

Constitutional Term Limits and Political Power in Francophone Africa: Recent Reforms, Democratic Challenges, and Emerging Realities

SOILIHI MOHAMED¹

PhD in Public Law and Political Science

Lecturer-Researcher, University of the Comoros

Department of Law, University of the Comoros, Comoros

Research Center for Development (CRD), Catholic University of Madagascar, Madagascar

Abstract

This article examines the evolving relationship between constitutional term limits and political power in francophone Africa, focusing on recent reforms, democratic challenges, and emerging political realities between 2018 and 2025. Drawing on doctrinal analysis, comparative constitutional study, and contextual political inquiry, the research explores how term-limit provisions, initially celebrated as democratic safeguards during the 1990s transitions, have been reinterpreted, circumvented, or dismantled in recent years. Empirical evidence from Chad, Guinea, the Comoros, and Madagascar illustrates this paradox. In Chad, the 2025 constitutional reform extending presidential terms and abolishing term limits demonstrates a clear rollback of democratic constraints. Similarly, Guinea's 2025 referendum authorizing transitional leaders to contest future elections reflects the persistence of elite strategies to consolidate power. In the Comoros, the dismantling of the rotating presidency and the controversial empowerment of President Assoumani's son in 2024 highlight the instrumentalization of constitutional rules. Meanwhile, Madagascar's recurrent political crises despite formal term-limit provisions underscore the limits of constitutionalism in contexts of weak institutions and contested legitimacy. The findings suggest that while constitutional term limits have become a regional standard, their enforcement remains deeply conditioned by political culture, institutional strength, and civil society mobilization. Recent developments reveal that term limits function less as automatic guarantees of democratic alternation than as contested arenas where law, power, and society intersect, exposing the unfinished trajectories of democratization in francophone Africa.

Keywords: constitutional term limits, political power, francophone Africa, democratic challenges, recent reforms, emerging realities, comparative constitutional law.

INTRODUCTION

The question of presidential term limits has become one of the most contentious issues in the constitutional and political history of francophone Africa over the past three decades. Introduced during the democratic transitions of the early 1990s, the two-term rule was designed as a safeguard against the authoritarian legacies of the post-independence era and as a mechanism to ensure political alternation, institutional

¹ Dr. Soilihi Mohamed, PhD in Public Law and Political Science (Catholic University of Madagascar) and Engineer in Geotourism, Ecotourism, and Georisk (University of Antananarivo), is a Lecturer-Researcher and Director of the "Laboratoire Dynamique Économique et Juridique du Secteur Formel et Informel" at the University of the Comoros. His research focuses on environmental law, governance, and the integration of environmental policies into sustainable development. Corresponding author: soilihimohamed34@gmail.com

accountability, and the consolidation of the rule of law (Banégas 2003; Villalón and VonDoepp 2005). International frameworks such as the Bamako Declaration (2000) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) further elevated term limits to the status of regional democratic norms (Prempeh 2008). By the early 2000s, most francophone African constitutions contained explicit provisions limiting presidential tenure, creating the appearance of constitutional standardization across the region.

Yet recent political developments reveal a growing disjunction between constitutional texts and political practices. In Chad, the 2025 constitutional reform extended presidential terms from five to seven years while abolishing term limits altogether, enabling President Mahamat Idriss Déby to retain power beyond the previous constitutional constraints (Reuters 2025). In Guinea, the 2025 referendum approved a new constitution granting the transitional leader the right to contest future presidential elections, despite earlier transitional commitments to political alternation (EcofinAgency 2025; AP News 2025). In the Comoros, the dismantling of the rotating presidency established in 2001 and the controversial empowerment of President Azali Assoumani's son in 2024 illustrate how constitutional provisions can be manipulated to serve dynastic and personal ambitions (Reuters 2024; AP News 2025). In Madagascar, the recurrent political crises culminating in the 2025 dissolution of the government amid popular protests highlight the limited capacity of formal term-limit provisions to prevent political instability when institutions lack legitimacy and elite consensus (The Guardian 2025).

These developments point to a paradox: while constitutional term limits have become a regional standard and a symbolic marker of democratic governance, their implementation remains deeply contested. The gap between normative commitments and political realities raises critical questions about the relationship between law, power, and democratic legitimacy in contemporary francophone Africa.

This article argues that presidential term limits in francophone Africa function less as automatic safeguards of democratic alternation than as arenas of political contestation where constitutional texts, elite strategies, and popular mobilizations intersect. Through a combination of doctrinal legal analysis, comparative political study, and contextual examination of recent events, the article explores how the constitutionalization of term limits interacts with the dynamics of political power, revealing both the resilience of authoritarian practices and the unfinished trajectories of democratization in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design that combines doctrinal legal analysis with empirical political inquiry to examine the evolving relationship between constitutional term limits and political power in francophone Africa. The methodological approach unfolds along three complementary dimensions.

First, a doctrinal legal analysis was conducted to trace the normative trajectory of presidential term limits from the early 1990s to the present. Primary legal sources include national constitutions, constitutional court decisions, and international instruments such as the Bamako Declaration (2000) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007). These sources provide the formal framework through which the principle of presidential term limits has been articulated,

codified, and elevated to the status of a regional democratic norm (Banégas 2003; Prempeh 2008).

Second, a comparative case study approach was employed to analyze recent political and constitutional developments in selected francophone countries, with particular attention to Chad, Guinea, the Comoros, and Madagascar between 2018 and 2025. These cases were chosen because they illustrate contrasting trajectories: Chad and Guinea exemplify the removal or weakening of term-limit provisions (Reuters 2025; EcofinAgency 2025), while the Comoros and Madagascar reveal the instrumentalization of constitutional norms amid political instability and elite contestation (Reuters 2024; AP News 2025; The Guardian 2025). Additional references to Benin and Cape Verde, where term limits have been largely respected, provide comparative balance and highlight institutional variation across the region (Villalón and VonDoepp 2005; Cheeseman 2018).

Third, a contextual political analysis was conducted to link constitutional reforms with broader patterns of governance, elite behavior, and popular mobilization. This dimension draws on secondary sources, including academic scholarship on African constitutionalism (Englebert 2009; Cheeseman 2018) and recent reports from international media and civil society organizations documenting constitutional amendments, electoral reforms, and political crises between 2018 and 2025.

The triangulation of legal texts, political developments, and scholarly literature allows for a multidimensional understanding of how constitutional term limits function not only as legal provisions but also as contested political arenas shaped by power struggles, institutional legacies, and societal expectations. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aims at **theoretical generalization**, offering insights into the complex interaction between constitutional norms, political practices, and democratic trajectories in francophone Africa.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal three interrelated patterns that illuminate the evolving relationship between constitutional term limits and political power in francophone Africa and the Indian Ocean region. These patterns emerge clearly from the comparative analysis of constitutional reforms, political practices, and popular responses between 2018 and 2025.

First, the adoption of presidential term limits during the democratic transitions of the early 1990s reflected both domestic demands for political alternation and international pressures for democratic governance. National conferences in Benin, Niger, and Mali institutionalized the two-term limit as a safeguard against authoritarian legacies (Banégas 2003; Villalón and VonDoepp 2005). International frameworks such as the Bamako Declaration (2000) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) elevated these provisions to the status of regional democratic norms (Prempeh 2008). However, the assumption that the mere constitutionalization of term limits would guarantee democratic consolidation has been increasingly challenged by recent developments in the region (Posner and Young 2007; Cheeseman 2018).

Second, recent reforms in Chad, Guinea, and the Comoros illustrate the persistent tension between constitutional norms and political realities. In Chad, the 2025 constitutional amendment extended the presidential term from five to seven years while removing term limits altogether, enabling President Mahamat Idriss Déby to

consolidate his authority beyond the initial constitutional constraints (Reuters 2025). In Guinea, the 2025 referendum introduced a new constitution that extended the presidential term to seven years and authorized transitional leaders to contest future elections, despite earlier commitments to alternation (EcofinAgency 2025; AP News 2025). In the Comoros, the dismantling of the rotating presidency established in 2001 and the controversial empowerment of President Assoumani's son in 2024 exemplify how constitutional provisions can be reinterpreted to entrench executive power (Reuters 2024; AP News 2025). These cases confirm that constitutional limits, while symbolically important, remain vulnerable to elite manipulation and institutional weakness, especially in contexts marked by dominant-party politics and limited judicial independence (Englebert 2009).

Third, the analysis of Madagascar and other countries highlights the limits of legal provisions in the absence of broader democratic culture and institutional trust. Despite the existence of constitutional term limits, Madagascar has experienced recurrent political crises, contested elections, and mass protests, culminating in the dissolution of the government in 2025 following widespread demonstrations over governance failures (The Guardian 2025). These events underscore that constitutional rules alone cannot ensure political alternation or stability when political elites lack commitment to democratic norms and when institutions fail to mediate political conflict effectively (Cheeseman 2018).

Overall, the results suggest that presidential term limits in francophone Africa function less as automatic safeguards of democratic alternation than as contested arenas where law, politics, and society interact. The regional trend toward constitutional standardization coexists with persistent practices of circumvention, manipulation, and reinterpretation by political elites, revealing the fragility of democratic institutions in the region. Moreover, the resilience of authoritarian practices amid formal constitutional reforms points to the unfinished trajectories of democratization in francophone Africa, where legal norms, political power, and popular mobilization remain locked in a dynamic and often conflictual relationship (Englebert 2009; Cheeseman 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the constitutionalization of presidential term limits in francophone Africa and the Indian Ocean region, highlighting the tension between legal norms, political power, and democratic governance. The findings reveal that while the two-term limit emerged in the early 1990s as a cornerstone of democratic reforms, its implementation over the period 2018–2025 illustrates growing divergence between constitutional texts and political realities.

Empirical evidence from Chad, Guinea, the Comoros, and Madagascar shows that constitutional provisions designed to ensure political alternation have been increasingly reinterpreted, circumvented, or dismantled in response to elite strategies and institutional weaknesses. In Chad, the 2025 constitutional amendment that abolished term limits entirely signaled a decisive shift toward executive entrenchment (Reuters 2025). In Guinea, the 2025 referendum authorizing transitional leaders to seek reelection further undermined the credibility of constitutional safeguards (EcofinAgency 2025; AP News 2025). In the Comoros, the dismantling of the rotating presidency and the controversial empowerment of President Assoumani's son in 2024 revealed the instrumentalization of constitutional frameworks for personal and familial

power consolidation (Reuters 2024; AP News 2025). In Madagascar, the persistence of political crises despite constitutional provisions for term limits illustrated the limits of legal constraints in the absence of elite commitment to democratic principles and institutional stability (The Guardian 2025).

Taken together, these developments confirm that presidential term limits in francophone Africa function less as automatic safeguards of democratic alternation than as arenas where law, politics, and society intersect (Cheeseman 2018; Englebert 2009). The regional trend toward constitutional standardization thus coexists with persistent practices of manipulation, reinterpretation, and circumvention by political elites, revealing the unfinished nature of democratization in the region.

Future research should explore the role of constitutional courts, regional organizations, and transnational civil society networks in strengthening the enforcement of term limits. Ultimately, the sustainability of constitutional democracy in francophone Africa depends not only on the formal adoption of legal norms but also on political will, institutional capacity, and civic mobilization to ensure that constitutional limits genuinely constrain executive power rather than serve as instruments of temporary political legitimacy.

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