



**The Brookings Institution  
Africa Growth Initiative  
*Foresight Africa Podcast***

**“Measuring African perspectives on democracy and governance”**

**Wednesday, May 15, 2024**

*Guest:*

JOSEPH ASUNKA  
CEO, Afrobarometer

*Host:*

LANDRY SIGNÉ  
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development, Africa Growth Initiative  
The Brookings Institution

*Episode Summary:*

Africa experienced a wave of democratic unrest from 2020-23, with seven countries—Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon—falling to military coups during this time. Why? Host Landry Signé and his guest Joseph Asunka, CEO of Afrobarometer, a pan-African survey research network, discuss Africans’ views on democracy and governance, as well as policy recommendations for reversing the recent trends.

[music]

**SIGNÉ:** Hello, I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to *Foresight Africa* podcast, where I engage with contributors to our annual *Foresight Africa* report, as well as with policymakers, industry leaders, and other key figures. You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

Today on the podcast, I am pleased to welcome Doctor Joseph Asunka. Joseph Asunka is the CEO at Afrobarometer, a nonpartisan survey research network that conducts surveys on democracy, governance, the economy, and society. Prior to joining Afrobarometer, Joseph was a program officer in the Global Development and Population Program at the Hewlett Foundation. He was also a lecturer at UCLA, where he received his Ph.D. in political science.

Welcome to the podcast, Joseph.

**ASUNKA:** Thank you so much, Landry. It's good to be with you.

**SIGNÉ:** Fabulous. What drew you to political science to begin with?

**ASUNKA:** That's, it's a long, winding story of a combination of planned decisions and accidental academic prospecting. So, I started off my studies at the high school level in the hard sciences. I was into physics, chemistry, and mathematics. And then for my undergraduate degree, I studied statistics and computer science. But right after my undergraduate degree, I started being very interested in applied statistics, courses in applied statistics, biostatistics, economics and the like. But a course that immediately came to mind was economics. So, I decided to pursue a degree, a master's degree in economics.

After that, I joined the Ghana Center for Democratic Development. This is, a research entity, I think tank based in Accra, Ghana. So, I worked with them for two years and I realized, you know, economics is a useful topic. But if you don't understand how politics works, it can be a futile exercise to have economic fixes to issues when politics comes into play. So, that's why I got interested in politics and decided to go back to my Ph.D. in political science at UCLA.

**SIGNÉ:** Can you explain what Afrobarometer does for those who might be unfamiliar with the organization?

**ASUNKA:** Thanks for asking. So, Afrobarometer is a Pan-African survey research network. What we do is conduct public attitudes survey across the African continent. And we ask questions on several topics, including governance, the economy, society, and living conditions. The Afrobarometer started actually in 1999. So, this year we are 25 years on.

The main purpose of Afrobarometer is to give African citizens a voice in public policy and decision-making. That when governments are making decisions, or policymakers are making decisions about development issues, they take into account what citizens are experiencing, what their priorities are, and what they are

feeling or experiencing in the context of governance. And so, the main purpose is to give citizens a voice in that, in those debates.

We started in 12 countries in 1999. These were the 12 countries that were open enough for us to ask the types of questions we asked in terms of openness, in terms of political openness. But we have since grown out to 40 countries on the continent at the moment, and our data now represents about 75% of the opinions of Africa, the population of Africa.

**SIGNÉ:** Very insightful, Joseph. Where do you see Afrobarometer's place in policy?

**ASUNKA:** So, Afrobarometer started off more as an academic project. It was started by three academics, Professors Michael Bratton, Professor Gyimah-Boadi, and Professor Robert Mattes. And these are professors based on the continent, one in Accra, one in Cape Town, South Africa, and one in Zimbabwe. So, it started more as an academic exercise.

But it has since evolved very strongly into policy space. And that is because Afrobarometer's main purpose is to give African citizens a voice in policymaking. And there is no way to really do that without actually being engaged in public policy advocacy.

So, we do contribute to public policy in two ways. First is from the data. So, we make sure that we get high-quality data and put it in the public domain for free. So, our data is a public good that we give to the public for free so that policymakers, policy actors, development actors, investors, and all who engage on the African continent when they do so, there is data available to inform them about what African citizens are thinking. That is a first in our space of our policy influence—putting data available, making it available out there for different actors to use.

The second area that we contribute to policy is within the institution itself. So, we analyze the data, and we write policy briefs and come up with policy recommendations that we distribute widely around in different actors. So, we share it widely with the media, we share it with government, with policy actors at the country level where we do the surveys, but also at the regional level, as well as the continental level.

And so, that, these are the two ways we contribute to public policy: making sure that they will have good quality data, and that we can analyze and make policy recommendations for actors to take up.

**SIGNÉ:** Fantastic. Would you mind sharing a few impact stories, when you provided policy recommendations which have been successfully adopted or implemented?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, some of the major ones have been especially anti-corruption efforts. I remember when, after one of our surveys were released, it was about the issues about corruption in Sierra Leone, as well as in Ghana and other parts of the continent. But the then-president of Sierra Leone, Bai Koroma, was, you know, a staunch user of Afrobarometer data. And so, he used the Afrobarometer data as a reason, as a logic behind his development of what they call the "no pay, no bribe campaign." And that was driven mainly by the fact that Afrobarometer data showed

that there was high levels of perceived corruption in the country, and that drove him to come up with that policy.

Same thing happened in Malawi. When we released the results and there was an indication of the police being perceived as the most corrupt entity. What the police actually did was they called us to come and share more data with them. But one day, what they did, cleverly, was to look at the trends over time. So, over time in Malawi, how has the perception of corruption been in Malawi? And when you look at the data, it actually trended downwards, meaning that Malawian police were doing increasingly better, even though they were still the most ... the institution perceived to be the most corrupt. So, they saw value in the data.

And so, usually we have different government entities inviting us to share more data with them so to inform their decisions internally.

**SIGNÉ:** If this could be helpful, Joseph, I have also used Afrobarometer data when testifying before the United States Congress. So, your impact goes beyond the frontier of the continent.

Joseph, Afrobarometer surveys Africans' view on democracy and governance, among other topics. And your *Foresight* essay focuses on governance and the rise in coups across the continent. In your view, what has led to the rise?

**ASUNKA:** Right. It is really hard to point to one cause. And in fact, the drivers of these coups are also different in different countries. So, if you take the case of Guinea, when President Alpha Condé attempted to, you know, manipulate the constitution so that he could run for a third term, this he did almost entirely against what citizens, the Guineans, wanted. Just right before he started to change the constitution, our data did show that almost 8 in 10 Guineans said they want the president to abide by two terms.

And I should say here that the presidential term limit is the most popular democratic norm on the African continent. In all the countries that we have surveyed to date, we always have a majority of citizens in every single country saying that they wanted their president to abide by two-term limits. And so, when Bai Koroma made the attempt to change the Constitution, this was against the wishes of its own people.

And that would have motivated general public discontent by the fact that he was doing this. And we were not surprised to see people on the streets celebrating because it is a fundamental principle, a fundamental norm that Africans strongly supports. So, in the case of Guinea it was more going against the popular sentiment of wanting presidential term limits.

In other cases, it was probably a combination of economic issues as well as perceptions of corruption, growing corruption, especially in the presidency, and the anxieties about crime and insecurity. And, you know, when you look across the continent, especially in the 2010s, you know, the period of the Africa rising narrative, our data did show that poverty was actually declining between 2009 and 2012, 2015. There was a decline in the rates of poverty in our data. But since then, poverty has continued to grow. And then the latest round of the survey that we conducted in 2021 through 2023, we recorded the highest level of incidence of poverty. So, poverty may

have been one of the underlying causes in terms of people's dissatisfaction with the way our governments were actually working.

And unfortunately, the military juntas actually took advantage of this. They would cite the issues of poverty. They'd cite the issues of, you know, insecurity, especially violent extremism, as a reason why they are intervening in politics. And these were the sentiments that citizens had been expressing: poverty increasing, the perceived corruption in their governments, as well as this anxiety about violent extremist groups, which made the military seem like the only institution that could salvage them. And that may have been the reason we saw the rise in these coups.

**SIGNÉ:** So, I like how you connect the various causes that you provide as to coups and the Afrobarometer survey results. Are there additional examples of survey results that you want to share, which could further explain the rise of coups?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, I think those are the keys. And by if when we look at our data, so I'll say two things, you know. One, in terms of the issues that we have found to drive people to be very dissatisfied with the way democracy works. And it comes as a result of one, as I said, you know, when there's perceived the rising levels of corruption in governments, elected governments in particular, especially, how they call it, perhaps perception of corruption in the presidency itself. That's one critical factor.

The second factor being the level of trust in the military. At the moment, the military in Africa is the most trusted democratic institution. Consistently it has been. So, if you take parliament, the presidency, the judiciary, and with the military, the military is on top of all of them, like, the most trusted institution on the continent. And so, here's the case, you have an institution that is very well trusted by citizens. And I think that trust is driven by the fact that citizens see the military as a disciplined institution. And they are somehow looking for an entity with a level of discipline that can be brought into the governance system, which is probably one of the drivers.

And of course, if you now take that combined with the fact that there's the rise in perceptions of corruption in the elected government, and there is this sentiment of insecurity, or people are afraid of violent extremism, then the military it sounds very attractive. But let me put a caveat here that even though there's that attraction for military intervention, Africans still do not want military rule. They may see the intervention as a useful mechanism for getting rid of their corrupt leaders, but they don't want the military to stay in power longer than they are welcome.

**SIGNÉ:** Very insightful. Your essay describes the role of the African Union and other regional economic communities in preventing unconstitutional changes of government on the continent. However, you note that many of these organization governance tools aren't successfully used, or they are not simply successful because member states don't comply. How do we reform the African Union and other regional economic communities so their tools are more effective at both deterring noncompliance or enforcing these mechanisms if noncompliance occurs?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, the African Union certainly, and the regional economic communities, many have gone through several reforms and there's a plethora of well written political, economic, and social governance protocols, which if implemented

well, will transform the African continent. And these documents, you can read all the protocols about whether it is via the African Peer Review Mechanism, the African Governance Architecture, and the instruments that set all of these institutions up are really well crafted and their mandates are very clear.

I think it's one, of course, the commitment of elected leaders on the continent to seeing through the implementation of these programs. But it does seem like we've gotten to a point where reform is probably no longer the logic, or the driver, but that we have the tools available to actually effectively implement or at least drive this continent forward.

That said, I think there's one particular reform that hopefully our policy actors will listen. That is the way the African Union operates. This issue of the principle of subsidiarity, where it feels like the African Union sees itself as a hierarchical organization where the African Union and the regional economic bodies operate as a hierarchy, that the African Union is on top of the regional economic bodies. And in that case the principle of subsidiarity, requiring that the Union cede decision-making powers to the regional economic bodies on issues, especially when it comes to conflict or unconstitutional change of government.

I think that principle makes the African Union weak. Weak in the sense that instead of working collaboratively with the regional economic bodies, the Union rather sees the primacy of the regional economic bodies in decision making in the region.

I think, as many other advocates have called for, a better arrangement will be for the African Union do away with the principle of subsidiarity and operate as a collaboration, that the African Union works in collaboration with the regional economic bodies whenever they are trying to address issues. I think that collaboration would help to build more momentum and actually provide some kind of solidarity behind the issues that we are trying to address, instead of standing on the side and expecting the regional economic bodies to be the ones taking the lead. If that rule alone can be reformed, we may see some changes.

**SIGNÉ:** How should they collaborate?

**ASUNKA:** Let's just give an example. If there is a military intervention in the country X. Right. Rather than say the regional economic body—so, for example, rather than say ECOWAS should be making the decisions about Niger, it should be the continental body together with ECOWAS working together to get things done. So, the African Union shouldn't sit, and the rest of the region shouldn't sit aloof and wait for ECOWAS to deal with the situation. Because sometimes, even within their region, the countries are not as cohesive as you would imagine. They've got, sometimes some of the countries may not even be in agreement as to how to resolve the issue. But having the regional body as the other continental bodies are playing a role alongside ECOWAS can bring a lot more, you know, impact.

Sometimes it may even be useful for ECOWAS to intervene in the East Africa community than some of the countries in the East Africa community intervening in a situation in East Africa, because they have the distance, and they can actually sometimes intervene more impartially. So, I think that kind of collaboration with the continental bodies will make more sense than this principle of subsidiarity.

**SIGNÉ:** Wonderful illustrations. Joseph, why do you think support for democracy is waning in some countries with histories of democratic governments, such as South Africa or Botswana?

**ASUNKA:** Yeah, it's interesting that you ask this question, and this is a critical question for us as well. So, much of the decline in support for democracy on the continent is driven by the poor delivery of democratic or political governance. Our analysis does show that three critical factors. First of all, the perceived rising levels of corruption in the presidency as well as in local government. So, when there's perceptions of increasing corruption in the presidency and local government. When there is weak rule of law, perceived weak rule of law, that especially parliament and the president do not respect the decisions of the courts. And when elections are not seen to not be free and fair are of the highest quality. These three key factors are the ones that drive support for democracy down on the continent.

What I must say here is that Africans' support for democracy is actually not affected by economic factors. Sometimes I say this, and people wonder why. So, the commitment to democracy is driven by how people see the delivery of their democratic goods, and the democratic goods being clean elections, effective rule of law, and clean government. That is, no corruption. When there is corruption, the rule of law is seen to not be effective and elections are not free and fair. That's when you see people begin to, now they ... the support for democracy begins to drop.

If you analyze the data using an economic factor—poverty, lack of economic performance on the parts of government—these economic indicators do not affect people's commitment to democracy and democratic norms and institutions. The things that affect democracy's support on the continent, as I said, is the political governance outcomes, not the economic outcomes.

**SIGNÉ:** This is very interesting, Joseph. So, you are saying that the quality of governance and the quality of democracy will be more important in determining whether citizens will be supporting democracy or not. But now, what about economic performance? What makes citizens satisfied about economic performance or not? And what will be their reaction to democratic governance?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, the economic factors impact people's satisfaction with the way democracy works. So, first of all, do you support democracy is asked as one question. The second part is, are you satisfied with the way democracy works? And so, people's support for democracy, as I said, is not related to economic factors. But their satisfaction with the way democracy works is driven largely by economic factors as well as the political factor. So, the economic factors will dampen people's satisfaction with democracy. But their support for democracy is only dampened by the quality of democratic governance.

**SIGNÉ:** And what are the consequences of a low satisfaction for democracy?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, the consequences for low satisfaction with democracy. When people are not satisfied with the way democracy works, that's where the risks of, you know, unconstitutional change of government, especially military coups, can happen. Because people, in terms of their economic livelihoods. Now even the Africans who want a democracy, when their economic needs are not met, then they feel

disappointed in the performance of their governments. The leaders' failure then dampens economic opportunities. In that sense, it creates an environment where there's anxiety, agitation, and sometimes a public discontent with elected leaders. And that public discontent can then lead into the military, for example, taking advantage of that opportunity to step in.

It can also create an opening for violent extremist groups to mobilize citizens in support of their causes, where they can get into a community, violent extremist groups can live in a community, provide some of the economic benefits that governments are not providing. Maybe they're providing them with water, they're providing them with their basic needs, and then they begin to infiltrate in a way that, you know, it can continue to perpetuate violent extremism in these countries, so.

Their dissatisfaction with democracy driven by the economic factors can make governments a lot more vulnerable both to the military, but also violent extremist groups and other groups that want to cause harm.

**SIGNÉ:** Joseph, how do you reconcile some of the contradictory findings in this year's survey? For example, youth are more willing to tolerate military interventions and are less trustful of military institutions than the older cohorts.

**ASUNKA: Right,** So, I wouldn't characterize it as a contradiction, per se. Yes, it is true, young people are relatively more willing to tolerate military intervention, and the word here that I underline here is intervention and not military rule. So, they are more likely to tolerate military intervention. But there is a condition there: only if their elected leaders abuse power. And so, the extent to which they dislike having their elected leaders abuse power is the driving force behind this interest in wanting the military to intervene. And so, they are willing to get rid of a government that is abusing power. And that is because of their own commitment to democracy and democratic governance.

And as I said, they are not supporting military rule. So, they don't trust the military to stay in power and rule for forever. Their expectation is an intervention, and there will be a timeline to transition back to civilian rule.

So, the results may not be as contradictory because these young folks are eager to see a change. At some time, they see the military as one vehicle for that change to come, for them to reset and then hopefully get back to civilian rule.

**SIGNÉ:** We have talked a lot about the rise of coups and reversal of democratic governments. What can be done to reverse the trends we are seeing and promote democratic governance on the continent, Joseph?

**ASUNKA:** Maybe I would describe the recent coups more as opportunistic episodes and not a trend. And I say not a trend because I do not expect that we will see another coup in the region anytime soon. And I'm keeping my fingers crossed for that. But at least this is driven by the data that I have, and I at least I can foresee what I hope would be the case.



The good news is that Africans want democracy, and they have consistently expressed this desire to live under governments that are democratic and accountable. The military is certainly not that option. So, it is therefore important for democracy stakeholders, both domestic and international, to invest time and resources to engage the military rulers now in negotiating a firm timeline to return to civilian rule.

Of course, the African Union and the regional economic bodies all play a big role here. But I hope that, as I mentioned earlier on, that we will do away with this self-defeating principle of subsidiarity, and rather work collaboratively. I think if the African Union, the regional economic bodies, worked collaboratively to engage with the military rulers at the moment to plan a clear transition back to civilian rule, that would be much more effective, as opposed to saying ECOWAS should take care of Niger and somebody else takes care of ..., it just doesn't. I don't think it works well for us.

So, we need African leadership in these negotiations. It shouldn't be any foreign intervention, or actor. The African leadership, African Union, the regional economic bodies and our elected leaders in the other countries should be the ones driving this effort forward.

**SIGNÉ:** I like your enthusiasm and your specific recommendations, Joseph. What governments are doing a particularly good job at listening to and paying attention to their constituencies?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, I'd say if you look at the data that we currently have, especially of the survey done in 2021 to 2023, the most enthusiastic citizens have been Zambians and Tanzanians. The governments of Zambia and government of Tanzania are the ones that enjoy the highest performance ratings in terms of democratic governance and economic performance from their citizens. And so, in my view, I mean, these are the countries, at least per the data, these are the countries where we have seen some positive signals.

And I would probably attribute Zambia's case to their most recent elections, where young people and civil society groups played a very powerful role in bringing to power the opposition that is in power. And that does seem like it has created a sense of enthusiasm and euphoria around the fact that citizens can change their government if they make a determination.

Of course, we just started the next round of the surveys now, and I'm sure we are going to get a similar picture from Senegal after we have are done with those surveys. Because that euphoria of citizens feeling that they can change their leaders through elections is critical to these kinds of ... the way citizens appraise their governments on these issues.

**SIGNÉ:** Fantastic. You mentioned Senegal. Would you mind elaborating more on that case?

**ASUNKA:** So, Senegal's case is a combination of the role of the judiciary, and I and I can't emphasize enough how important the judiciary is when it comes to democratic governance, and the need for democracy stakeholders and citizens, as

well as civil society groups, to work in ensuring that the judiciary can enjoy a high level of independence in their actions and decisions.

So, the judiciary in Senegal, similarly as it happens in Malawi as well as in Kenya, where the judiciary steps in in an election dispute and makes sure that the president at that time in Senegal, Macky Sall, did not have the opportunity to postpone the elections. This was because of the role of the judiciary, right, in making sure that the decision of the president does not contravene the constitution, which paved the way for Senegalese to be able to express themselves in terms of who they want to be their leader and leading to the opposition coming into power.

Which, as I said, clean elections are one of the critical things that most African citizens want. And when elections are seen to be free, fair, and that citizens can make a change through elections, they can do that. So, I would advocate here for building an electoral system that gives people the confidence that they can change their leaders. And I hope that will also invest in protecting the independence of the judiciary to sustain our democracies.

**SIGNÉ:** Joseph, how can other governments learn from these countries which have been successful?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, maybe I would rather think of it in terms of how citizens and civil society advocates can learn from these countries, because for government sometimes politics and the incentives around elected leaders can undermine, or it at least can undermine their interest in learning about successful countries. But I think the critical thing here will be how can citizens and other democracy actors here on the continent learn from these successful cases.

And I think the learning can come from just what I mentioned, one, making sure that we can find ways to protect the judiciary as an institution of democracy. Secondly, ensuring that our elections are clean. And one thing that I've always pushed here for has been, increasingly there's an integration of technology in elections, to make sure that elections are clean so that technology can play a role, that if we are bringing technology into elections, we want to make sure that that technology is trusted.

And here, again, I believe that the African Union and the regional economic bodies can play a role in the sense that, you know, when you are thinking about how to regulate the use of technology and the kinds of technology you use, if we have a centralized pool of resources that you can imagine having an African-generated technology, election management technology, that sits on the continent. So, that election results do not have to go and sit in a server that is in the United States, or a server that sits in Europe. But that there is a system on the continent where both the election management software and the hardware can be located on the continent and used for managing elections, so it can provide more credibility and trust among citizens.

**SIGNÉ:** Is there anything Afrobarometer survey failed to capture this year, and that you are hoping to get more insight into in upcoming surveys rounds?

**ASUNKA:** Right. So, as for the upcoming survey round, we have actually a very new topic that we have never covered. And this is on sexual reproductive health and

rights. So, we want to get our citizens' attitudes towards safe abortion and access to contraceptives and the like. And I think this module we developed for this time around, which is the first time we are going to cover that topic, was also partly motivated by what happened in the U.S. in terms of *Roe v. Wade*, because we want to see if it has any ripple effects, but also to just get a general sentiment and cross-country variation in terms of attitudes for sexual and reproductive health and rights. So, that's a very new topic we are covering in round ten.

But in addition to that, we are going to cover other topics that we had taken a break from. Usually, Afrobarometer sometimes we cover certain topics, but because opinions and attitudes don't change that frequently, like opinions on certain topics don't change year to year. So, what we would normally do is give it a break and then we come back to it. So, the topics that we are going to revisit this time around, the surveys which we just launched in January, will be migration, and the attitudes towards refugees and migrants across the continent. And that is in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area, to see what people's attitudes are in terms of the cross-border trading, but also migration and labor movement on the continent.

The second piece is access to justice, which has been a topic we covered in about two rounds ago. We are revisiting it now to get people's sentiment on their access to, to justice.

And the final one that we'll be covering this time will be Africa's voice in the global context. So, the African Union, now part of the G20 and other, you know, global bodies, their citizens' views about the role and voice of Africa on this global in this global context. These are some of the topics I will be covering in round ten. And hopefully by the middle of this year, you will start to see new results come out from the different countries.

**SIGNÉ:** These are all fascinating topics. And I'm enthusiastically looking forward to reading your next findings.

[music]

Joseph, thank you so much for joining us today.

**ASUNKA:** It has been a pleasure to be with you. Thank you so much. And then I really enjoy *Africa Foresight*, I read all the articles in it. It's entertaining and also informative in many, many ways. So, thank you for doing this.

**SIGNÉ:** I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. To learn more about this show and our report, visit [Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast](https://www.brookings.edu/podcasts/foresight-africa/).

The *Foresight Africa* podcast is brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Send your feedback and questions to podcasts at Brookings dot edu.

My special thanks to the production team, including Kuwilileni Hauwanga, supervising producer; Fred Dews, producer; Nicole Ntungire and Alexandria Cordero, associate producers; and Colin Cruickshank, audio engineer.

This show's art was designed by Shavanthi Mendis. Additional support for this podcast comes from my colleagues in Brookings Global and the Office of Communications at Brookings.