1. What led to the coup attempt in Sierra Leone?

Introduction

On November 26, unidentified gunmen targeted several police stations and correctional centres in Freetown (Capital of Sierra Leone). The Minister of Information and Civic Education declared the attacks in the capital as an unsuccessful coup attempt to overthrow the government. In August 2023, the Sierra Leone police had arrested several people, including senior military officers who were accused of planning violent attacks on government institutions. The recent attacks were an attempt to free the military officers.

What is happening in Sierra Leone?

Three specific factors play a role in the recent events in Sierra Leone.

First, is the political instability. The political climate in Sierra Leone has been unstable since President Julius Maada Wonie Bio's narrow re-election in June. The outcome was contested by the opposition, alleging that the election was manipulated.

Second comes the economic instability. The country is experiencing a high cost of living crisis and severe poverty.

Third is the aggression of the police. The prison riot of 2020 in the overcrowded Pademba prison was quelled by using live ammunition. Similarly, the protests of August 2022 left six police officers and 27 protesters dead. Resentment towards the government persists due to the lack of accountability towards protest casualties, as police aggression continues.

What has been the state response?

An indefinite curfew was immediately levied following the attack and was lifted on November 27, only for new curfews to be imposed. The Sierra Leone Civil Aviation Authority (SLCAA) informed airlines to reschedule flights according to the new nationwide curfew. A cash reward has been declared to anyone who could provide details about the coup leaders. President Bio declared that calm had been restored, but shots were fired in Murray town on November 26, amid security operations to capture the leaders of the attack.

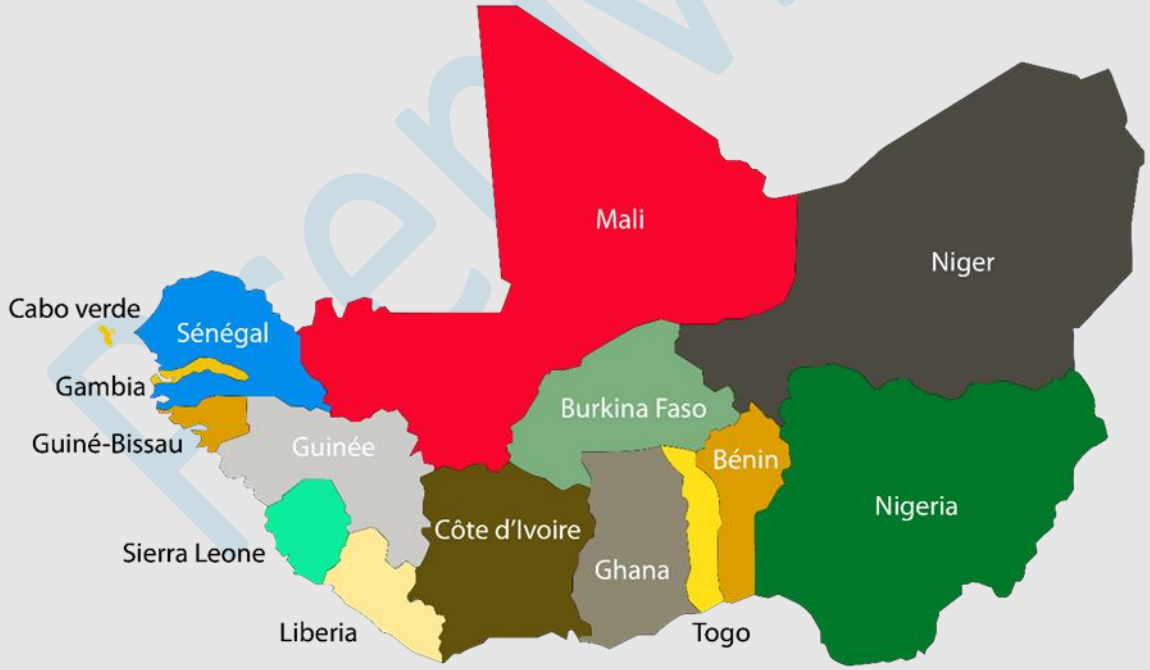
Will the ECOWAS intervene?

Since 2020, six African countries have undergone nine coups and coup attempts. Countries including Niger, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Sudan are under military rule. The growing antagonism of people towards democratically elected governments paved the way for the military to legitimise their takeovers. The Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) intolerance towards unconstitutional takeovers was emphasised when the organisation threatened Niger with military intervention and levied economic sanctions.

Sierra Leone is a member country of ECOWAS and hence if any security concern arises in the future, ECOWAS and the member countries will step in to maintain constitutional order. The visit from the ECOWAS' delegates to the country highlights its commitment towards democracy. Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world and if a coup attempt is successful, the consequent ECOWAS intervention and sanction will be detrimental.

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; also known as CEDEAO in French and Portuguese) is a regional political and economic union of fifteen countries located in West Africa.



The union was established on 28 May 1975, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos, with its stated mission to promote economic integration across the region.

ECOWAS also serves as a peacekeeping force in the region, with member states occasionally sending joint military forces to intervene in the bloc's member countries at times of political instability and unrest.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Issues
Source: The Hindu

2. Overview of the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act

Introduction

The European Union's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act is a significant legislative initiative aimed at regulating artificial intelligence technologies within the EU. With the growing influence of AI across various sectors, the EU seeks to strike a balance between fostering innovation and ensuring ethical and responsible AI development. The objectives of the EU AI Act are to create a regulatory framework for AI technologies, mitigate risks associated with AI systems, and establish clear guidelines for developers, users, and regulators. The act aims to ensure the responsible use of AI by protecting fundamental rights and promoting transparency in AI applications.

The strengths of the Act

One of the notable strengths of the EU AI Act is its risk-based approach. The legislation categorises AI applications into different risk levels, ranging from unacceptable to low. This approach enables tailored regulations, with higher-risk applications subject to more stringent requirements. This flexibility acknowledges AI technologies' diverse potential impact on society. It also explicitly prohibits certain AI practices deemed unacceptable, such as social credit scoring systems for government purposes, predictive policing applications, and AI systems that manipulate individuals such as emotional recognition systems at work or in education. This prohibition reflects the EU's commitment to preventing the misuse of AI technologies.

The EU AI Act emphasises transparency and accountability in AI development and deployment. It requires developers to provide clear information about the capabilities and limitations of AI systems, enabling users to make informed decisions. Additionally, the legislation mandates that developers maintain comprehensive documentation to facilitate regulatory oversight. Moreover, to ensure compliance with the regulations, the EU AI Act introduces the concept of independent conformity assessment. Higher-risk AI applications like medical devices, biometric identification, and access to justice and services, must undergo assessment processes conducted by third-party entities. This approach enhances objectivity and reduces the risk of conflicts of interest, contributing to the credibility of the regulatory framework.

The limitations

One of the criticisms of the EU AI Act is the challenge in accurately defining and categorising AI applications. The evolving nature of AI technologies may make it difficult to establish clear boundaries between different risk levels, potentially leading to uncertainties in regulatory implementation.

Critics have also argued that the stringent regulations in the EU may hinder the competitiveness of European businesses in the global AI market. While the Act aims to ensure ethical AI practices, some fear that overly restrictive measures could stifle innovation and drive AI development outside the EU. Additionally, compliance with the EU AI Act may impose a significant burden on smaller businesses and start-ups. The resources required for conformity assessments and documentation may disproportionately affect smaller players in the AI industry, potentially limiting their ability to compete with larger, more established counterparts. Striking the right balance between regulation and fostering innovation is crucial, with critics arguing that the EU AI Act may lean too heavily towards stringent controls.

The potential implications

The EU AI Act is likely to have a global impact, influencing the development and deployment of AI technologies beyond the EU's borders. As a major economic bloc, the EU's regulatory framework may set a precedent for other regions, shaping the trajectory of AI development on a global scale, just like the MiCa regulation did for crypto-assets.

By prioritising ethical considerations and fundamental rights, the EU AI Act contributes to the establishment of global norms for AI development. And the impact on innovation and competitiveness will depend on the balance struck by the EU between regulation and fostering a conducive environment for AI development.

It encourages collaboration and cooperation between regulatory authorities, fostering a unified approach to AI regulation. International collaboration in regulating AI technologies is essential to address global challenges and ensure consistent standards across borders.

The administrative side

Any individual has the right to report instances of non-compliance. The EU member states' market surveillance authorities will be responsible for enforcing the AI Act. There will be specific limits on fines applicable to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups. The EU will establish a centralised 'AI office' and 'AI Board.' In case businesses do not adhere to the EU AI Act, fines could range from $8 million to almost $38 million, depending on the nature of the violation and the company's size. For instance, fines may amount to up to 1.5% of the global annual turnover or €7.5 million for providing incorrect information, up to 3% of the global annual turnover or €15 million for general violations, and up to 7% of the global annual turnover or €35 million for prohibited AI violations.

The EU's AI Act represents a significant step towards regulating AI technologies responsibly and ethically. While it addresses key concerns associated with AI, such as

transparency, accountability, and risk mitigation, there are challenges and potential drawbacks that need careful consideration. The global impact of the EU AI Act and its potential to shape international norms make it a landmark initiative in the ongoing discourse on the responsible development and deployment of artificial intelligence.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; S&T
Source: The Hindu

3. Centre writes to states over new Covid variant - JN.1

Why in news?
With cases of Covid-19 on the rise in Kerala, the Union health ministry has written to states and Union Territories, asking them to monitor cases of influenza-like illnesses, conduct adequate testing, and send all positive samples for whole genome sequencing.

What do we know about JN.1?
The sub-variant JN.1 is a descendant of the BA.2.86 variant, commonly referred to as Pirola, and is not exactly new. The first cases of this variant were detected in the United States in September and the first case globally was detected as early as January this year.

While JN.1 contains only one additional mutation on the spike protein as compared with Pirola, it has been on the watch-list of researchers because Pirola contains more than 30 mutations on the spike protein. Mutations on the spike protein of Sars-CoV-2 matter because they are the ones that attach to receptors on a human cell and allow the virus to enter it.

Can it lead to a surge, or more severe symptoms?
There is no evidence to suggest that JN.1 can cause worse symptoms or spread faster than the variants already in circulation. Initially, there were concerns that the high number of mutations could mean that Pirola would evade immune response more easily and spread rapidly. That, however, hasn't happened.

In fact, an assessment by the WHO Technical Advisory Group on COVID-19 Vaccine Composition showed that Pirola and JN.1 were both effectively neutralised by serum from humans who had had the infection and vaccination.

While Pirola and JN.1 are considered to be Variants of Interest (variants that are less effectively neutralised in labs by antibodies from infection or vaccination and have a potential to spread), they have not been designated as Variants of Concern (variants that result in increased transmission, severe disease leading to hospitalisation, and reduce effectiveness of vaccines).

What has led to the current concerns?

There is definitely an increase in the number of cases being caused by Pirola and its close relative JN.1 globally. Cases have been detected in the USA, some European countries, Singapore, and China.

How can you protect yourself?

Experts say that while new variants of Sars-CoV-2 will keep emerging, protective measures against a respiratory virus remain the same. Doctors suggest masking up in crowded areas, especially enclosed ones, if the number of cases is increasing locally. Remaining in well-ventilated spaces reduces the spread of the infection. Also, washing hands frequently prevents the infection.

Relevance: GS Prelims; S&T
Source: The Indian Express & The PIB