



**Balancing the Economic Community of West African States Tightrope:
between Democracy, Security and Disintegration?**

Kwesi Aning

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Abstract

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has, since its establishment in 1975, acted as a norm entrepreneur, with democracy promotion as a critical area of concern. Its instituted frameworks seek to deepen and modify member states behaviour to voluntarily accede to its rules, norms, objectives and principles. However, eliciting member states compliance with democratic norms has faced significant challenges since 2020. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger have experienced democratic reversals by using insecurity and corruption as justificatory rationales for unconstitutional changes of government. In response, ECOWAS has sought to enforce and elicit compliance with its norms from recalcitrant member states, while simultaneously balancing and ensuring that *ad hoc* cooperative security initiatives involving these states can deal with extremist threats in the Sahel and the coastal states. Negotiating the pitfalls posed by enforcing its democratic ethos in an inconsistent manner has undermined ECOWAS's credibility and threatened it with disintegration. Nearly 50-years of integration processes are under threat of collapse. The paper argues that, understanding and appreciating the complexity and multiplicity of reasons leading to these reversals and how ECOWAS responds to and applies its mechanisms in a consistent and predictable manner is key to reversing unconstitutional changes of government, while providing security guarantees and sustaining its institutional integrity. It concludes by offering some recommendations and suggestions for embedding and deepening constitutionalism and democratic practices among its Member States.

Keywords: ECOWAS, democracy, security, Sahel, *ad hoc* security initiatives, integration.

Introduction

The West African subregion has been facing two critical developments over the past decade. First, the challenges of *democratic consolidation and insecurity* and, second, how ECOWAS's responses to these symbiotic relationships have brought shame to an already divided organisation as it deals with democratic reversals and insecurities². ECOWAS challenges started with the insecurities in the Mano River Union (MRU) states in the 1990s. However, since 2020, West Africa has been 'shaken by unprecedented violence'³ resulting from these two developments. In the years prior to the escalation of insecurity in Nigeria and the Sahel, there was a triumphalist march towards deepening democratic norms, especially after the last remnant of quasi-authoritarian rule was ended in the Gambia in 2016.⁴ Between 2015 and 2020, there was not a single undemocratic change of power in West Africa showing a period of rare stability. In May 2015, however, ECOWAS abandoned a proposal to restrict West African presidents to two terms in government after opposition from both Togo and The Gambia. Since then, the democracy projects have faced challenges contributing in no small part to the resurgence of *coup d'états*.⁵ Ever since 2020, the region has experienced eight successful and attempted military takeovers, and ECOWAS is seemingly powerless to reverse them⁶. The challenges faced by West Africa's constitutional democratic experiments can in part be explained by the narrow elitist conceptions and practice of democracy and exclusionary politics resulting in demands for change that oftentimes contribute to insecurity.

Democratic Developments and Trends In West Africa

Discussing democracy in Africa in general and ECOWAS in particular at the start of 2024 is important as a third of African countries head to the polls. For West Africa, countries including Ghana, Mali, Togo, Senegal, Guinea Bissau, and Burkina Faso head to the polls.⁷ 2024, therefore, will be a "tumultuous election year" against the backdrop of conflicts, economic shocks and heightened geopolitical reconfigurations⁸. Already, Senegal⁹ has postponed its February 25 scheduled elections and there is uncertainty about Mali and Burkina Faso.

As a norm entrepreneur, ECOWAS's Supplementary Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy provides specific guidelines shared by all its member states. It focuses on the development of constitutional State-based rule of law, strengthening of democracy processes and mechanisms and norms and adopting common principles of good governance. Its adoption in 2001 demonstrated a turning point in ECOWAS's political construction by focusing on the consolidation of fundamental democratic principles such as the separation of the three branches of government; the decentralisation of power away from the office of the President; the depoliticization of the armed forces; and the strengthening of electoral systems at all levels of government.¹⁰

Through the adoption of different protocols, regulations and conventions, ECOWAS has sought to embed democratic norms in the sub-region¹¹ leading to democratic and multi-party transitions in the 2000s, a development that was tantamount to a political

¹This paper was first presented at a Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), Uppsala, Sweden seminar on 10 January 2024. It subsequently formed the basis for presentations to several Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in Scandinavia. This is a revised version to take cognisance of recent events.

²Kwesi Aning. September 2020. 'West African democracies are in reverse, but the solution must come from within' at <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/west-african-democracies-are-in-reverse-but-the-solution-must-come-from-within> accessed 26 February 2024 and also Kwesi Aning, Peter Albretch and Anne Blaabjerg Nielsen, 2021. *West Africa Security Perspectives: Kwesi Aning Explains*, DIIS REPORT 2021: 03 DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.27018.59842

³West Africa 'shaken by unprecedented violence', UN envoy tells Security Council, 16 December 2019 at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053641>

⁴See for example, Kwesi Aning. 2022. 'Cracks in the smiling coast of West Africa: violence, torture and death in The Gambia', KAIPTC Occasional Paper. Available at <https://www.kaiptc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Aning2.pdf>

⁵Economic Community of West African States Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on *Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security*. Executive Secretariat Dakar, December 2001.

⁶Arijit Ghosh. 2023. 'Who's Going to Lead the Continent in 2024?: Next Africa', 29 December Bloomberg News, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2023-12-29/africa-in-for-a-political-shakeup-with-18-nations-set-to-vote>

⁷<https://www.economist.com/interactive/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/2024-is-the-biggest-election-year-in-history>

⁸'2024 is a record year for elections. Here's what you need to know', at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/12/2024-elections-around-world/>

⁹Yusuf Akinpelu. 2024. 'Senegal on the brink after elections postponed', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68209178>

¹⁰See Section 1, Article 1. Emphasis of author.

¹¹See the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance A/SP1/12/01 Supplementary to the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security.

renaissance in the region. However, democracy has been watered down by elected governments in tandem with the international community to the holding of elections. That while there was a political renaissance in principle, on paper, the realities in practice never went beyond the holding of elections, which more often than not are tainted with violence and abuses of human rights, that do not conform to the principles inherent in the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Governance. The Protocol's provisions were expected to be internalised by member states, acting as the building blocks for institutionalising democratic values. However, since 2020, democratic gains in several member states have been derailed by intra-state conflicts, extremist violence, tweaking of constitutions and military takeovers.

Democratic and Constitutional Fragility, Violence and the Resurgence of Coups d'état

There is no doubt that democratic processes have stalled or are fragmented in several ECOWAS member states. The spread of democracy and regularly scheduled elections in the early 2000s was expected to result in the near-disappearance of military coups in the region. However, pervasive and persistently low levels of economic growth and democratic backsliding without intervention by ECOWAS meant that as an organisation, it 'willingly ceded its moral authority'¹² and unintendedly contributed to creating an enabling environment for the reappearance of *coup d'états* and the men on horseback in the sub-region¹³. Coups d'états are challenging both the political order and democratic processes and the voluntary principles inherent in the Supplementary Protocol. Since 2020, West Africa has witnessed successful coups d'états in Mali, Niger, Guinea and Burkina Faso and failed ones in Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. These incidences raise a fundamental question: what will become of ECOWAS's democracy project that member states have willingly acceded to?

Democracy in West Africa is in crisis: increasingly fragile, insecure and under threat. As of January 2024, more than a quarter, 26.7 percent, of ECOWAS member states have experienced democratic reversals through coups d'états. Two have had failed coup attempts, two others have manipulated constitutions and extended stays in power, while

in Senegal, we are witnessing the slow but certain curtailment of democratic gains. ECOWAS's authority and structure face extensive and irreversible damage after its failure to restore democracy in its four coup-affected member states. It has failed to deepen democracy, improve stability and lay the foundations for a tight-knit economic union. These reversals were not sudden occurrences. Coups d'états have come about as a result of a gradual and widening process that has endangered democracy through corruption, expanding insecurity as a result of extremist violence, human rights abuses, electoral fraud, institutional weakness (judicial and legislative) that all culminated in different forms of state capture. After decades of instituting normative frameworks, the region has become thriving grounds for unconstitutional transfers of power, with the potential for more changes compounding its security challenges.

The Challenge of Insecurity

Several of the coups d'états since 2020 have used insecurity and corruption as justificatory arguments, especially in the Sahel; a region gaining greater strategic importance in economic, security and strategic terms. Insecurity in the Sahel provides several insights into the challenges faced by ECOWAS:

First, extremist jihadist actors in the region have demonstrated an astonishing capacity to withstand bi- and multilateral interventions, and second, discoveries of oil and gas reserves, gold, uranium and aquifers in Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, have turned the region into a hotbed of geostrategic and political competition.

All these reasons have contributed to the strategic importance of this region, where three main forces are distinguishable, namely:

- A Western group represented by France, Germany, the EU and the USA;
- An Eastern Group represented by Russia and China; and
- Emerging economies represented by India, Turkey, Brazil, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran.

Niger, which is the largest Sahel country and strategically located between sub-Saharan Africa,

¹²Mhaka, op cit.

¹³Samuel E Finer. 1962. *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. London: Pall Mall Press.

North Africa and Europe, experienced a coup d'état in 2023. ECOWAS's failure to respond to different forms of unconstitutional changes of government in the subregion and its subsequent attempts to act differently in Niger are both instructive and symptomatic of the institutional inertia and bureaucratic-technical missteps that undermine the organisation's credibility. First, ECOWAS suspended Niger's membership of the organisation, imposed sanctions, closed borders, cut off the electricity supply (via Nigeria) and threatened to use military force, if the leaders of the coup d'état failed to reinstate the lawfully elected President¹⁴. According to the Commissioner for Political Affairs Peace and Security (PAPS) of ECOWAS, Abdel Fatau-Musah:

"If push comes to shove we are going into Niger with our own contingents and equipment and our own resources to make sure we restore constitutional order. If other democratic partners want to support us they are welcome."¹⁵

In spite of these tough words, ECOWAS neither had the support, wherewithal nor the institutional strength to follow through on its own threats of deploying its standby force. Eventually, at an ECOWAS Heads of State and Government Summit in Abuja, Nigeria, in December 2023, 'the authority ... decided to set up a committee of Heads of State ... to engage with the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie (CNSP) and other stakeholders, with a view to agreeing on a: (a) short transition roadmap, (b) establishing transition organs as well as (c) facilitating the setting up of a transition monitoring and evaluation mechanism to work for the speedy restoration of constitutional order'.¹⁶ This decision, however, has been overtaken by events in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In late 2023, these states formed an Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) and in January 2024 served notice to ECOWAS of their intention to exit from ECOWAS in a veritable ECOWEXIT.

ECOWAS at a Dangerous Crossroad

Niger is a key international player in the fight against the spread of violent jihadist extremism in West Africa. The US has a military drone base in the country at U.S. Air Base 201, which is the US top military asset in the region, targeting insurgents affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State in cooperation with the French military. With the suspension of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS and the establishment of

the AES, the original ECOWAS cooperative security framework has been undermined in theory and praxis. The only viable cross-cutting security framework in West Africa, is the Accra Initiative (AI).

Accra Initiative (AI) and Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The Accra Initiative (AI) was launched in Accra, Ghana in September 2017 and includes Benin, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo and Nigeria (with observer status) to serve as a collaborative security mechanism. Specifically, the AI, which also include the three breakaway countries as members, is mainly geared towards preventing the spill-over of regional terrorism and other transnational organised crimes from the Sahel to neighbouring border areas. In the aftermath of the suspension of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS's wider cooperative security framework, these states have signed a mutual defence pact, aimed at helping each other against possible threats of armed rebellion or external aggression. The Liptako-Gourma charter establishing the *Alliance of Sahelian States (AES)*, aims at a collective defence and mutual assistance framework that binds the signatories to assist one another – including militarily – in the event of an attack on any one of them. The new pact reflects a desire to break with the way terrorism and organised crime have been combated, and can be seen as a dismissal of the *G5 Sahel Joint Force*, which was intended to bring the five Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Mauritania together in a defence alliance, but is perceived by the military juntas to be controlled by France. In addition to the regionally-based alliance, the perceived ineffectiveness of international interventions such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) mission and the French-led *Operation Barkhane* have contributed to Mali's decision to seek other external partners such as Russia.¹⁷

ECOWAS's ongoing misreading of the developments in the Sahel led the Chairperson of the ECOWAS Heads of States summit, Bola Tinubu of Nigeria, to describe this alliance as a 'phantom attempt'¹⁸, implying that the alliance should not be taken seriously and these initiatives would die a natural death. However, the Alliance of Sahel States has been created at a time when regional and international cooperation in

¹⁴Peter Beaumont. 2023. 'West African bloc prepared for military intervention after Niger coup', The Guardian, 17 August, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/17/west-african-bloc-prepared-for-military-intervention-after-niger-coup>

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶"ECOWAS sets up committee to negotiate with Niger junta on return to civilian rule", at <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/11/ecowas-sets-up-committee-to-negotiate-with-niger-junta-on-return-to-civilian-rule/>

¹⁷Moda Dieng. 2023. 'Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have a new defence alliance: an expert view of its chances of success', *The Conversation*, 19 October at <https://theconversation.com/burkina-faso-mali-and-niger-have-a-new-defence-alliance-an-expert-view-of-its-chances-of-success-215863>

the Sahel is struggling, and reflects a genuine search for a more consequential answer to the subregion's security woes. The G5 Sahel Joint Force, which raised a lot of hopes when it was launched in 2017, has been on the brink of collapse since Mali withdrew in 2022. Cooperation with European partners has been hampered by a succession of events and decisions, including the renunciation by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger of several defence agreements with Paris and the withdrawal of French troops.¹⁹ Whether the international community likes it or not, then, regional cooperation in West Africa is at a precipice, and the future of ECOWAS is unsure.

From ECOWAS to ECOWACS?

If the withdrawal of the AES states is completed, ECOWAS as it was known will cease to exist in practice, and initially give way to an Economic Community of West African Coastal States (ECOWACS). If ECOWAS becomes ECOWACS, it will mean that ECOWAS has failed as a norm entrepreneur. Its Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy, its Political Principles and other documents and their constitutive principles which sought to provide normative frameworks providing specific blueprints and limitations for state action will need re-examination relating to its rules, norms and principles, and how they can be applied consistently and adhered to by member states. In a reformed regional framework, non-compliance must be dealt with in a consistent manner. Thus, apart from providing rules and procedures for how member states must behave, ECOWACS must seek to:

- Distinguish and concentrate on specific or joint problems that threaten constitutionalism in all forms and by extension the democracy project;
- Engender and advance reliable exchange of information and knowledge;
- Intensify confidence and trust building measures and understanding among member states and their citizens;
- Facilitate issue linkage among states and citizens; and
- Stringently enforce, monitor and verify rules and guidelines underpinning cooperative projects.

The *coup d'états* in Mali, Niger, Guinea and Burkina

Faso and their subsequent withdrawal have questioned ECOWAS's effectiveness, credibility and the levels of 'bindingness', relating to the extent to which ECOWAS could elicit compliance from member states with the instruments that they have voluntarily acceded to. For a regional economic community in West Africa – whether it remains ECOWAS or becomes ECOWACS – to be central to the needs of states and citizens, its democracy regime must change. This must be done by not only examining institutional changes or external factors in isolation, but rather in the context of how they react. Contributory factors to improving ECOWACS's potential effectiveness are:

- a. The character and frame of rules;
- b. Application of its binding provisions; and
- c. Mechanisms by which rules are revised.

The effectiveness of ECOWACS's democracy regime, in other words, hinges on a combination of how its institutional attributes and mechanisms *motivate and associate actors* in ways that encourage preferred modification in behaviour in relation to more transparent democratic practices and an end to changes in constitutional term limits..

Concluding Remarks

The current state of democratic backsliding and insecurity in West Africa calls for strategic and critical reflections by member states on the nature of regional collaboration and integration. Unending cycles of insecurity and coups reflect institutional weaknesses at national and regional levels, manifested in ECOWAS's inability to:

- enforce compliance with what states have voluntarily signed on to;
- control foreign interferences in the governance of Member States;
- understand and respond to the wishes and complaints of community citizens; and
- moderate the excesses of elected governments in the region²⁰.

West Africa's current difficulties require creative ideas and leadership from ECOWAS and its proponents. So far, its responses to democratic reversals have been

¹⁸ECOWAS Press Release 'The 64th Ordinary Session of Ecowas Authority of Heads Of State And Government Holds In Abuja', 10 Dec, 2023 at <https://www.ecowas.int/the-64th-ordinary-session-of-ecowas-authority-of-heads-of-state-and-gov-ernment-holds-in-abuja/>

¹⁹Dieng, op cit.

²⁰Bola Akinterinwa. 2023. 'International Politics of the 2023 Coup d'etat in Niger Republic: Consequences of a Weakened ECOWAS', at <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/08/13/international-politics-of-the-2023-coup-detat-in-niger-republic-consequences-of-a-weakened-ecowas>

variously characterised as a ‘mistake’²¹ and ‘...killing itself softly’²². The net effect of ECOWAS’s inactions have ‘...[brought] shame to an already divided [organisation]’²³. Whether or not ECOWAS has been permanently reduced to an ECOWACS, the future of regional collaboration in West Africa still has the potential to become an important force for democracy and stability in the region simply by enforcing its own rules and values consistently.

Already, ECOWAS’s leaders are reconsidering their own stance with respect to the possible disintegration of the ECOWAS were these states to successfully exit. As a result, ECOWAS is reconsidering the prospects of a) extending an olive branch to the AES states to reconsider their decision and to remain or rejoin ECOWAS; or b) the possibility of future democratically elected governments in the AES states reversing the withdrawal. Whatever the options are, ECOWAS

has humiliated itself with its hasty and poorly thought through actions and inactions. An olive branch has been offered, but ECOWAS has limited options and wiggle room to either coerce or incentivise the AES states to start the negotiation process. Only time will tell.

²¹Ajala, Olayinka. 2023. ‘Niger coup: Ecowas must do these 3 things to break the stalemate’, *The Conversation*, 4 September, at <https://theconversation.com/niger-coup-ecowas-must-do-these-3-things-to-break-the-stalemate-212403>

²²Akinterinwa B. 2023. ‘International Politics of the 2023 Coup d’etat in Niger Republic: Consequences of a Weakened ECOWAS’, at <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/08/13/international-politics-of-the-2023-coup-detat-in-niger-republic-consequences-of-a-weakened-ecowas>

²³Ibid.

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