



PRESIDENTIAL LECTURE ADDRESS

BY

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**AT THE OXFORD POSTGRADUATE DISTINGUISHED
LECTURE SERIES ON DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA**

**THEME: "DEFENDING CONSTITUTIONAL
DEMOCRACY IN AN ERA OF GROWING
COUPS AND ELECTORAL UNCERTAINTY IN
WEST AFRICA"**

**UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD
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- **VICE-CHANCELLOR,**
- **DISTINGUISHED FACULTY MEMBERS,**
- **MEMBERS OF THE OXFORD POSTGRADUATE
COMMUNITY,**
- **LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**
- **GOOD EVENING.**

I. OPENING REFLECTIONS

1. It is a privilege to address you here at the University of Oxford – an institution whose intellectual traditions have shaped global conversations on governance, leadership,

law, and political accountability for generations.

- 2.** Universities such as Oxford do more than produce scholars.
- 3.** They build the intellectual muscle that eventually shapes governments, institutions, and nations.

4. And at a moment when constitutional democracy is under visible strain across parts of the world, **spaces such as this remain essential to serious reflection about power, legitimacy, and leadership.**

5. The subject before us tonight is immediate and urgent. And for West Africa, it is deeply consequential.

6. Across our region, constitutional democracy is under pressure.

- 7.** Since 2020, West Africa has witnessed successive military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea-Bissau, alongside attempted disruptions elsewhere.

- 8.** At the same time, contested elections, insecurity, economic hardship, declining institutional trust, and growing public frustration, especially among young people, have intensified pressure on constitutional governments that remain.

9. As **President of Sierra Leone**, and as **Chairman of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government**, I have witnessed these pressures closely.

10. I have sat in emergency summits after elected governments collapsed.

11. I have participated in mediation efforts after constitutions were suspended.

12. I have engaged leaders confronting insecurity, political unrest, economic fragility, and widening distrust in democratic institutions.

13. So, this conversation carries urgency. And it also requires honesty.

14. Because the greatest threat to constitutional democracy in West Africa is not only the soldier who suspends the Constitution.

15. It is also the slow erosion of public trust that makes citizens begin to doubt whether constitutional systems can still protect them, represent them, and improve their lives.

16. That erosion of trust manifests in many ways, from disillusionment that creates apathy and low engagement with the democratic process, to support for the military regimes that sometimes take over.

II. WHERE DEMOCRATIC EROSION BEGINS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

17. When we see support among citizens for military coups in some African nations, it is not that people have rejected democracy as an ideal.

18. What many have lost faith in is the democratic experience they have lived.

19. They have seen elections conducted while hardship deepened.

20. They have seen constitutions invoked while institutions weakened.

21. They have seen public authority exercised without restraint, public resources managed without accountability, and public trust exhausted without concern.

22. Democratic erosion rarely begins dramatically.

23. More often, institutions weaken gradually — through tolerated excesses, weakened accountability, and compromises that slowly become normalised — until unconstitutional actors present themselves as the solution to failures they did not create, but are prepared to exploit.

24. One lesson has become very clear to me over the years: **democracy is never self-sustaining.**

25. A constitution can be drafted in months.
Elections can be organised in weeks.
Institutions can be established by law.

26. But **democratic culture takes much longer to build.**

27. Restraint takes time. Public confidence takes time.

28. The habit of losing honourably, governing lawfully, dissenting peacefully, and submitting to constitutional limits takes time to develop.

29. And unfortunately, all of that can be weakened much faster than it is built.

30. The real strength of constitutional democracy is revealed under pressure — when courts issue decisions governments do not like, when elections are disputed, and when leaders discover that power still has limits.

31. The democratic question in Africa, therefore, is not simply whether elections are held.

32. It is whether African states can build political systems strong enough to command legitimacy without coercion, survive leadership transitions peacefully, and deliver dignity to citizens consistently.

33. Nowhere is that pressure felt more intensely than during elections.

III. ELECTIONS AND THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

34. Elections remain one of the greatest tests of democratic legitimacy in Africa today. Yet elections alone do not secure democracy.

35. What matters most is whether citizens trust the process enough to accept the outcome — even when their preferred side does not win.

36. That trust depends on institutions: independent electoral commissions, transparent counting and verification systems, credible courts, and political leadership that does not delegitimise outcomes before results are even known.

37. When those foundations hold, elections strengthen national cohesion.

38. When they weaken, elections become sources of instability rather than instruments of democratic legitimacy.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

39. I will not stand here and claim that Sierra Leone's democratic journey is without imperfections, or that my own defeat or victories were accepted by all without question.

40. Before I got elected as president, I too lost elections as a leader of the opposition, and my Party legally challenged the results of polls we believed were marred by irregularities serious enough to question the outcome.

41. When I ran again and won, the elections were contested by members of the opposition.

42. What matters is that grievances were taken to the courts, institutions functioned, and disputes remained within constitutional bounds.

43. That is not perfection. That is democracy at work.

- 44.** Democratic maturity requires allowing legal complaints to move through constitutional channels.
- 45.** It requires patience with due process, even when politics prefers speed.
- 46.** It requires respecting the opposition's right to lawfully challenge outcomes.
- 47.** That discipline is not weakness. It is the foundation of a democratic system capable of surviving contested results.

48. This is also why questions such as diaspora voting remain sensitive across much of our continent.

49. Broader participation strengthens democracy in principle.

50. But in practice, expansion depends on public trust in the integrity and capacity of the electoral system itself.

51. A democracy that cannot inspire trust in how it counts votes will struggle to expand who gets to cast them.

52. Our ambition as leaders should be to build electoral institutions whose credibility is so firmly established, so widely respected, and so institutionally protected that outcomes do not require perpetual external validation to be accepted.

53. That is why in Sierra Leone, I remain committed to a comprehensive electoral system reform process through mechanisms like the Tripartite Steering Committee, which undertakes both administrative and legislative reforms.

54. Disputes will always exist. But mature democracies channel disputes through law, not violence; through courts, not coercion; through evidence, not incitement.

55. The political class is directly implicated in this.

56. How we conduct political life matters.

57. How we treat opposition, civil society, and the press matters.

58. We cannot personalise the state or intimidate critics, then appear surprised when citizens doubt whether constitutional order truly belongs to them.

59. In addition to those who overthrow it abruptly, **democracy is also weakened by those who degrade it gradually.**

60. That is why regional bodies and national governments must look beyond sudden ruptures of constitutional order to the root causes of such rupture.

IV. THE COUP PROBLEM: CAUSES, NOT JUST SYMPTOMS

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

61. As **Chair of ECOWAS**, I have condemned unconstitutional changes of government, and I will continue to do so.

62. Military coups are wrong. But if constitutional governments fail to govern responsibly, the potential for unconstitutional intervention increases.

63. Every country that experienced a coup in recent years was already under severe governance strain.

64. In **Mali**, public confidence in formal democratic structures eroded as insecurity spread and the state struggled to protect citizens.

65. In **Niger**, a historic democratic transfer of power in 2021 was reversed only two years later, reminding us that a single successful transition does not immunise fragile states against democratic reversal.

66. The lesson is clear: **elections alone do not renew legitimacy indefinitely.**

67. Legitimacy must continually be reinforced through performance, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness to citizens — particularly on security and economic conditions.

68. Ghana offers an important counter-example.

Not because Ghana is without challenges, but because successive governments and institutions have consistently protected the credibility of the democratic process.

69. That has compounded into durable public confidence.

70. The infrastructure of democratic trust, built patiently over decades, has become one of Ghana's greatest national assets.

71. I do not believe West Africa is trapped in democratic fragility.

72. I believe we are living through a difficult but necessary transition toward stronger constitutional cultures — shaped not by imported templates, but by the hard-earned lessons of our own history.

73. In this, my own country serves as a useful example.

V. SIERRA LEONE AND A PERSONAL RECKONING

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

74. Sierra Leone's democratic journey is deeply personal to me.

75. Our country emerged from a devastating civil war and began rebuilding democratic institutions under conditions of extraordinary fragility.

76. There have been difficult elections and political tensions.

77. This, in addition to economic pressures, has added to the moments of profound national strain since we gained independence sixty-five years ago.

78. We are not a perfect democracy, and no honest leader should claim otherwise.

79. But even in difficult moments, we have not abandoned constitutional processes.

80. My own political journey includes a chapter of unconstitutional change, and I do not avoid that history.

81. I first came to power through military rule.

82. In 1996, in the middle of civil war, I handed power to an elected civilian government.

83. Many believed the country was too unstable for a democratic transition and that military authority should continue.

84. But I came to believe that **even an imperfect democratic mandate offered Sierra Leone a stronger basis for legitimacy than prolonged military rule ever could.**

85. Twenty-two years later, I returned to leadership not through force, but through the ballot box.

86. I learned that the hardest act of leadership is not taking power. It is limiting it.

87. Neither leaders nor nations can remain trapped in one chapter of their history.

88. Leadership must evolve — toward greater legitimacy and greater respect for constitutional order.

89. I have governed under military authority, and I have governed within constitutional democracy. There is no comparison.

90. Force may impose obedience temporarily, but it cannot build legitimacy.

91. It cannot create citizens out of subjects. Only constitutional consent can do that.

92. That lesson has never left me.

VI. WHAT DEFENDING DEMOCRACY ACTUALLY REQUIRES

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

93. Democratic erosion sometimes happens through tolerated excesses, weakened institutions, and constitutional compromises that gradually become normalised.

94. As leaders, we face real temptations to reward loyalty over competence, and to treat criticism as hostility rather than accountability.

95. Constitutional leadership requires resisting those temptations.

96. And restraint is hardest precisely when power makes restraint optional.

97. The true test of democratic leadership is whether leaders respect constitutional limits when doing so carries political cost.

98. ECOWAS has defended constitutional order across the region through sanctions, suspensions, and mediation efforts. We will continue to do so.

99. But regional institutions cannot defend democracy only against soldiers while remaining silent when elected governments weaken democratic systems from within.

100. That is why ECOWAS must deepen preventive diplomacy by strengthening governance benchmarks and speaking with the same clarity about democratic backsliding as it does about military coups.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

101.I also want to say a few words about the
Armed Forces.

102.I speak here with particular understanding
because I served in the military, up to the
rank of Brigadier.

103.The Armed Forces play an essential role in
protecting and defending the sovereignty of
a nation.

104.But political disputes are not military
questions.

105. Questions of elections, governance, and leadership must always be resolved in accordance with the constitution.

106. And civilian governments carry corresponding responsibilities.

107. Respect for constitutional order within the military is strengthened when civilian leaders themselves consistently model constitutional behaviour.

108. Doing so requires clear plans and the political will to follow through.

VII. A CONCRETE AGENDA FOR CONSTITUTIONAL SURVIVAL

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

109. Defending constitutional democracy in West Africa requires sustained and practical commitments.

110. First, electoral credibility must be treated as a **structural investment**, not an event-management exercise.

111. Electoral commissions require institutional independence, predictable funding, and insulation from political interference.

112. Second, governance performance must be taken seriously.

113. Regional early-warning mechanisms should track governance deterioration, shrinking civic space, declining public confidence, and insecurity before constitutional breakdown occurs.

114. Third, regional institutions must develop both the tools and the political will to address democratic backsliding by elected governments, not only unconstitutional seizures of power.

115. Fourth, youth inclusion must become a structural priority.

116. Young people will not indefinitely defend systems from which they feel excluded.

117. And fifth, the international community must align its behaviour with its democratic rhetoric.

118. External support for democratic processes must not become external ownership of them.

119. African elections must derive legitimacy primarily from African institutions accountable to African citizens.

120. Democracies cannot mature if citizens believe democratic validation must always come from outside.

121. We do not ask to be isolated. We ask to be respected as authors of our own democratic futures.

122. External partners have an important role in technical support and institutional strengthening.

123. But the legitimacy of African elections must ultimately rest with African institutions accountable to African citizens.

124. The moment of democratic judgment belongs to the people themselves, especially to the young people who constitute the majority of our population.

VIII. A MESSAGE TO THIS GENERATION

125. To the postgraduate students gathered here

tonight: you are part of a generation that will shape institutions across Africa and across the world.

126. Many of you will one day face moments

where principle and expediency stand in direct conflict.

127. Some of you will become **judges** and will be

asked to choose between law and pressure.

128. Some of you will become **civil servants** and will be asked whether your loyalty belongs to the constitution or to personalities.

129. Some of you will become **diplomats** and will be asked whether principle can survive political convenience.

130. Some of you will become **journalists and scholars** and will be asked whether truth is worth discomfort.

131. In those moments, your decisions will matter more than the words written in any constitutional document.

132. Because **democracies are ultimately sustained by the integrity, courage, and discipline of the people entrusted to defend them.**

133. Constitutions do not enforce themselves. Institutions do not defend themselves. People do.

134. West Africa has buried too many young people due to political instability.

135. Too many futures have been interrupted by conflict.

136. Too many nations have spent decades rebuilding trust that should never have been broken.

137. Constitutional democracy is often slow. It can be frustrating. It demands patience and compromise from those who hold power.

138. But I have seen the alternative from the inside.

139. That is why I say tonight, **with conviction grounded in experience: democracy must endure.**

140. Because constitutional legitimacy remains the only durable foundation for peace, stability, and national progress.

141. Our generation must ensure that no African child grows up believing that the gun is a faster path to power than the ballot.

142. That is the democratic responsibility of our
time.

THANK YOU.