



ROUNDTABLE REPORT

The Role of Political Parties: Rethinking Inter-Party Dialogue and Consensus-Building in West Africa

Senegal Consultations

28 April 2026 – Dakar, Republic of Senegal



Executive Summary

On 28 April 2026, a high-level regional roundtable convened in Dakar, bringing together approximately forty political leaders, representatives of electoral management bodies, civil society actors, and regional organizations. The objective was to examine the current state and future of inter-party dialogue in West Africa in the context of growing democratic fragility.

The roundtable was jointly organized by the African Inter-Party Dialogue Network (AIPDN) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in collaboration with the ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC), the African Governance Institute (AGI), the Oslo Center, the Prospect Peace Institute–Africa, and the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP Senegal).

Discussions revealed a central paradox: while inter-party dialogue is widely recognized as essential for democratic stability, it remains inconsistently applied, insufficiently institutionalized, and frequently undermined by mistrust, political exclusion, and weak enforcement mechanisms.

Participants emphasized that West Africa stands at a critical juncture. Dialogue must evolve from an ad hoc, crisis-driven tool into a permanent, inclusive, and credible governance mechanism. The roundtable culminated in a shared commitment to strengthen structured dialogue frameworks as a cornerstone of democratic governance, electoral integrity, and peacebuilding.

Objectives of the Roundtable

Overall Objective

To strengthen inter-party dialogue as a strategic tool for democratic consolidation, electoral integrity, and political stability in West Africa.

Specific Objectives

- Review and contextualize outcomes from the Nairobi 2025 roundtable
- Examine the evolving role of political parties in the region
- Assess the effectiveness of existing dialogue mechanisms
- Analyze the impact of political exclusion and lawfare
- Identify lessons from resilient democratic contexts
- Develop actionable, region-specific recommendations

Methodology

The roundtable adopted a participatory and dialogue-driven approach, including:

- Keynote address
- Thematic panel discussions
- Case study presentations
- Facilitated group and breakout sessions
- Plenary reflections and consensus-building exercises

The methodology emphasized inclusivity, peer learning, and practical outcomes, bringing together ruling and opposition parties alongside institutional and civil society actors.

Key Findings: From Diagnosis to Solutions/State of Inter-Party Dialogue in West Africa

Inter-party dialogue mechanisms across the region remain uneven in both structure and effectiveness.

- Some countries have established permanent platforms that foster trust and continuity
- Others rely on ad hoc mechanisms, often activated only during crises

Permanent mechanisms were widely viewed as more credible and sustainable. In contrast, executive-led dialogue processes often face legitimacy challenges, particularly among opposition actors.

Governance systems in the region are increasingly multi-stakeholder, involving civil society, electoral bodies, and, at times, security actors. While this reflects political complexity, it also underscores the need for clearer institutional frameworks.



Political Parties, Electoral Integrity, and Dispute Management

Inter-party dialogue is a core component of credible electoral systems.

Where embedded in electoral processes, dialogue:

- Prevents disputes
- Facilitates consensus on electoral rules
- Strengthens cooperation with electoral management bodies
- Enhances enforcement of codes of conduct

However, major challenges persist:

- Unilateral electoral reforms undermine trust
- Codes of conduct often lack effective enforcement mechanisms
- Limited political will weakens dialogue outcomes

A notable observation was the perceived lack of leadership from some regional bodies and francophone countries in advancing electoral dialogue initiatives.

Lawfare, Political Exclusion, and Democratic Legitimacy

Participants identified the instrumentalization of legal frameworks (“lawfare”) as a growing systemic risk.

Key concerns include:

- Use of judicial processes to disqualify candidates
- Administrative barriers to political participation
- Unequal access to state resources
- Perceptions of judicial bias

Political exclusion affects:

- Opposition actors
- Women and youth
- Minority and marginalized groups

In highly centralized systems, electoral competition becomes existential, intensifying mistrust and reducing incentives for cooperation.

Participants also highlighted:

- Weak internal democracy within political parties
- Institutional fragility combined with leadership deficits
- The need to strengthen civic space and citizen awareness

Key insight: While the law underpins legitimacy, its manipulation undermines democracy.

Dialogue in Contexts of Crisis, Polarization, and Transition

In fragile political contexts, dialogue becomes both more necessary and more difficult.

Effective dialogue in such settings requires:

- Neutral facilitation
- Inclusivity
- Sustained engagement

Lessons from regional experiences underscore the importance of:

- Rebuilding trust after crises
- Reintegrating excluded actors
- Linking dialogue to broader peacebuilding processes

The breakdown of dialogue mechanisms was identified as an early warning signal of instability.



Cross-Cutting Issues

Several themes emerged consistently across discussions:

- A persistent trust deficit remains the primary constraint
- Dialogue platforms often lack independence
- Regional norms exist but are inconsistently implemented
- Citizen engagement remains limited
- Inclusion of women, youth, and marginalized groups is inadequate

Strategic Implications

A systemic transformation is required:

- From ad hoc → permanent dialogue mechanisms
- From elite-driven → inclusive participation
- From reactive → preventive governance
- From politically controlled → independent systems

This shift requires both strong national ownership and enhanced regional coordination.

Recommendations

Leveraging ECOWAS Regional Norms to Support National Dialogue Platforms

- Article 36 of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (A/SP1/12/01) calls on Member States to institutionalize national mediation systems.
- Article 53(i) of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008) encourages the establishment of permanent platforms bringing together electoral management bodies, political parties, security services, media, and civil society to promote dialogue, develop codes of conduct, and ensure peaceful dispute resolution.

These regional norms require Member States to establish inter-party dialogue platforms that:

- Operate independently of executive control
- Ensure inclusive representation, including smaller and emerging parties
- Meet regularly, not only during electoral periods

The ECOWAS Commission should:

- Integrate support for inter-party dialogue platforms into routine engagement with Member States
- Adopt a structural and preventive (not only crisis-driven) approach to political dialogue

The ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN) should:

- Monitor the functioning of inter-party dialogue mechanisms as a key early warning indicator
- Treat breakdowns in dialogue as signals of structural risk requiring preventive action

For example, the breakdown of political dialogue in Benin could have served as an early warning signal ahead of the attempted coup of 7 December 2025.

The ECOWAS Commission should also systematically document and publicly report on Member States' compliance with provisions related to dialogue and multiparty governance.

Institutionalization of Dialogue

- Establish permanent, legally mandated inter-party dialogue platforms
- Ensure independence from executive control
- Promote regular engagement beyond electoral cycles

Strengthening Electoral Integrity

- Formalize collaboration between political parties and electoral bodies
- Enforce codes of conduct with clear sanctions
- Promote transparency in electoral reforms

Addressing Political Exclusion and Lawfare

- Safeguard judicial independence
- Prevent misuse of legal frameworks
- Ensure fair and inclusive candidate qualification processes

Enhancing Regional Engagement

- Strengthen ECOWAS' role in monitoring dialogue frameworks
- Integrate dialogue into early warning systems
- Promote accountability through public reporting

Promoting Inclusion and Civic Engagement

- Expand participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups
- Strengthen civic space and public awareness
- Foster citizen-centered consensus-building approaches

Capacity Building

- Invest in training for political actors in negotiation and mediation
- Strengthen internal party democracy
- Promote values-based political leadership

Linking Governance and Socioeconomic Realities

- Recognize the interdependence of political stability and economic conditions
- Integrate dialogue processes with broader development priorities

Conclusion

The Dakar roundtable reaffirmed that inter-party dialogue is not peripheral, it is central to democratic governance in West Africa.

The region faces a clear choice:

- Institutionalize inclusive and credible dialogue systems, or
- Continue with fragmented, reactive approaches that risk deepening instability



The
oslo
Center

