EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN AFRICA

Editor: Maurice N. Amutabi



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Prof. Dr.-Ing. Benedict M. Mutua, who is a Professor of Water Resources, Environmental and Hydraulics Engineering, and Vice Chancellor of the Technical University of Kenya (TUK) for his great leadership, inspiration, dedication and commitment in serving staff and students of this great institution and the entire Kenyan nation over the years, and to wish him well as he discharges his mandate as the CEO of TUK.

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May 1, 2025

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Chapter 10

Democratic Fragility and ECOWAS's Challenges In West Africa: Insights From Recent Coup D'états In The Region

By

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Abstract

This chapter attempts to unravel the factors that accounted for this trend. Specifically, the chapter attempts to provide answers to the following questions: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 principally promote economic integration among member states. The organization's journey has been impaired by violent conflict, by democratic interregnum, which has made ECOWAS toggle among economic, security, and democratic government routes since the 196Os decade of independence. However, the recent scenario in the region with the violent seize of power by the military from the democratically elected leaders in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso proved to be herculean task for the organization in the restoration of political stability in these countries. The unfolding event has raised critical questions on the survival of the organization in achieving its economic and political viability of the founding fathers. What are the factors responsible for the destabilization of democratic stability in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso? What are the lessons learnt from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso withdrawal from ECOWAS? What steps should be taken to restore and avert the recurrence of this situation in the region? The study recommends among others that ECOWAS should take proactive steps in the sustainability of democratic governance by ensuring the spread of its dividend among the masses of the member nations and do everything possible to encourage member states to abide by the principles of good governance in the region.

Keywords: West Africa, Democracy, ECOWAS, Good Governance, Regional Integration

Democratic Fragility and ECOWAS's Challenges In West Africa : Insights From Recent Coup D'etats in The Region

By

[1]Edun Abdulkareem Jimoh, [2]Adedoyin Jolade Omede & [3]Lukman Omomeji Shehu

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded in 1975 as a subregional economic bloc with the objective of fostering economic integration among member states. Over time, the organization's mandates have expanded to include peace and security owing to the persistent insecurity and political instability plaguing the subregion (Adebayo, 2022). West African countries like many other countries within the African continent have grappled with political instability occasioned by incessant incursion of the military into the political terrain of the region. In less than a decade after independence, West African began to witness recurring military interventions in politics, with the military often present itself as corrective alternative to civilian government perceived to be ineffective (Doe, 2023). The first phase of military coups was blamed on politicians who succeeded the departed colonialists (Chidume, 2013). The politicians were accused of being self-seeking, power-hungry and ambitious. In other words, they were accused of enriching themselves from the state treasury, nepotism, favoritism and experimentation of foreign ideologies in the name of African Socialism that was not relevant to the improvement of the lives of the people (Chidume, 2013).

After about three decades of military rules, African countries began to witness a wave of democratic transition starting from 1990s and continued into the 21st century (Angalapu, 2023).

West African countries were not left out of this sweeping wave of democratization as evident in the return to multiparty democracy in several states, often marked by constitutional reforms and constitutional elections in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Guinea and Ivory Coast (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Kandeh, 2004; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

ECOWAS has played crucial roles in promoting democracy in the subregion. The organization has adopted both proactive and reactive approaches in institutionalizing democratic norms and ensuring regional integration to democratic ideals. It has undertaken peacekeeping missions, mediated political crises and imposed sanctions on erring member states to deter unconstitutional change of government (Adebayo, 2022). This is

evident in its interventions in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast, where democratic order and stability were restored (Angalapu, 2023). The organisation has also demonstrated its commitment to democratic rule within member states through the entrenchment of Article 1(c) which states the organisation's zero tolerance acquisition and maintenance of power through unconstitutional means, as part of its protocols (ECOWAS Protocol, 2001).

The resurgence of military coups in the subregion, specifically in countries like Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) underscores the limitations of ECOWAS's approaches. It raises questions about the effectiveness of its democratic enforcement mechanisms (Adebayo, 2022). The principle of non-interference, enshrined in the ECOWAS Treaty, has also posed significant challenges to the organization's ability to respond decisively to democratic crises (Sesay, 2013). Some member states, particularly those with authoritarian-leaning governments, have resisted ECOWAS' interventions in domestic political affairs, further weakening the organization's capacity to enforce democratic norms. Additionally, geopolitical factors, such as external influences from global and regional powers, have complicated ECOWAS' decision-making processes, particularly in cases where foreign interests align with authoritarian regimes (Obi, 2012).

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to critically analyze the factors contributing to democratic fragility in West Africa and the challenges ECOWAS faces in promoting political stability. By examining the recent coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger, this chapter aims to provide insights into the structural and institutional weaknesses that have facilitated military interventions. Furthermore, it explores the implications of these political developments for regional integration and proposes policy recommendations to strengthen democratic governance in West Africa.

Statement of the Problem

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa since 2020 has exposed significant challenges to democratic stability and governance in the region, highlighting the fragility of democratic institutions and the limitations of ECOWAS in addressing the situation. Despite the adoption of protocols like the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) by ECOWAS and its "zero tolerance" policy against unconstitutional changes of government, the region has witnessed multiple coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger. The ECOWAS's inability to reverse the trend, despite sanctions and diplomatic intervention, coupled with the recent withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS, signals a significant danger

not only to democratic institutions in the region but also to regional integration.

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to critically analyze the factors contributing to democratic fragility in West Africa and the implication of the recent withdrawal of Mali Burkina Faso and Niger from the regional body on regional integration and political stability.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

This section provides an analytical framework for understanding the key concepts central to this study: democratic fragility, regional integration, and ECOWAS's role in governance and stability. By exploring these themes, the review highlights the complexities surrounding democratic governance in West Africa and the challenges ECOWAS faces in ensuring stability.

Democratic Fragility

Democratic fragility refers to the vulnerability of democratic institutions to collapse, often resulting in authoritarian takeovers or military rule (Diamond, 2019). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in West Africa, where weak institutions, electoral malpractice, and political manipulation undermine democratic consolidation (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Huntington (1991) argues that stable democracies require institutional frameworks that ensure transparency, accountability, and adherence to democratic norms. However, many West African states lack these safeguards, making them prone to political crises (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). The resurgence of military coups in the region suggests that democracy remains fragile and susceptible to elite-driven disruptions.

Regional Integration and Democratic Governance

Regional integration is often viewed as a means of strengthening democratic governance by fostering economic cooperation, promoting political stability, and establishing shared security mechanisms (Balassa, 1961). ECOWAS, originally established as an economic bloc, later incorporated democratic governance and conflict resolution into its agenda (Adebayo, 2022). Through initiatives such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), the organization has sought to uphold democratic principles among its member states (Sesay, 2013). However, despite these efforts, democratic reversals continue, raising concerns about the effectiveness of regional mechanisms in promoting stability (Obi, 2012).

ECOWAS' Mandate and the Challenges to Political Stability

Originally established to promote economic integration, ECOWAS has since expanded its mandate to include conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and democracy promotion (Adetula, 2014). The organization has intervened in conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and The Gambia to restore democratic order (Adebayo, 2022). However, ECOWAS faces challenges such as geopolitical rivalries, the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, and inconsistent enforcement of its democratic protocols (Francis, 2013). These factors have contributed to the persistence of democratic fragility and governance failures in the region.

Military Coups and Governance Failures in West Africa

Military interventions have historically disrupted democratic processes in West Africa. Scholars argue that factors such as corruption, economic mismanagement, authoritarian rule, and weak civil-military relations create conditions for coups (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). The recent wave of coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) indicates deep-seated governance failures and growing public frustration with elected leaders (Collier, 2009). This is particularly evident in Guinea and Niger where the citizens brazenly displayed supports for the putschist as against the displaced civilian government (Shehu, et al, 2024). The inability of civilian governments to address socio-economic challenges and insecurity has further eroded trust in democratic institutions (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

Table 1: Military Coups in West Africa, 20202-2023

Date	Country	Event	Head of State	Coup Leader	Outcome
August 18 2020	Mali	2020 Malian Coup d'état	Ibrahim Boubacar Keita	Asimi Goita	Coup successful
May 24 2021	Mali	2021 Malian Coup d'état	Bah Ndasw	Asimi Goita	Coup successful
March 31 2021	Niger	2021 Nigerien coup Attempt	Mohammed Bazoum	Sani Saley Gourouza	Coup Failed
July 26 2023	Niger	2023 Nigerien coup d'état	Mohammed Bazoum	Abdourahamane Tchiani	Coup Successful
September 5 2021	Guinea	2021 Guinean coup d'état	Alpha Conde	Mamady Doumbouya	Coup successful
January 23 2022	Burkina Faso	January 2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état	Roch Marc Christian Kabore	Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba	Coup Successful
September 30 2022	Burkina Faso	September 2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état	Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba	Ibrahim Traore	Coup successful
September 26 2023	Burkina Faso	2023 Burkina Faso Coup Attempt	Ibrahim Traore	Abdoul September Aziz Aouoba	Coup failed

Source: Compiled by the Authors

Table 1 shows the trajectory of military coups in the region from August 2020 to September to 2023. Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali,

Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, including currently suspended or withdrawn members. In the early 2000s, ECOWAS adopted *Protocol A/SP1/12/01*. This further solidified its commitment to democratic governance and the prevention of unconstitutional changes of government through the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001).

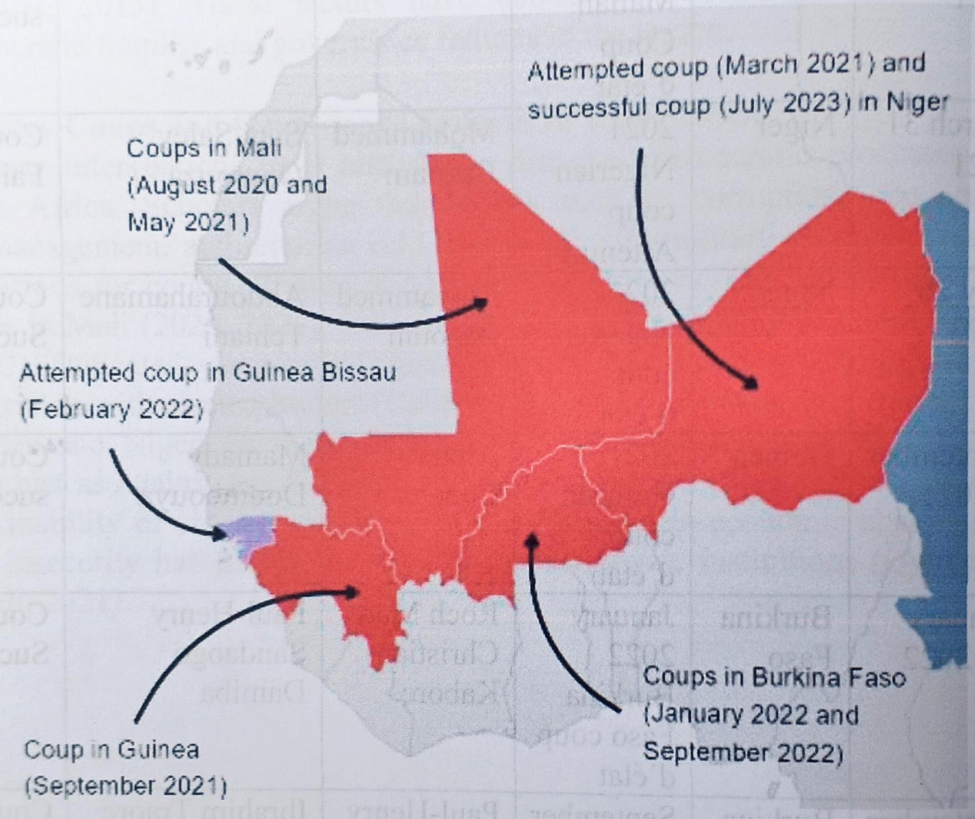


Fig. 1. Map of contemporary military coups in ECOWAS's member states
Source: Alexander, H, & David, T (2023)

Fig. 1. Map of contemporary military coups in ECOWAS's member states
Source: Alexander, H, & David, T (2023)

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, combining both primary and secondary data to investigate the causes and implications of recent military takeovers in West Africa. A key informant interview (KII) was employed to gather insights from experts on governance and regional stability. Additionally, relevant literature, including policy documents,

reports from ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN), as well as peer-reviewed journal articles, were reviewed to complement primary data. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in democratic instability, geopolitical influences, and ECOWAS' responses.

Factors Responsible for Democratic Destabilization in West Africa

The recent military coup d'états in West Africa, specifically in Mali, Guinea Burkina Faso and Niger are rooted in a complex interplay of governance deficits, socio-economic hardship, insecurity and institutional weakness. These factors have undermined democratic processes and have contribute to the growing political instability in the sub-region. These factors are discussed in details, sharing scholarly perspectives and empirical facts from the affected countries.

(i) Governance Failure

The persistence of bad governance and autocratic tendencies of some civilian regimes has not only eroded democratic gains but has also significantly fueled peoples' discontent in democratic governance. Political leaders often manipulated the constitutional process to extend their tenures beyond constitutional limits, and to suppress dissenting or opposition voices, triggering protests and political crises (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Shehu et al, 2024). The controversial third-term bid of Former President Alpha Conde of Guinea, which led to the widespread protests and political unrest in 2020 is a testament to how governance failure led to the collapse of democratic regimes in West Africa. In addition to this, the inability of civilian leaders to guarantee democratic precepts such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, fundamental human rights and press freedom also contributed to democratic failure (Aidi, 2022). Similarly, the much-taunted good governance associated with democratic government are not obtainable from the democratic experiment in West Africa, and this has greatly influenced citizens disenchantment in democratic government. This is evident in the widespread solidarity supports that greeted military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso (Kumah-Abiwu, 2023).

(ii) Pervasive Insecurity

The expanding terrorist campaigns around Sahel region also contributed to democratic destabilization in West Africa. There was a surge in violence linked to Jihadist insurgencies in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, particularly from terrorist groups like JNIM, Al-Qaeda, AQIM, Ansar Dine and MNLA (Hansen, n. d). In addition to this, the politically precipitated violence contributed to the democratic instability in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger (Shehu et al, 2024). These political crises were as a result of

undemocratic atmosphere created by politicians who are not ready to submit themselves to the democratic process.

(iii) Socio-Economic Hardship

High level of poverty, unemployment and other socio-economic inequalities have created social unrest among people, thereby providing fertile ground for anti-democratic sentiments. For instance, the global GDP rating released by World Bank in 2023 rates Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso as 132, 119 and 117 respectively out of 177 countries rated across the globe (Worldmeter,2023). These countries were similarly ranked 167, 166 and 151, respectively, in Human Capital Index (HCI) out of 180 countries rated globally for the year 2020 (World Bank, 2020). These worsened economic indicators have created a huge negative impact on the socio-economic lives of the people and have created significant discontent among people who, daily, questioned the ability of the democratic government to lead their country on the path of economic development. These grievances have fueled demand for political change and openness to the military as an alternative to ineffective civilian leadership (World Bank, 2023).

(iv) Pervasive Corruption and Lack of Accountability

With the collapse of democratic regimes in Africa less than a decade after independence, one would think that politicians must have learnt the lesson of prudent management of resources for the betterment of all, having had another shot at democratic government. The reports across the West African sub-region proved that corruption still remains endemic. The Transparency International (2022) report ranked West African countries high in its corruption perception index. For instance, of the 180 countries rated in 2022 Guinea, Mali and Niger were rated 147, 137 and 123 respectively. Additionally, in Mali and Niger, widespread corruption in defense procurement and public service delivery has bred resentment, particularly among marginalized populations (Freedom House, 2023). This Endemic corruption has not only eroded public trust in democratic institutions but has also weakened the democratic process and served as an invitation to the military in the four coup-infected countries (Shehu et al, 2024).

(v) Fragile Institutions and Civil-Military Imbalance

Weak governance, institutional fragility and over-politicization of the military have undermined the principle of checks and balances essential for democratic consolidation (Obinna & Semudara, 2024). For instance, Former President Roch Marc Christian Kabore was elected President of Burkina Faso amid the popular uprising that culminated in the removal of Ex-President Blaisse Compaore (BBC, 2015). This uprising exposed the military

to the political rudiments and prepared them for the alternative role in the management of the affairs of the country. Similarly, in the controversial 2020 third-term election of Former president Alpha Conde of Guinea, the Gendarmerie, the Army and the National Police were all engaged to suppress the opposition and ensure the victory of Conde at the polls at all costs (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Though Conde succeeded in winning the election, the military he used backstabbed him and toppled his government eleven months after the election (Shehu, et al, 2024).

(vi) External Influence and Weak Regional Enforcement Mechanisms

External geopolitical interests and ECOWAS' limited capacity to enforce democratic norms contributed to democratic destabilization in the four affected countries. There was the report that some of the leaders of the putschists received pieces of training in countries like the US, Russia, France and Germany before their coups (PSC Insight, 2023). Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who led the 2021 coup in Guinea, was alleged to have staged the coup while receiving military training in the US (PSC Insight, 2023). This report indicated the involvement of external factors in the collapse of democratic regimes in these countries. Similarly, the ECOWAS response to coups and autocratic regimes has been inconsistence, constrained by the principle of non-interference and divergent interests among member states. This has emboldened coup leaders and reduced the deterrent effect of regional sanctions (Francis, 2013; Obi, 2012).

Implications of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger's Withdrawal from ECOWAS.

On January 28 2024, the military leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger their intention to with their countries' membership from ECOWAS (BBC, 2024). This announcement was a historic point in the Sahel's political trajectory as the countries continue to push for sovereignty, regional security, and economic autonomy (Peoples Dispatch, 2024). The decision to withdraw from the regional bloc was a result of sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on the countries' military governments following their displacement of legally constituted democratic governments (Aljazeera, 2024). Consequently, the three states announced the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (BBC, 2024).

This collective withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marks a critical inflection point in the political and institutional trajectory of the West African sub-region. While the decision was announced by the ruling military juntas in January 2024, the implications extend far beyond symbolic

disengagement, touching on economic, security, diplomatic, and socio-political dimensions that threaten the integrity of regional integration and democratic consolidation in West Africa. The impacts of the withdrawal include:

1. Disruption of Regional Economic Integration

ECOWAS has long served as a vital platform for regional economic integration. The formation of ECOWAS in 1975 was primarily to foster integration among member states. By exiting the Community, these countries risk severing access to preferential trade arrangements, regional development funds, and cross-border market cooperation (Hum Angle, 2025). Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are landlocked and are among the poorest countries in the continent. This withdrawal will undoubtedly disrupt regional trade and service flow (ETK, 2024). ECOWAS states have cumulative GDP of $1.483 trillion, the three countries (Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger) account for paltry 8% of this GDP estimate (Wikipedia, 2024; ETK, 2024). Their withdrawal may further condemn them to economic isolation and economic situation. This withdrawal has also affected trade flow between these countries and other ECOWAS member countries.

2. Regional Security Vacuum

ECOWAS has been a crucial player in managing various political crisis and conflicts among its members, as well as consolidating peace and democracy through the adoption of Protocol on Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security 1999 and the supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001 (WANEP, 2024). The achievements of the Community in this regard are commendable considering its success in countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Gambia (Adebayo, 2022). Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are at the epicentre of the Sahel security crises, where violent extremists, transnational organized crime and ethnic militias have weakened state authority (WANEP, 2024). Their withdrawal from ECOWAS has undermined intelligence sharing, joint military operations, thereby leading to security vacuum that could further embolden the terrorist groups. For instance, data from the WANEP National Early Warning System shows that between January and August 2024, over 673 armed attacks were recorded in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Similarly, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) 2024 report indicated that the global epicentre of terrorism has been shifted out of the Middle East into the Central Sahel region, which now accounts for half of the deaths from terrorism (GTI, 2024).

3. Diplomatic Isolation and Regional Fragmentation

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger form ECOWAS has signalled a broader diplomatic disengagement, reflecting growing disenchantment with regional and international norms of liberal democracy. In place of ECOWAS, the military-led governments of these countries announced the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States, an alliance with a security-first approach to governance and a preference for non-interference (Aljazeera, 2024). This realignment indicates a shift from cooperative multilateralism to a fragmented geopolitical order. This shift has led to limited international engagement and could further jeopardize much-needed developmental assistance (AU, 2024).

4. Threat to Regional Political Stability

The withdrawal of these countries from the regional body also threatens to destabilize the political order of West African countries. ECOWAS has served as a bulwark for democratic norms through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which prescribed penalties for unconstitutional change of government. By rejecting ECOWAS authority, the departed states signal an erosion of shared democratic commitments and paved the way for a new political model grounded on militarized nationalism rather than participatory governance (Source??). This ideological divergence could provoke further ruptures, encourage similar exits by other disaffected regimes, and fuel geopolitical fragmentation (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

5. Undermining ECOWAS Institutional Credibility

The coordinated withdrawal exposes ECOWAS' institutional weaknesses. While the Community often championed the promotion of democratic government in the region, critics argued that its responses have been inconsistence and ineffective in addressing local grievances (Francis, 2013). The inability of ECOWAS to pre-empt or reverse recent coups, and the exit of its key members, have damaged its credibility, reducing its leverage in future mediation efforts and raising doubt about its normative legitimacy (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

Conclusion

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa underscores the persistent fragility of democratic governance in the sub-region and reveals the complex interplay between governance failure, pervasive insecurity, socio-economic hardship, corruption, and institutional weakness. Despite ECOWAS's evolving mandate and laudable efforts to entrench democratic norms through protocols and interventions, its capacity to prevent unconstitutional changes

of government has been significantly undermined by internal contradictions, limited enforcement mechanisms, and the doctrine of non-interference.

The cases of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger reveal that the erosion of public trust in civilian regimes—often rooted in leadership failure, democratic backsliding, and deteriorating living conditions—has created a fertile ground for military interventions. The emergence of popular support for some of these coups further questions the legitimacy of democratic experiments that fail to deliver good governance. ECOWAS's inconsistent response to these challenges, compounded by the geopolitical entanglements of external actors, has further constrained its efficacy.

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS signals a troubling shift in regional dynamics, threatening the cohesion of the subregion and jeopardizing gains made in regional integration, economic cooperation, and collective security. The implications are profound—not only for the withdrawing states but also for the broader regional and continental democratic trajectory.

Recommendations

For ECOWAS to put democratic governance on the path of sustainability in the subregion, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Strengthen Democratic Institutions and Good Governance

ECOWAS must intensify support for institutional reforms in member states aimed at promoting transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Strengthening electoral bodies, judicial independence, and anti-corruption frameworks will enhance democratic resilience and public trust in civilian governance.

2. Enhance the Enforcement of Democratic Norms

The organization should move beyond rhetorical commitments to more assertive enforcement of its protocols. This includes the timely imposition of sanctions on regimes that violate constitutional order and creating binding mechanisms for compliance with the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

3. Reform the Principle of Non-Interference

ECOWAS must revisit the doctrine of non-interference to allow timely and robust interventions in member states experiencing democratic regression. A redefined principle of "non-indifference" should be adopted to prioritize the defense of democratic order and human rights.

4. Address Socio-Economic Inequities

Regional efforts should prioritize economic development, poverty alleviation, and youth empowerment to tackle the root causes of political instability. Developmental support from ECOWAS and international partners should be contingent upon measurable governance reforms.

5. Deepen Civil-Military Reforms

Member states must adopt policies that depoliticize the military, promote civilian oversight, and redefine the military's constitutional role in governance. Civil-military relations must be recalibrated to prevent the armed forces from becoming instruments of political repression or self-imposed "saviors."

6. Mitigate External Influences and Build Strategic Partnerships

Given the growing influence of external powers in West Africa's political landscape, ECOWAS must develop a coherent strategy to manage foreign interests while safeguarding democratic norms. Strategic partnerships with the African Union, United Nations, and regional civil society networks should be harnessed to bolster regional stability.

7. Re-engage the Sahel States through Constructive Diplomacy

The regional body must adopt a pragmatic approach in engaging Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. While upholding its democratic principles, ECOWAS should pursue dialogue and confidence-building measures to avoid further fragmentation and to foster gradual reintegration based on shared security and development goals.

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