two previous terms as ECOWAS chairman (2013-2015). At the same time, Ghana's approach to JNIM generates tension with Ouagadougou, as northern Ghana serves as a temporary refuge for militants (see de Bruijne et al. 2024).

Lastly, just as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana also faces high youth unemployment rates. In Ghana, 36 % of the population is aged 0-14 and youth unemployment stands at 38.8%, according

¹³ Interview with EU delegation, Accra, June 2025

¹⁴ Interview with CFI, Abidjan, June 2025.

to World Bank data. About 68% of the employed youth have vulnerable jobs characterised by low wages and insecurity (Mensah & Bagnetto 2025). Mahama has established a new ministry – the ‘Ministry of Youth Development and Empowerment’ – to address youth unemployment. Still, the contemporary youth unemployment rates, vulnerability and economic hardship may increase susceptibility to recruitment by criminal networks and violent extremist groups.

Overall, Ghana’s democratic institutions remain robust by regional standards, but their legitimacy is under strain. The country embodies the paradox of formal resilience and substantive fatigue: elections are competitive, but citizens question whether they matter. Economic fragility, youth discontent, illicit economies, and the risks of disinformation-driven amplification all threaten to chip away at Ghana’s status as a model democracy. The test for Accra is whether it can translate its institutional continuity into renewed popular confidence and whether it can do so before external shocks and internal frustrations converge into more serious challenges.

2.6 Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana: a comparative outlook

Dimension	Côte d'Ivoire	Ghana
Macroeconomic stability & outlook	GDP growth: ~6.3% projected for 2025 (IMF). Nominal GDP: \$86.5 bn, \$2760 per capita (2024, WB). External debt: ~37.6% of GDP; Total Public Debt ~59.3%. Fiscal deficit: ~4.0% in 2024, narrowing to 3% in 2025 (IMF/WAEMU target) (IMF 2025). Fitch rating: BB-	GDP growth: ~4.0% projected for 2025 (IMF). Nominal GDP: ~\$82.8 bn, \$2405 per capita (2024, WB). External debt: ~35–36% of GDP; Total Public Debt ~70.5% (2024), projected to ~66.4% in 2025. Fiscal deficit: ~7.7% in 2024 → target 2–8% in 2025; primary surplus of 1.5% (IMF 2025). Fitch rating: B-
Political stability & governance	President Ouattara has secured relative stability since the 2011 conflict, but democratic institutions remain fragile, with weak accountability, a highly centralised executive, and limited checks (Freedom House, 2024; BTI, 2024).	Ghana maintains a stable democracy, though grappling with several post-pandemic economic and internal political challenges (Freedom House 2024; BTI 2024).
Economic transformation & stability	Côte d'Ivoire has enjoyed sustained growth, investing heavily in rural infrastructure, education, and health. It has also attracted considerable private capital through Eurobond issuance (BTI 2024).	Ghana posted growth of 5.1% in 2021 and 3.1% in 2022, but its economy remains highly vulnerable to external shocks. The country also received an IMF bailout due to unsustainable debt (BTI 2024).
Corruption & institutional integrity	Despite progress, Côte d'Ivoire continues to struggle with entrenched corruption and limited institutional reform, particularly affecting SMEs and the informal sector (BTI 2024).	Corruption and economic mismanagement have contributed to deepening inequality in Ghana. The government faces pressure to implement sustainable policy solutions (BTI 2024).
Social development & inclusion	Investments in key sectors, such as health and education, are significant; however, persistent poverty, low human development, and gender inequality remain unresolved (BTI 2024).	BTI highlights that Ghana's democracy is robust, but the economy continues to produce unequal outcomes and is still recovering from recent crises (BTI 2024).

Côte d'Ivoire: Macroeconomic and fiscal overview

Côte d'Ivoire is sustaining robust growth, projected at 6.5% through 2026, supported by diversification beyond cocoa into gold, hydrocarbons, and infrastructure. Gold output reached 51 metric tons in 2023 and is expected to rise further with the expansion of the Séguéla and Yaouré mines (Mining.com, 2025; Ecofin Agency, 2023). Hydrocarbon exploration in the Tano Basin adds to resource potential (GeoExPro, 2024). Extractives already contribute around 16% of exports and 4% of GDP (EITI, 2025). However, rising debt service obligations and political tensions heighten risks of instability despite favourable fundamentals (Allianz, 2025; ICG, 2025).

Ghana: Macroeconomic and fiscal overview

Ghana, by contrast, continues to face significant macroeconomic imbalances despite its rich endowment of petroleum, gold, minerals, and cocoa. Large trade and budget deficits prompted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to approve a \$3 billion debt restructuring program in May 2023 under the Extended Credit Facility (ECF), aimed at stabilising the economy and restoring confidence in the cedi. Between 1966 and 2019, Ghana sought IMF assistance sixteen times (Nyarko, 2023), making the 2023 plan the seventeenth. Overspending before elections has been a recurring driver of deficits, positioning Ghana as the IMF's fourth-most-indebted African borrower. By 2022, external debt had escalated to the point of de facto bankruptcy, with interest payments exceeding 70% of government revenues at one stage (Gunter & Watkins 2025, p. 6). The key challenge lies in whether Ghana can harness its resource wealth to reduce reliance on foreign loans and IMF bailouts. Structural weaknesses persist with low export diversification and heavy dependence on imports continuing to fuel chronic deficits (Randy Aikins, 2022). Stronger fiscal oversight is therefore needed, as debt restructuring alone cannot resolve Ghana's vulnerabilities.

2.7 Shared Vulnerabilities, Divergent Paths

Taken together, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana illustrate both the resilience and the fragility of West Africa's coastal bulwarks. Each has followed a distinct trajectory: Côte d'Ivoire as a post-conflict success story built on rapid growth but marred by executive overreach and a narrowing political space; Ghana as a competitive electoral democracy characterised by regular alteration between ruling parties, but increasingly shaped by elite capture, economic vulnerability, and eroding trust in democratic institutions. While both countries remain more stable and prosperous than their Sahelian neighbours, neither is immune to the regional pressures or their own internal political and economic struggles.

Keeping this background in mind, we now turn to a set of cross-cutting issues that both countries must navigate – issues that are simultaneously domestic and regional, local and international. They do not manifest in identical ways, but together they frame the

constraints and possibilities for Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana as they seek to sustain stability in an increasingly volatile neighbourhood. These four issues are:

1. *Eroding democratic legitimacy: democracy and stability – but for whom?*
2. *Sovereigntist narratives and regional polarisation: ECOWAS vs AES schism*
3. *Generational and class divides: young vs. old, elites vs. marginalised youths*
4. *The security threat in the northern areas*

These issues are deeply interlinked, playing out within each national context while also shaping, and being shaped by, a regional context in flux. In the following section, we examine them one by one, tracing how they manifest in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, and how they may shape possible future scenarios for (in)stability in both countries.

3. Analysis

3.1 Democracy and stability – but for whom?

Côte d'Ivoire

Despite Côte d'Ivoire's formal adherence to democratic processes – regular elections, a multi-party system, and robust formal institutions – many respondents describe the system as a democracy increasingly captured, where access is limited and power concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite. Beneath the veneer of electoral pluralism lies a reality of skewed institutions and elite dominance. Perhaps one of its starkest examples is the composition of the Electoral Commission, “(...) Ouattara has stacked this commission with party comrades and loyalists. The electoral system nor the election are fair and competitive (...) there are no rules and Ouattara is lecturing about democracy, but his electoral body is biased....”¹⁵

PDCI-RDA representatives, NGOs and CSOs emphasised that the most potent Presidential contenders to Ouattara are barred from running, a pattern they describe as a “*constitutional coup*”.¹⁶ As the PDCI-RDA noted: “*In Ivory Coast, we have a democratic deficit, and we are located in a troubled neighbourhood.*”¹⁷ This was cited as a stark example of how the rules of the game are stacked in favour of the executive.¹⁸ This is a consequence of judicial barriers established by the Ouattara presidency's firm grasp of key state institutions.

The political opposition is routinely harassed, their capacity to mobilise remains constrained, and pro-government voices and channels dominate the media environment. It gives ammunition to political entrepreneurs who wish to stoke tensions and strain the already-fragile social cohesion in this post-civil war society. Rumours and narratives now travel much faster than official clarifications and debunking, with multiple episodes highlighting how viral falsehoods spill over into real life violent reprisal in cities such as Abidjan.

From our interviews, much of the disinformation campaigns and narratives that capture young people and are seen as most potent are focused on the legitimacy of Ouattara and questions surrounding the election, the Ivorian democracy, and seek to target and

¹⁵ Interview with PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Interview with CFI official, Abidjan, June 2025.

delegitimise elite figures. Fact-checkers and CFI documented how stories of a fake coup, of Ouattara's alleged death, rumours of the sexual orientation of leading generals.¹⁹

Elite capture extends beyond politics into the economy. Although Abidjan's centre projects wealth and vitality, respondents emphasised that prosperity is largely closed off for much of the population, particularly rural communities and youth. *"Ouattara only want you to see Abidjan and Cocody...(...) travel outside the city-centre and you will see the real Côte d'Ivoire."*²⁰ Strong macroeconomic indicators mask deep inequalities, nepotism, and exclusion. As a representative from CFI emphasised: *"(...) it is important to have elites who are not corrupt and who strive to enhance transparency. (...) still the democratic way of governance has saved the country, especially after the civil war in 2010. For example, there are many constructions works in Abidjan, indicating that the booming economy actually transforms into infrastructure projects and so forth."*²¹

These gaps and contradictions are mirrored within the media ecosystem. Government channels and state regulators project optimism, yet independent media and online platforms circulate critical narratives and perspectives on these issues.²² Journalists and fact-checkers noted that opaque communication and a lack of transparency create a vacuum, which populist and disinformation actors readily exploit. In such contexts, 'disinformation' often becomes a catch-all label for any account that contradicts official messaging, which proves easier and more comfortable than addressing the source of the grievances, further eroding public trust.

Ghana

In contrast, Ghana's institutions appear more open and competitive. Regular toggling between the NDC and NPP in office has entrenched the principle of procedural democracy, and the 2024 elections reinforced the expectation that no party can monopolise power indefinitely. As one informant noted: *"In Ghana, there is no contention regarding extending presidential term limits, (...) which leads to stabilisation of the political system"*.²³

However, respondents in Accra frequently voiced frustration that Ghanaian democracy is becoming an elite cartel, where two entrenched parties alternate in office but leave underlying structures untouched. Politics is widely seen as prohibitively expensive, limiting access to those with resources or family connections, and reinforcing the dominance of established elites. When inquired about democratic limitations, a representative from the UNDP replied: *"The 2024 presidential elections was one of the most competitive elections of*

¹⁹ Interview with Cellule Anti-Fake News Abidjan official, Abidjan, June 2025.

²⁰ Interview with PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

²¹ Interview with CFI official, Abidjan, June 2025.

²² Interview with Haute Autorité de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HACA) official, Abidjan, June 2025.

²³ Interview with IDEG representative, Accra, June 2025.

all time in Ghanaian history, (...) and it was clear dissatisfaction with the previous government. They struggled to address the youth unemployment issue, as well as misuse of public resources and the foreign debt situation is out of control. (...) Corruption, and especially dividends of the bureaucracy need to be addressed.”²⁴

This perception is reinforced by declining trust in institutions. Surveys show falling voter turnout and satisfaction with democracy, alongside a widespread fall in the trust for all government institutions in Ghana (Yerkes & Hogan 2024). Several observers highlighted the opaque financing of political campaigns, which, together with Ghana's persisting struggle with corruption and ties to the transnational drug trade (de Lugo et al 2025), fuels suspicions of “dirty money” in politics and deepens scepticism about whether elections translate into better governance. In this sense, Ghana risks developing a formally competitive democratic system that no longer convinces large parts of its population that it serves their interests, rooted in struggles to deliver tangible socio-economic gains, employment, avenues for political participation, and access to a broader set of basic needs (Afrobarometer 2021; 2025).

The 2024 election, which returned John Dramani Mahama to the presidency, underscored both the durability and the strains of Ghana's model. Mahama campaigned on fixing the battered economy after years of debt accumulation, inflation, and repeated recourse to IMF bailouts. A Ghanaian political analyst commented: *“Mahama has indeed promised a lot. He needs to deliver and meet the expectations of the people. However, he may find it difficult to fulfil all of them. (...) Mahama needs therefore to be transparent about the political reality if he finds it difficult to deliver on his election promises”*.²⁵

The 2023 IMF Extended Credit Facility stabilised the cedi and brought short-term relief, but structural weaknesses remain. Ghana's persistent reliance on imports, fiscal mismanagement before elections, and massive external debt leave it vulnerable to shocks. After being asked about the most important issues the new Mahama administration needs to address, a representative from IDEG argued: *“The battered economy needs to be fixed as overspending is getting out of control and foreign debt is sky-rocketing, (...) this spending is a typical trait between the election years.”*²⁶ Replicating the same question to other respondents in Accra, the foreign debt situation and overspending are mentioned as key issues for the new administration. Another respondent emphasised the following: *“Undoubtedly, Mahama needs to resolve the budget deficit despite that he may lose political points for that. (...) The manipulation of the Bank of Ghana was serious and may have contributed to the budget deficits”*.²⁷ The Bank of Ghana scandal was first exposed in 2023, after customers noticed unauthorised bank transfers from their bank accounts. In the

²⁴ Interview with UNDP official, Accra, June 2025.

²⁵ Interview with political analyst, Accra, June 2025.

²⁶ Interview with IDEG representative, Accra, June 2025.

²⁷ Interview with political analyst, Accra, June 2025.

following years, extensive scrutiny led to the dismissal of several hundred employees, all accused of involvement in the actions.

These challenges are not only economic as they feed into public perceptions that the political class governs in its own interest, perpetuating inequality and exclusion. The information environment reflects this tension. Ghana enjoys a relatively pluralistic and vibrant media landscape within its region; yet there are emerging signs that press freedom, which was often celebrated as a safeguard of Ghana's democracy, is also under pressure (Afrobarometer 2025; Damilola 2025).

In Ghana, disinformation circulates widely, especially on youth-oriented social media. NGOs and fact-checkers such as the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) and its partner Fact-Check Ghana, along with Ghana Fact and DUBAWA Ghana, have set up a situation room to monitor election-related narratives. The EU Delegation in Accra also supports initiatives to strengthen media responses. Narratives of corruption, elite capture, and international hypocrisy resonate because they amplify real grievances. In the post-truth landscape, emotionally charged content blurs the line between critique, rumour, and manipulation.

Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana illustrate two sides of the same dilemma. In Abidjan, executive consolidation secures stability at the expense of pluralism, while in Accra, competitive elections persist but faith in their substance is waning. Both contexts highlight a legitimacy gap rooted in restricted access and uneven growth (Côte d'Ivoire) or an elitist two-party system (Ghana) that fuels disinformation. Real grievances, when amplified, provide fertile ground for political entrepreneurs at home and abroad to cast doubt on democratic institutions.

3.2 The ECOWAS-AES schism: Status quo versus a new dawn

The break between ECOWAS and the AES carries significant consequences for Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. For both countries, it not only undermines prospects for urgently needed regional security cooperation but also fuels narratives that question the credibility of democracy itself, deepening internal strains around governance, generational legitimacy, and external influence. As one journalist put it: *“ECOWAS is accused of being beholden to France, while AES stands for ‘true and legitimate’ sovereignty.”*²⁸

The sanctions regime imposed by ECOWAS after the coup in Mali in 2020, in concert with its Western partners, to deter further unconstitutional power grabs and breaches of the ECOWAS charter, rapidly became a symbol of division. Initially framed as temporary, sanctions expanded as coups multiplied from Mali to Burkina Faso and then Niger. What began as pressure to restore democratic rule hardened into an effort to isolate entire

²⁸ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

populations. This bred popular anger not only within the targeted states but also among populations in neighbouring countries dependent on cross-border trade.

*“The 2023 coup in Niger marked the breaking point.”*²⁹ Nigerian president Bola Ahmed Tinubu, then ECOWAS chair, threatened military intervention if President Mohamed Bazoum was not reinstated. The threat, however, was neither credible nor convincing. Past interventions had occurred in far smaller contexts (The Gambia in 2011) and Tinubu had not secured consensus at home. When the Nigerien junta, supported by its Sahelian counterparts, called the ECOWAS’s bluff, the bloc's credibility suffered a major blow. This moment provided impetus for the creation of the AES. Where ECOWAS came to be seen as the guardian of aging elites and their external backers, the AES presented itself as the sovereigntist alternative, embodying ‘true independence’ and a break with foreign tutelage. A dispute over unconstitutional power transfers thus evolved into a much broader ideological battle over legitimacy, sovereignty, foreign alignment, and the viability of democracy as a system of governance. *“The fight between AES and ECOWAS is about models of governance in many ways...”*³⁰ The ECOWAS-AES schism, therefore, feeds into narratives that now shape political discourse, social media and news spaces, and public opinion across the region.

Côte d’Ivoire

Côte d’Ivoire stands at the centre of this storm. As one of ECOWAS’s anchors, Abidjan is deeply invested in the bloc’s survival, yet Ouattara himself embodies many of the criticisms AES directs at the ‘old order’. His controversial third and fourth terms, are cast in AES propaganda as proof that ECOWAS applies double standards towards military rulers and democratically elected incumbents. The 2020 constitutional amendment that enabled President Ouattara to seek a third term and his decision to run for a fourth term in the 2025 election, were repeatedly raised as evidence of the declining adherence to democratic norms. The opposition rallied in 2024 to push for electoral reforms, yet to no avail (Aka 2024). To many, this represents not just domestic backsliding but a double standard vis-à-vis the AES: term limits are sacrosanct for some, yet for others seemingly elastic due to their alignment with the old political order and their Western backers. This message resonates and is amplified in the AES’s rhetoric. Ouattara is framed as emblematic of a system where there are rules for the ordinary and no rules for those in power. Moreover, he is often portrayed as remaining in power largely due to the backing of France, with some claiming that this support extends to alleged involvement in plots against the sitting leaders of the AES.

In the discursive battleground of social media, Ouattara is often portrayed as the face of *Françafrique* – an aging technocrat, propped up by Paris, clinging to power while inequality

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

deepens. CFI and Cellule Anti-Fake News experts described how these narratives spread through viral campaigns, ranging from claims that Ouattara was plotting against AES leaders to stories framing Côte d'Ivoire as a French proxy destabilising the Sahel. From interviews with the UNDP, it was reiterated such narratives tap into real frustrations: *“When inequality and exclusion persist, people are more ready to believe messages that delegitimise the state.”*³¹ For AES leaders, Pan-African influencers and youth activists alike, Côte d'Ivoire symbolise the hypocrisy of the old political order. In this line, the country has become a significant target for disinformation campaigns.

This symbolism matters because it fuses elite persistence with external alignment. While international partners commend Ouattara's leadership as a guarantor of stability and growth, youth-driven online spaces frame his governance as proof of dependency and stagnation. Memes and viral videos contrast his longevity with the youth and rhetoric of Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré, turning Côte d'Ivoire into the foil through which AES legitimises itself, a narrative reinforced by the Kremlin-linked influencer Kemi Seba. In this way, the Ivorian case is not merely national but regional: it crystallises the charge that ECOWAS protects elites at the expense of genuine democracy.

Ghana

Ghana, by contrast, has sought to mediate rather than confront. Rather than being attacked as the embodiment of the status quo, Accra under Mahama has sought to bridge the divide, opening dialogue with Sahelian juntas while remaining loyal to ECOWAS. Mahama's appointment of a special envoy for AES affairs, and his Sahel tour to Niamey, Ouagadougou, and Bamako, underline a pragmatic recognition that West Africa cannot be stabilised without engaging AES leaders. This reflects Ghana's acute vulnerability to security spillovers from Burkina Faso, but also its desire to keep ECOWAS relevant by preventing complete rupture:

*“Mahama seeks good relations with AES and ease the tensions with ECOWAS, which is in Ghana's own interest. (...) However, Ghana has always been engaged with its neighbours, most notably with the Accra Initiative which is designed to bridge conversations and prevent spill-over effects from the Sahel to the coastal states. This is indeed the motivation behind engaging with the putschists today (...) The relations have improved, but not a return to normality, (...) the relationship is still affected by genuine mistrust.”*³²

However, the strategy carries risks. At home, critics worry that engaging AES undermines Ghana's democratic reputation. Abroad, some partners fear dialogue legitimises the military regimes. Beneath these diplomatic calculations lies a generational challenge like the one of Côte d'Ivoire. In Ghana, the problem is less an individual leader than the

³¹ Interview with UNDP official, Abidjan, June 2025.

³² Interview with respondent 1, Accra, June 2025.

mentioned two-party system in which elites rotate power but without meaningful structural reform for the average Ghanaian citizen. The IMF's 17th bailout in 2023 stabilised the cedi but reinforced the perception of dependency, austerity and elite capture. For many young Ghanaians, Western-backed institutions supporting their democracy have come to mean debt and austerity rather than improved economic opportunities. In online spaces, AES rhetoric gains traction by tapping into these frustrations and amplifying demands for sovereignty and renewal.

Finally, while Ghana's middle-way approach to restoring diplomacy and security cooperation may offer advantages, it also carries certain risks. By engaging with the AES-leaders, Accra could inadvertently legitimise and reinforce militarised, heavy-handed counter-insurgency strategies, including those promoted by Russian mercenary companies that have so far failed to stem the advance of jihadist groups. Instead of containing the threat, such approaches have rather fuelled its expansion (Raleigh et al. 2021), raising the prospect that instability in the Sahel will increasingly spill across Ghana's borders. It is also a tricky balancing act, as the decision of specific countries to bilaterally engage in such talks outside of the ECOWAS structure may further the impression of a divided regional bloc in the current stand-off with the AES.³³

Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana arguably occupy opposite symbolic roles in the ECOWAS-AES schism. Abidjan is the target, portrayed as the old guard clinging to power with Western blessing; Accra is the mediator, seeking to maintain dialogue in the hope of reconciliation. Abidjan is seen as less reliable than Accra, given their specific post-colonial history with France and historic ties to the halls of power in Paris: *"The Paris-Ouattara relation raise suspicions among many, and if not truly felt also by the top echelon in the AES regimes, it is at least providing a useful critique."*³⁴

The schism between ECOWAS and AES is therefore more than an institutional and diplomatic rupture. It is a struggle over narratives and legitimacy, shaped as much by disillusioned youth, contested democratic norms and an increasingly polarised information environment as by the hard realities of security. Here, the role of younger generations becomes decisive.

3.3 Generational disconnect and class divide: Young versus old, elites versus marginalised youths

In West Africa, as in most sub-Saharan African countries, youth constitute the demographic majority yet often remain marginalised from economic and political power (Cheeseman

³³ Interview with political analyst, Accra, June 2025.

³⁴ Interview with UNDP official, Accra, June 2025.

2022). This persistent exclusion fuels resentment towards the established order and addressing it has become a key factor in tackling the problem of disinformation.

Increasingly networked through digital platforms, young people have played central roles in protests and popular mobilisations across the continent (Hodzi & Zihnioğlu 2024). These frustrations are also evident in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, where entrenched political elites preside over relatively stable states that nonetheless grapple with a generation of youths who are losing faith in the ability of their political systems to deliver (Mensah & Bagnetto 2025). While the issue of debt and sluggish economic growth do not play out as starkly in Côte d'Ivoire, the political and economic inequalities are glaring, underscoring the perception of a regime run by old and out-of-touch politicians.

Within the ECOWAS-AES debacle this undercurrent is manifesting itself in different ways. The military rulers, in the AES, have capitalised on these resentments and aim to channel such discontent, casting themselves as vehicles of generational revival. Figures like Burkina Faso's Ibrahim Traoré stand in stark contrast to the region's aging civilian leaders, many of whom are viewed as detached and complicit in decades of stagnation. This divide is not solely about age but also symbolises a broader division that is also tied to class, wealth, and access. ECOWAS and its long-serving leaders is often perceived as an old-boys club of political elites that benefits the few while excluding the many, framed as corrupted by their submission to Western powers and a Western-led international order (Wright 2025).

Côte d'Ivoire

As stated, Côte d'Ivoire exemplifies this generational fault line. The country's post-war stability has rested on the continued dominance of an elite faction, with President Alassane Ouattara – born in 1942 – at the helm since 2010. While this stability has reassured investors and ensured remarkable growth, it has also deepened a generational disconnect. For younger Ivorians, especially those under 35 who now make up most of the population (World Bank 2025), Ouattara represents not stability but a status quo in which they feel left out.

This disconnect is visible in two arenas. Firstly, governance and political access: the ruling class is dominated by figures who came of age during the independence era, while younger leaders remain marginalised. Mobilised youth were central to Côte d'Ivoire's conflicts (Hamer 2011; HRW 2012). The same is true for some of its most notable protests, such as the protests that came in response to Ouattara's decision to run for a third term, where over 50 people were killed in August 2020 (HRW 2020; Amnesty 2020). Secondly, the digital information space: an increasing number of young Ivorians obtain much of their information from digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. As one AFP respondent put it: *"TikTok is 'fuel to unrest'... One should never neglect how content*

has the ability to fuel anger. The platform influences young audiences – which ultimately could affect how they will cast their ballots.”³⁵

Throughout our interviews, respondents noted Ouattara’s decision to address this issue, but stressed that his administration appears out of touch with how political meaning is constructed and disseminated online, as well as how to counter it. According to both interviews with local fact-checkers, a journalist tied to the Ivorian network of online press professionals (REPPRELCI) and the AFP, leading members of the administration see platforms such as TikTok and others as separated from the political realm.³⁶ They remain tied to an understanding in which they themselves and other politicians are the true wielders of power, underestimating the impact that such platforms play in circulating rumours and stories that may have high political potency.³⁷ As one journalist from AFP stated: *“disinformation gains traction as social media is neglected by the government”*.³⁸

While the Ivorian government has developed formal strategies to combat disinformation, these are often perceived as reactive and unevenly enforced, paradoxically fuelling further disinformation and threatening press freedom in the country. The strategies are also criticised for their limited ability to reach WhatsApp and TikTok (Deux 2024). The legal tightening around ‘fake news’ has raised human rights concerns without necessarily building trust in official narratives (Freedom House 2020), a notion which is widely shared among opposition parties, who feel that disinformation is being used as a tool of suppression while also highlighting that disinformation grows in places absent of transparency. When asked about the state of disinformation and false news online, a leading member of the main opposition party replied: *“Well, disinformation is not a good thing. But it is something all political parties partake in. And we should not focus solely on disinformation, but how such stories grow in the absence of transparency and democratic norms.”³⁹* Going on to complain about the electoral process and the barring of opposition figures they reiterated the need to see disinformation as a symptom and not the cause of the political turmoil in Côte d'Ivoire: *“People get arrested just for TikTok, (...) it stands as a threat against freedom of speech, underpinning the authoritarian tendency we are witnessing in Côte d'Ivoire”*.⁴⁰

These factors together have further cemented a view among many in Côte d'Ivoire and the region that the political class is out of touch with ordinary people and the youth particularly. These feelings are not left to themselves, but rather seized upon by political entrepreneurs, many who operate and navigate far better on social media than those who run or advise the

³⁵ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

³⁶ Interview with REPPRELCI journalist; AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

³⁷ Interview with REPPRELCI journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

³⁸ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

³⁹ Interview with PDCI-RDA representatives, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

sitting government. The external dimension is significant, with the junta in Burkina Faso actively instrumentalising these sentiments.

Through President Ibrahim Traoré, who seized power in Burkina Faso in 2022 at the age of 34, a generational contrast is drawn with the region's older establishment leaders, such as Ghana's John Mahama (66), Nigeria's Bola Tinubu (73), and Côte d'Ivoire's Alassane Ouattara (83). The young junta leaders in Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as their older compatriots in Niger, have embraced this form of generational populism articulated through digital platforms. While much can be said of Traoré and Goïta's struggle to deliver effective governance, they have mastered the symbolic politics of social media. By collaborating with Russia and adapting its techniques of amplification and information warfare, tailored to regional and local contexts, these dynamics are becoming increasingly indigenous. In comparison, as most of our respondents noted, Ivorian authorities appear both slow and hesitant.

As the AFP journalist noted: *"Captain Ibrahim Traoré gets it, the man is only 36 years of age and to a much greater extent in tune with but also shaping perceptions of reality on these digital platforms."*⁴¹ One of the most visible manifestations of this is the Burkinabé Information Department's use of "deep fakes" and other AI-based methods in its online information warfare. The AFP journalist further noted *"(...)in fact, among the first things Traore did in power, was to establish a disinformation taskforce which Ivorian authorities have yet to form a counter-taskforce against. Traore is a weak president with a weak rule, but through narratives and information space he can mask this weakness."*⁴² Meanwhile, Ivorian authorities have thus far been unsure how to counter malign content effectively and craft effective anti-disinformation strategies. The result is a vacuum in which those who can tap into powerful narratives – often activists, influencers, and AES-aligned amplifiers – are increasingly filling.

In sum, Côte d'Ivoire's greatest strength – continuity and technocratic stability – may also be its greatest vulnerability. In a region where legitimacy is increasingly contested through narratives, memes, and mobile videos, failing to engage youth in the digital sphere risks leaving the state exposed to both external disinformation campaigns and homegrown frustration (Deux 2024).

Ghana

In Ghana, the generational and class divides are no less central, but manifest through democratic fatigue and economic frustration rather than the continued dominance of a single leader. The country's political order, shaped by alternation between the NDC and NPP, is often hailed as resilient; yet, for many young Ghanaians, it appears as a closed

⁴¹ Interview with AFP journalist, Abidjan, June 2025.

⁴² Ibid.

system. Entry into politics is prohibitively expensive, family networks dominate access, and campaign financing remains opaque. The issue is politics characterised by a cartelised two-party system whose ties to the West are often seen as perpetuating austerity and dependency (Odijie & Imoro 2021; Agomor 2019).

Disillusionment is real: official data show youth unemployment averaged 32% (15–24) and 22.5% (15–35) in 2025 (Ghana Statistical Service 2025). In online spaces, this frustration fuses with AES-aligned rhetoric, amplifying pan-Africanist, anti-colonial, and sovereigntist narratives. At the same time, local fact-checking coalitions ran a national ‘situation room’ to counter falsehoods and disinformation spread online during the 2024 election. A respondent stressed: *“The establishment of AES caused spill-over effects in especially one domain: the information space. (...) In Ghana, we see the intensity of political influence operations financed by malign actors including Russia and China. (...) They have the ability of using more resources on information influence than the West.”*⁴³

Similar to Côte d'Ivoire, the sovereigntist agenda is not solely about geopolitical leaning but also about a generational struggle in Ghana. In Accra, Mahama in his second period represents a system of rotating elites constrained by the IMF and enforced austerity, which young Ghanaians increasingly see as democracy without dividends – despite the cedi's rally and promising debt-restructuring talks. Across both cases, the charge is the same: Western alignment has produced leaders seen as more accountable abroad, and especially to Western capitals such as Paris, Brussels, or Washington, than to their own populations. This discursive shift weakens the credibility of individual governments and erodes trust in the regional order they anchor (ISD Global 2025). Mahama has responded by diversifying partnerships – turning to China, the Gulf, and regional outreach to AES leaders – while still maintaining Ghana's democratic reputation.

A Ghanaian political analyst noted: *“The geopolitical landscape in Ghana and the wider region is diverse. (...) Turkey exercises purely military-driven influence and many coastal states have invested in Turkish drones. (...) In terms of the UAE, it is difficult for them to gain traction in Ghana, because Ghana is purely Christian.”* On China, the analyst continued: *“I understand why governments turn to China, but enhanced China-Africa relations come with a price: Reduction of transparency, legal norms of governance and accountability. That is the outcome when China enters the stage”*.⁴⁴

Still, more than diversifying external partners is needed to strengthen trust in Ghana's democracy, especially among youth. According to Afrobarometer (2022), satisfaction with democracy has dropped from 74% in 2012 to just over 50% today, and more than 94% of Ghanaians believe some government officials are corrupt. Declining trust is also mirrored in participation: voter turnout fell below 64% in the 2024 elections, a striking drop from

⁴³ Interview with respondent 2, Accra, June 2025.

⁴⁴ Interview with political analyst, Accra, June 2025.

nearly 80% only a decade earlier. These figures highlight a growing disparity between formal democratic resilience and popular legitimacy.

The economic and fiscal dimensions deepen this divide. Ghana's youth unemployment crisis has created a pervasive sense of exclusion from the benefits of democracy and growth. Despite repeated IMF bailouts, including the 2023 Extended Credit Facility (see IMF 2023), which stabilised the cedi, structural problems – high debt, import dependency, fiscal mismanagement – have left young people feeling trapped in an economy unable to absorb their aspirations. For many, this reinforces the view that democracy is less about opportunity and inclusion than about elite rotation at the top with the backing of international financial institutions (The Economist 2022). A Ghanaian political analyst echoed: "(...) *The looting must stop, and impunity needs to be abolished. If the youth unemployment rates keep rising, this may further erupt into instability in Ghana*".⁴⁵ These narratives are pinned on the grievances of the youth, and the perception that the political elites – no matter the incumbent – are struggling to tackle and address their interests and provide a future they may believe in, resulting in cost-of-living protests and pre-election discontent (Reuters 2024). Once people lose faith in the democratic system due to absences of basic service delivery, vertical trust erodes between citizen and the state.

Like Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana's (dis)information ecosystem amplifies these frustrations (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp have become primary spaces for youth political expression, but also fertile ground for disinformation and populist narratives – especially potent within societies where a culture for rumours combines with frail social cohesion. Here, messages about elite corruption, foreign hypocrisy, and AES-style sovereignty gain traction – not because they are entirely fabricated, but because they reflect and amplify narratives which resonate with lived experiences. Youth increasingly measure politics not against the risk of fiscal crises, but against the unmet promise of democratic dividends.

In short, Ghana's generational divide is defined less by aging incumbency and more by a system that young people see as procedurally democratic but exclusionary. The combination of falling trust, economic exclusion, and a digitally networked youth population makes this divide a critical vulnerability, one that – if left unaddressed – risks eroding the very legitimacy that has long underpinned Ghana's democracy. Thus, in both Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, there exists a similar general perception of youth being excluded from the benefits of democracy and growth, and in both, this perception is weaponised and amplified by internal and external actors in ways that threaten the legitimacy of their political regimes.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

3.4 The security threat in the northern areas

The northern territories of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire is at the frontline of the southward expansion of jihadist insurgencies from the Sahel. As the conflict has continued to spread, the risk of coastal spillover has been increasing. Both Togo and Benin have suffered repeated attacks with the latter seeing an upsurge in violence in 2025 (Nsaiba 2025). Ghana has so far remained largely unscathed while Côte d'Ivoire faced a series of attacks that struck its northern areas in 2020 and 2021 that were subsequently brought under control (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) 2021; 2022). The regional trajectory in the short term seems clear: jihadist groups such as JNIM and ISGS affiliates are expanding their operational reach southwards, and the question is whether Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire can continue to hold the line.

The coordinated assaults in Côte d'Ivoire in 2020-2022 were seen as attempts by jihadists to establish a foothold in one of the region's most strategically significant coastal states (KAS 2022; ICG 2023). Since then, Abidjan strengthened security deployments in the north and rolled out social programs aimed at youth employment and poverty which have helped to reduce militant activity. The security situation has since remained relatively calm, but a recent attack killing four villagers during an incursion by "unidentified armed individuals" from Burkina Faso shows that the threat is persistent (Jeune Afrique 2025). Recent spillover to Benin and Togo shows that even when conditions appear stable and under control, they can change rapidly.

Ghana's case is somewhat more puzzling. Despite sharing a long and porous border with Burkina Faso, the country has not recorded a single large-scale militant attack. Reports state that the country is used by JNIM as a logistical corridor and rear base, where militants gather food, fuel, motorcycles, and even explosives such as dynamite, while also resting and hiding from counterterrorism pressure (de Bruijne et al. 2024). This has raised speculation of a tacit non-aggression pact: by tolerating limited jihadist activity on its territory, Ghana avoids becoming a battlefield. While this arrangement may provide stability for now, it may risk replicating the trajectory of Benin, where militant use of the borderlands as a rear base gradually evolved into entrenched presence, meddling in local conflicts, and a surge of attacks in the last year (Nsaiba 2025). Although insurgent groups have not established permanent foothold in the northern territories of Ghana, violence committed against civilians and battles between groups have swelled over the past few years. This surge is prompted by land-rights issues, pastoralist conflicts with sedentary communities, communal conflicts and chieftaincy disputes. Conflicts between chieftaincy institutions in Northern Ghana have been prompted by factors such as the increasing interference of political parties in chieftaincy institutions (Bukari et al. 2021), issues of land rights, competition over resources (Abideen 2023) and disputes over succession (Issifu 2021).

Both countries have pursued a dual-track strategy of military containment and socio-economic development in their northern areas. In Côte d'Ivoire, this strategy has been helped along by its strong economic performance, enabling investment in infrastructure

and education alongside larger counterinsurgency deployments. Ghana, meanwhile, has invested in border security and surveillance, including through joint patrols with neighbours under the Accra Initiative, but fiscal instability, debt constraints, and a hyper-competitive partisan political system may have reduced the effectiveness of the developmental track (de Bruijne et al. 2024). Importantly, local perceptions seem to differ from official narratives. While governments frame the threat primarily as external spillover, residents in northern Ghana emphasise internal vulnerabilities such as youth unemployment, farmer-herder conflict and distrust of state institutions as more immediate drivers of radicalisation (UNDP 2023). From our own interviews, particularly in Ghana, we also noted that a discussion on the potential security threats in the north remained largely absent. Such a disconnect may risk leaving structural enablers of violent extremism unaddressed and left to fester.

Furthermore, the mentioned Accra Initiative, has been gravely weakened by the wave of coups across the Sahel. Intelligence-sharing became nearly impossible amid mutual distrust. Côte d'Ivoire and Benin continue to have strained relations, while Togo and Ghana have sought cooperation with the military juntas, mirroring the broader ECOWAS-schism. The initiative is not dead, as exemplified by Ghana's special envoy to the AES, Lt. Col. Larry Gbevlo-Lartey, but its potential as a framework for regional security cooperation depends on the countries mending ties, which is unlikely in the short term.

Consequently, without effective intelligence-sharing and joint patrols, armed groups are freer to exploit border areas for smuggling, logistics, and maintaining rear bases. JNIM's fuel blockade on Malian cities since September 2025, including the capital Bamako, illustrates how insurgents are extending their strategic depth and probing vulnerabilities of the Sahelian juntas (Monteau 2025). This further shows how armed groups – secular and jihadist – have consolidated control over vast rural territories in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, while state authority has retreated into major urban centres. This shrinking state presence may be giving rise to what can be described as 'garrison states' with significant consequences for neighbouring countries seeking to avoid conflict spillover (Bøås 2025).

Furthermore, a respondent emphasised that “(...) *transnational crime, narcotics- and arms trafficking stand as key regional issues affecting the coastal states*”.⁴⁶ The Gulf of Guinea is a hub for piracy causing disruptions in the international trade chains and shipping, smuggling activities and transnational drug distribution (see Asamoah Agyekum 2024). Confronted with a question on this topic, the EU Delegation in Accra stressed the following: “*In addition to the various issues linked to illicit migration, transnational organised crime, disinformation and corruption plaguing Ghana, maritime security has become even more important and must be put on the agenda – both domestically in Ghana and regionally. We talk a lot about the insurgency threat in the north, but we should pay more attention to maritime security (...) The EU prioritises initiatives to combat transnational crime in the Gulf of Guinea, and the*

⁴⁶ Interview with respondent 1, Accra, June 2025.

coastal states have become a priority for the EU in this mission".⁴⁷ This means that a security lens should not solely seek to address the issues within the north, as it is increasingly clear that Ghana and its ports play a role within the global logistical drugs-trafficking chains (de Lugo et al. 2025).

Lastly, the rise of farmer-herder and other localised conflicts over land rights in the north of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire may be partially explained through the stoking of grievances through rumours and fake news spread online.⁴⁸ The issue of amplified grievances travelling from TikTok, Telegram and other channels, potentially translating into real-life violence are not solely a phenomenon in the centres but a worryingly rising trend within the north. Farmer-herder conflicts emerged in Côte d'Ivoire in the early 1970s, when Fulanis immigrated to Côte d'Ivoire after the great Sahelian drought. Their arrival caused minimal opposition from the Ivorian government at the time, since the pastoralists contributed to national beef production (Bassett 1988). However, the entry of Fulanis developed into grievances of Senufo peasants due to crop damage caused by cattle grazing which was uncompensated. Sedentary communities in the savanna region thus felt marginalised and neglected, and such grievances persist to this day.

The Fulanis migrated to the Ghanaian borderlands after recurring Sahelian droughts in the 1950s-60s, and swiftly fuelled conflicts between cattle owners and peasants for the same reasons as in Côte d'Ivoire; destruction of crops, land-rights and killing of cattle (see Tonah 2006). Farmer-herder conflicts in the northern districts of Ghana are still present today. The grievances shared by sedentary communities are still induced by the multiplicity of land-rights factors – not necessarily linked to environmental change, drought or resource scarcity (see Amankwaa 2019). Informants in Ghana also elaborated on these issues and stressed that the security issue in the North should not solely be viewed through the informal gold sector, chieftaincy disputes or through the rear bases of groups such as JNIM. Ethnic conflicts between herder-Fulanis and sedentary ethnic groups competing for land play a key role. As one Ghanaian respondent emphasised: *"The neglect and marginalisation of Fulanis in the Northern territory of Ghana (...) and I want to exemplify with the difficulty they face with getting ID papers, for instance, (...) this creates fertile ground for recruitment to violent jihadi groupings in North"*.⁴⁹ The Fulanis have found themselves to be victims of negative stereotypes and prejudices – such as Fulani being armed robbers, rapists and their lifestyle imply uncivilization – and these attitudes have led to social exclusion, denial of resources and settlement (Bukari & Schareika 2015). Still, the relationship between farmers and pastoralists in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire also shows elements of cooperation, particularly in resource management, trade, and cattle entrustment as they share the same spaces for livelihoods (see Bukari, Sow & Scheffran 2018).

⁴⁷ Interview with EU officials, Accra, June 2025.

⁴⁸ Interview with UNDP official, Accra, June 2025.

⁴⁹ Interview with respondent 2, Accra, June 2025.

Overall, if the current trajectory of expanding insurgent activities in the Sahel and rising internal tensions and conflict continue, the security challenges in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire will intensify significantly. The ability of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire to contain violent extremism will depend not only on border and maritime security, but also on addressing internal grievances and managing a fractured regional order.

4. Three possible futures

Based on the themes and analysis presented above, we sketch out three possible futures for Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. These scenarios are not deterministic predictions, but plausible trajectories shaped by key domestic and regional variables.

For Côte d'Ivoire the decisive factors are:

1. The stability of the economy, above all cocoa prices on international markets.
2. The 'Ouattara factor' – his health, potential death, and the capacity of elites to manage a succession.
3. The security environment in the north of the country.

For Ghana they are:

1. The management of sovereign debt and President Mahama's ability to stabilise fiscal policy.
2. The security situation in the northern borderlands.
3. The gradual erosion of confidence in democratic institutions.

While both countries share vulnerabilities in their northern peripheries, their economic profiles diverge. Ghana faces an acute debt burden and repeated reliance on external bailouts, raising questions about whether the international environment will continue to provide refinancing options. Successive governments have 'kicked the can down the road', relying on external restructuring and short-term fixes rather than addressing structural weaknesses. With international financial conditions tightening, Accra's ability to secure refinancing in the event of a future default may be historically constrained. Côte d'Ivoire, by contrast, has enjoyed sustained growth, but it is heavily reliant on cocoa exports. It also deals with pressing questions about the legitimacy of Ouattara's fourth term in office. A downturn in international prices, combined with questions either of Ouattara's rule or if the old man were to die, raises questions about his succession. These questions, combined with possible renewed insecurity in the north, could destabilise its growth model and tear at the already fragile social cohesion in this post-conflict nation. If crises converge, both countries may prove fragile. While the Ivorian crisis may seem more potent and acute, the Ghanaian crisis is creeping and may therefore prove itself difficult to manage within the political logic of the contemporary clientelist Ghanaian democracy. This leaves us with the following future scenarios.

A brighter future

In an optimistic future scenario, Côte d'Ivoire enjoys stable cocoa prices on the international market and can continue its drive to diversify its economy. Even in the event of a financial or price shock, the Ivorian economy proves itself as mature and robust enough to weather it. Ouattara continues to rule the country with relative stability while laying the groundwork for a successor, either within his own party or from the opposition, at the conclusion of his fourth term. The security situation, due to the strong economy and effective rule of Ouattara can weather any serious incursions by groups such as JNIM.

In Ghana, Mahama is able to cut the budget deficit while progressing in his restructuring talks with international creditors (Africa Report 2025). Through these reforms, the government is able both to deal with the issue of the debt and focus on laying the foundation for more inclusive economic growth. The security situation in the north stabilises, and by these measures of economic and security reform the Ghanaian citizenry regains some trust in public institutions and further democratic erosion is stalled.

Status Quo

In a more moderate outlook, the economy experiences either that (1) the Ivorian economy keeps its relatively high growth rate, cocoa prices remain stable, yet growth remains uneven. Alternatively, (2) either a weakening growth rate fuelled by falling cocoa prices or a more demanding macro-economic picture.

One trajectory sees Ouattara's fourth term unfold without major political violence but marked by persistent legitimacy concerns and a failure to prepare a viable successor. An alternative trajectory involves escalating political instability during the fourth term, potentially triggered by violence or an abrupt leadership rupture caused by Ouattara's premature departure from office or unexpected death. Such a scenario would pose a significant challenge to Côte d'Ivoire's political system.

The security environment (1) remains relatively stable, yet incursions and the issue of farmer-herder conflicts remain a low-intensity and small-scale persistent issue to deal with. Alternatively, the security situation (2) in the north drastically worsens with far more bold attacks from JNIM and other groups – much of the dormant grievances harking back decades are instrumentalised by political and violent entrepreneurs who, through the use of social platforms and other forms of communication, spread and amplify ethno-nationalist, jihadist, and other discourses promoting political violence.

In Ghana (1), Mahama's reforms stall, and while political rhetoric is centred on tackling corruption and reducing the debt and reaching an understanding with creditors, he is only successful in "kicking the can". His reforms remain largely cosmetic, but through talks with creditors, he can extend the ongoing issue of debt servicing. Alternatively, (2) he is not able to do either, and it is blatant that both the reforms are shallow, and creditors are more wary of reaching a debt-restructuring. A financial or economic shock to Ghana causes a debt

crisis. There is little international appetite to come to Ghana's rescue, as most creditors are themselves constrained.

The security situation remains stable, yet plagued by incursions and violence, both by Jihadist groups and conflicts between landowners, farmers, and herders remain a persistent issue. Alternatively, Ghana experiences a sharp increase in attacks from Jihadist groups who have become much bolder. As the states in the north increasingly fail to project power outside of their limited garrisons and major urban sites, Ghana becomes increasingly part of this growing conflict space. This security crisis further strains the social cohesion of Ghana and trust in the legitimacy of both the President and the political system as a whole.

As both the reforms have somewhat stabilised the economy (1) and the security situation remains relatively stable (1), the slow erosion of trust in the political institutions and the Ghanaian democracy is halted, but in no way fully regained. In such a scenario the Ghanaian democracy would likely be able to handle a smaller-scale shock as societal tensions and grievances remain at a moderate level. Alternatively, either the economic situation in part due to failed reforms and debt-talks (2), or a security crisis (2) in the north rapidly erode and put huge question marks on the Ghanaian democratic system. Such a scenario in which either the economic and governance variable or the security situation has a negative outcome could prove a monumental task for the Ghanaian democracy. While the Ghanaian democracy nominally may seem highly functional, with high scores on indexes such as Freedom House, it is also evident that if one digs deeper, there are systemic issues that indicate that the Ghanaian democracy may not weather such a shock.

A dark horizon

Having considered both an optimistic and a more moderate outlook, we can also discuss a pessimistic, improbable yet possible future in which all three variables in either country, or in the worst case, both, come to fruition. This entails for Côte d'Ivoire that the economy is hit by a financial crisis, which may be due to a falling price of cocoa; meanwhile, one experiences a political crisis as either Ouattara dies or a combination of his weakening political legitimacy and being unable to handle a tough macro-economic situation leads to a loss of investor confidence. These developments have significant ramifications for Côte d'Ivoire and Ouattara's political project, cemented as a project of peace, stability, and growth post-2011. As this project becomes increasingly fragile and bubbling with social tensions and unmet expectations, it opens the door for political entrepreneurs, both domestic and foreign, to further exacerbate the pre-existing fault lines in the country. The risk of a renewal of civil conflict is real, and identifying structurally weak and exposed states, groups like JNIM and others gain a much greater foothold in the north as the regime in Yamoussoukro does not have the bandwidth to deal with a series of confounding crises. In such a worst-case scenario, societal tensions, as well as strains within civil-military and military-state relations, could resurface if a politico-military figure with a radically different vision for Côte d'Ivoire emerges – potentially reshaping the country's domestic and foreign policy orientation.

In Ghana, the situation in the north deteriorates sharply. The current tacit non-aggression pact between jihadist groups and local actors breaks down, and incursions intensify, particularly along the Beninese borderlands. Militants move from temporary rear bases into more semi-permanent positions, consolidating territorial presence. At the same time, a collapse in Burkina Faso and/or Mali – both of which are already deeply unstable – cannot be ruled out. Several reporters on the ground stress that such a development is no longer unthinkable.⁵⁰ The combined effect would be a radically altered security environment for Ghana. Alongside persistent economic fragilities, this creates a compound crisis that severely tests the resilience of the Ghanaian democracy. Such a scenario represents both an acute and a long-term threat, as Ghana would not only face direct violence but also potential waves of refugees fleeing across borders. The political system – already strained by clientelism, debt burdens, and declining trust – could find itself unable to contain the pressures. In such a setting, the sustainability of Ghana's democratic project would be thrown into profound question.

⁵⁰ Interview with CFI official; AFP journalist; local respondents in Accra and Abidjan, June 2025.

5. Conclusion

This report has shown that both Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire face a convergence of different vulnerabilities: insecurity spilling south from the Sahel, both through the rise and proximity of insurgent groups and through the destabilising actions of regimes within the AES. The fractured regional order, defined by the ECOWAS-AES divide, forms a demanding challenge for both countries. New geopolitical actors are entering the stage, as China, Turkey, the UAE and Russia with its partners in the Sahel all play different roles in the region. In this context, disinformation has become a significant factor – not only as a tool of external actors, but also of political entrepreneurs at home who exploit grievances for personal and political gains, threatening to erode social cohesion, vertical trust, and tear at the democratic legitimacy of the two bulwarks of West Africa. The trajectories of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana diverge: Côte d'Ivoire's increasingly centralised executive and succession risks stand in contrast to Ghana's more pluralistic, yet elite-dominated political system, which, despite its competitiveness, risks disenchanting its citizenry.

What sets this study apart is its focus on how these structural pressures intersect with contested narratives, youth disillusionment, and regional polarisation. Few comparable analyses integrate these dimensions, within this region. Our relatively minor qualitative fieldwork, combined with desk-based research, therefore provides a pilot-level insight into these complex dynamics.

Looking forward, the best-case scenario would see both countries stabilising their economies, addressing internal grievances, and sustaining their roles as anchors of coastal stability. A more likely outcome may be a fragile status quo, where legitimacy slowly erodes and uncertainty deepens. In the worst case, domestic fragilities combined with regional shocks could trigger spiralling crises that would be extremely difficult to manage. To anticipate and respond to these potential future scenarios, more systematic and comparative research is warranted. This study represents an early step – highlighting both the resilience and fragility of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, and the uncertain paths that lie ahead.

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