

DISPARATE RESPONSES TO CONSTITUTIONAL AND MILITARY COUPS IN WEST AFRICA:

A Threat to Democratic Development

POLICY BRIEF

MARCH 2026



Benjamin Serebour

**Disparate Responses to
Constitutional and Military Coups in West Africa:
A Threat to Democratic Development**

Benjamin Serebour

POLICY BRIEF

MARCH 2026

Abstract

An unconstitutional assumption of power, whether by civilians or the military, poses a serious threat to democratic governance in West Africa. Recently, Côte d'Ivoire's President, Alassane Ouattara, contested the October 2025 elections and won a fourth term in office, following constitutional reforms that reset the presidential term limit. This came after court rulings disqualified President Ouattara's closest contenders from running in the polls. While the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has condemned military coups in the region, it has either refrained from or shown little interest in criticizing the manipulation of constitutions by civilian leaders. This paper argues that the inconsistent response to military and constitutional coups not only damages ECOWAS' credibility but also indicates that coup d'états, whether by civilians or the military, are becoming normalized. Preventing military and constitutional coups will require a fair, impartial, and consistent response, regardless of whether they are carried out by civilian or uniformed personnel. I conclude, arguing that, without decisive and impartial measures, ECOWAS risks further erosion of its legitimacy and the entrenchment of authoritarianism across the region.

Introduction: Coups With and Without Guns

Over the past decade, West Africa has grappled with a constitutional crisis, manifesting in military takeovers and a subtler yet equally dangerous phenomenon: the constitutional coup d'état. The latter involves the manipulation of the constitution by incumbents to extend their stay in power. These processes usually entail constitutional amendment through referendum, enabling incumbents to legalize their eligibility to contest elections, as happened in Côte d'Ivoire in 2016 and Guinea in 2020.² In July 2025, Côte d'Ivoire's 83-year-old President, Alassane Ouattara, announced his intention to run in the October 2025 elections. The announcement followed court rulings that disqualified Tidjane Thiam and Laurent Gbagbo, considered his main challengers, from running. Thiam was disqualified after a court ruled that he forfeited his Ivorian nationality when he acquired French citizenship in 1987.³ Gbagbo's disqualification stems from his conviction for his role in the post-election violence in 2010, which brought an end to his rule.⁴ The removal of prominent opposition figures from the ballot raised concerns about the fairness and competitiveness of the electoral process.⁵ President Ouattara's eligibility to contest the elections stemmed from the 2016 constitutional reform, which the Constitutional Council interpreted as establishing "new republic", thereby resetting the previous presidential terms to zero.⁶ By this interpretation, the constitution allowed President Ouattara to run for two more terms. The opposition, however, described the move as unconstitutional and a threat to democracy in Cote d'Ivoire.⁷ These developments highlight the growing tensions between formal democratic institutions and the political practices that undermine these structures.

While constitutional and military coups differ only in method, they share a similar impact on democratic governance. However, the regional responses have been uneven. This policy brief aims to address the dynamics of military and constitutional coups in West Africa, the erosion of trust in ECOWAS resulting from its response to these coups, and the implications of these coups on democratic progress in the sub-region. It concludes with recommendations to address the challenges and promote democratic consolidation in the region. The paper is divided into six sections. Following the introduction, the next section explores the third-term agenda, which focuses on incumbents' constitutional amendments to extend their stay in power. The third section assesses the military coups in the sub-region and ECOWAS's response to these crises. Next, the paper highlights disparities in ECOWAS's response to military and constitutional coups, followed by a conclusion and recommendations on ensuring an impartial response to unconstitutional change of government.

The Third-Term Agenda: A Backdoor to Authoritarianism

The third-term agenda refers to the manipulation of the constitution to abolish term limits, enabling incumbent presidents to contest elections at the end of their terms.⁸ In some instances, these leaders change the constitution to allow them to contest elections in

²Salihu, N. & Moomin, R. (2022). Third Termism and Political Insecurity in West Africa: Cases of Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea. Policy Brief 10, Accra: KAIPTC

³Camara, S. (2025). Ivory Coast Opposition Leader Thiam Disqualified from Presidential Elections. Africa News Today. Retrieved from <https://africanewstoday.com/ivory-coast-opposition-leader-thiam-disqualified-from-presidential-election/>

⁴Radio France International (2025). African Union Court Denies Cote d'Ivoire Opposition Leaders' Appeal. Retrieved from <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20250627-african-union-court-denies-cote-d-ivoire-opposition-leader-gbagbo-soro-appeals>

⁵Guèye, L. (2025). Africa News Today. (2025). Ivory Coast President Ouattara, 83, announces contentious fourth-term bid amidst democratic concerns. Africa News Today. Retrieved from <https://africanewstoday.com/ivory-coast-president-ouattara-83-announces-contentious-fourth-term-bid-amidst-democratic-concerns/>

⁶Institute for Security Studies. (2020). Côte d'Ivoire and the 'third-term' virus. PSC Report. <https://issafrica.org/pscreport/psc-insights/cote-divoire-and-the-third-term-virus>

⁷Rédaction Africanews. (2025). Ivory Coast opposition says president's fourth term bid violates the Constitution. Africanews. <https://www.africanews.com/2025/07/30/ivory-coast-opposition-says-presidents-fourth-term-bid-violates-the-constitution/>

⁸Arah, M.L. (2023). Third Termism in Africa: View from the African Cultural Lenses. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol.11 No.3, March 2023

perpetuity.⁹ This phenomenon is not new to West Africa. In 2009, then-President Mamadou Tanja of Niger attempted to amend the country's constitution to run for a new term.¹⁰ This proved unsuccessful, leading to his removal in a 2010 coup d'état. In Guinea, then-President Alpha Condé, who had controversially won another term under an amended constitution, was also removed from power in a 2021 military coup.¹¹ In Togo, a 2024 constitutional revision created the avenue for President Faure Gnassingbé to extend his family's 58-year dynasty by adopting a parliamentary system that evades presidential term limits.¹² Côte d'Ivoire's constitution was also amended to enable President Ouattara to contest for a third term in the 2020 election,¹³ and his recent victory in the 2025 elections confirms the regional trend. As shown in the above scenarios, attempts to extend tenure in office do not always result in coups. Although tenure elongation may create political tension, it becomes a trigger for military intervention, mostly when combined with deeper structural factors such as institutional weakness, elite conflict, public discontent, and deteriorating security conditions.¹⁴ These term extensions are typically accompanied by the suppression of opposition leaders through imprisonment, legal disqualification, cooptation, or the weakening of electoral commissions, as well as the erosion of judicial independence.¹⁵ These tactics often resemble the governance practices of military juntas, making the distinction more symbolic than substantive. Despite the similarities, ECOWAS usually provides little or a somewhat friendly rebuke to constitutional coups. For instance, in its 15 April 2024 communique, ECOWAS criticized the constitutional reforms and said it will deploy an exploratory mission to assess the situation in the country.¹⁶ However, a day later, ECOWAS withdrew the communique and announced the deployment of a fact-finding mission to Togo.¹⁷ Although the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice held that the amendment constituted an unconstitutional change of government under Article 23 of the African Charter on Democracy, Election and Governance, no action was taken against the country and its leadership.¹⁸ This reinforces public perception of double standards on ECOWAS response to unconstitutional change in government.

Response to Military Coups

Contrary to constitutional manipulations, military takeovers in the sub-region are always met with immediate condemnation, suspension, and economic sanctions. After the coup d'état in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022), and Niger (2023), ECOWAS suspended these countries, imposed economic sanctions and border closures, and, in the case of Niger, even threatened military intervention.¹⁹ Even with the military coups, there were disparities in response from the regional body. While Guinea, Mali, and Niger were subjected to both suspension and economic sanctions, Burkina Faso was only suspended from ECOWAS without accompanying economic penalties. ECOWAS justified this differentiated response by

⁹bid

¹⁰Massalatchi, A. (2009, May 8). Niger's Tanja to Hold Referendum for Third Term. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/niger-s-tanja-to-hold-referendum-for-third-term-idUSJOE5470GU/>

¹¹BBC News (2020, October 24). Guinea elections: Alpha Condé wins third term amid violent protests Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54657359>

¹²Siegle & Wahila (2024). Togo: An Election without Voting Aimed at Perpetuating Gnassingbé Dynasty. Retrieved from <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2025-elections/togo/>

¹³Aljazeera (2020, November 9). Ivory Coast Constitutional Council Confirm Ouattara Re-election Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/9/ivory-coast-president-ouattaras-disputed-third-term-confirmed>

¹⁴Noutchie, S. C. O. (2025). *Constitutional coups and military interventions: Reassessing extended presidential tenure and its impact on governance in Africa*. International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science, 14(4), 519-518.

¹⁵Gyimah-Boadi (2021). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: Nature, Causes, Remedies. Kofi Annan Foundation.

¹⁶Abatan, J. E. (2024). Hasty constitutional reforms deepen tensions in Togo. Institute for Security Studies. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/hasty-constitutional-reforms-deepen-tensions-in-togo>

¹⁷bid

¹⁸ECOWAS Court of Justice. (2024). ECOWAS court delivers judgment on Togo's constitution reform case. <https://courtecowas.org/ccj-decisions/ecowas-court-delivers-judgment-on-togos-constitution-reform-case/>

¹⁹Byaruhanga, C. (2023). Niger Coup: Fear and Anger in Niamey as ECOWAS Threatens Force. BBC News. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-66478983>

citing Burkina Faso's humanitarian and security crisis, arguing that sanctions risked further destabilising an already fragile situation.²⁰ As Aning (2022) notes in his analysis of ECOWAS' "tightrope," the organisation often navigates a delicate balance between upholding democratic norms and preventing further regional insecurity.²¹ These inconsistencies reveal deeper structural tensions within ECOWAS' normative and enforcement frameworks, highlighting the need to re-examine its principles and mechanisms to ensure more coherent, predictable, and appropriate responses to unconstitutional changes of government.²²

Notwithstanding, ECOWAS's aggressive stance on Niger provoked intense pushback, with Burkina Faso and Mali declaring support for the Niger Junta.²³ The leader of the military government, Abdourahamane Tchiani, later authorized the defence forces of Mali and Burkina Faso to enter Niger and defend it in the event of an attack.²⁴ A civil society practitioner in Mali expressed surprise at the reaction of ECOWAS: *"We could not have imagined that ECOWAS would discuss mobilizing forces to remove the military leader of Niger from power. People notice that France influenced the decision, and surprisingly, France can have such a significant impact on ECOWAS at that level... The AES was created mainly because of these challenges."*²⁵

One of the primary reasons for the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which led to the breakaway of the three central Sahelian states from ECOWAS, was attributed to foreign interference in ECOWAS's affairs.²⁶ President Tchiani described the formation of the AES as the culmination of a common will to reclaim the national sovereignty of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. He stated, "Our peoples have irrevocably turned their backs on ECOWAS. It is up to us today to make the AES Confederation an alternative to any artificial regional group by building a community free from the control of foreign powers".²⁷

Disparities in Regional Response to Military and Constitutional Coups

ECOWAS has institutional mechanisms for promoting democratic norms, including the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007). Article 45 of the ECOWAS supplementary protocol clearly states that "in the event that democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or where there is massive violation of Human Rights in a Member State, ECOWAS may impose sanctions on the State concerned". Yet enforcement has been selective, which, in itself, stems from the interpretation of the article. While the provision applies to military coups, it remains unclear whether it also covers constitutional manipulation by incumbent civilian leaders. The table below illustrates the regional body's response to the unconstitutional assumption and retention of power by military and civilian leaders

²⁰ECOWAS (2022). *Final Communiqué: Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government — Situation in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso*. ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/final-communique-extraordinary-summit-ecowas-authority-heads-state-and-government-situation-mali-guinea-and-burkina-faso-4th-june-2022>

²¹Aning, K. (2024). *Balancing the Economic Community of West African States: A Tightrope: between Democracy and Security*. Occasional Paper 60, Accra: KAIPTC.

²²Ibid

²³Mathur, S. (2024). *A test for West African regionalism: Explaining ECOWAS's response to the crisis in Niger*. Centre for Democracy and Development.

²⁴Reuters. (2023). *Niger allows Mali, Burkina Faso troops to enter its territory in case of attack*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/niger-allows-mali-burkina-faso-troops-enter-its-territory-in-case-attack-2023-08-24/>

²⁵Interview, Civil Society Practitioner, Bamako, Mali. June 2025.

²⁶Ibid

²⁷Balima, B. (2024, July 6). *Junta-led Sahel states rule out return to West African economic bloc*. Reuters. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/junta-led-sahel-states-rule-out-return-west-african-economic-bloc-2024-07-06/>

SRL	Country/Year	Type of Coup	Response
1.	Mali – 2020, 2021	Military Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspension from ECOWAS • Economic and financial sanctions • Restrictions on recruitment into ECOWAS professional positions • Freezing of Malian state assets from ECOWAS commercial banks • Land and air border closures
2	Côte d'Ivoire – 2020	Constitutional Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained its ECOWAS membership • No sanctions
3	Guinea – 2021	Military Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspension from ECOWAS • Economic and financial sanctions
4	Burkina Faso- January 2022, September 2022	Military Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspension from ECOWAS
5	Niger – 2023	Military Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspension from ECOWAS • Economic and financial sanctions • Border closures • Freezing of Niger's state assets
6	Togo – 2024	Constitutional Coup	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintained its ECOWAS membership • No Sanctions

Author's Construct, 2025

The table illustrates how ECOWAS consistently punishes military takeovers but remains silent on constitutional manipulations. This inconsistency undermines the credibility of ECOWAS, erodes trust in its impartiality, and signals to authoritarian leaders that a constitutional coup offers immunity from accountability. As a driver in Mali remarked, *“Alassane Ouattara changed the constitution to enable him to go for a third term. He is now seeking a fourth term. What is the difference between Ouattara and Goita? I will say Ouattara is also a dictator, but it seems people are OK with that because he is a civilian.”*²⁸

These sentiments indicate frustration with ECOWAS’ response to the unconstitutional assumption of power by civilians and the military. While military takeovers are condemned and sanctioned, constitutional manipulation by civilian leaders often goes unchallenged because ECOWAS has limited legal and policy grounds to do so. The tolerance of term elongation by civilian leaders emboldens autocrats and weakens the region’s moral authority to confront military leaders.

²⁸Interview with Driver in Bamako, June 2025.

Conclusion

Both military and civilian authoritarian regimes pose significant challenges to democratic consolidation in West Africa as they threaten human rights, erode public trust, and destabilize regional governance structures. Nevertheless, the differential treatment of military and constitutional coups not only encourages civilian authoritarians to entrench their hold on power but also demonstrates a strategic failure by ECOWAS in ensuring democratic consolidation and good governance among its member states. As long as civilian leaders like President Alassane Ouattara and President Faure Gnassingbe can manipulate the constitution with little or no consequences while military leaders face sanctions and condemnation, a dangerous double standard will persist. The disparities in response not only undermine ECOWAS's credibility but also make coups, whether by civilians or by military personnel, seem normal. Preventing military and civilian coups d'état will require a fair, impartial, and consistent enforcement response, regardless of whether it is carried out by civilian or uniformed personnel. Ultimately, the credibility of ECOWAS and the future of democracy in West Africa depend on closing the gap between rhetoric and response. Only by treating both military and constitutional coups with equal seriousness can the region hope to consolidate democratic governance.

Policy Recommendations

The paper offers the following recommendations:

- 1.** ECOWAS must develop and enforce clear, uniform standards that define all forms of unconstitutional changes of government, including the manipulation of term limits and electoral laws as violations of democratic principles. This will require the political will to hold all leaders equally accountable, regardless of whether they wear military uniforms or suits. Such a response must go beyond reactive measures and address the structural and normative deficiencies that allow undemocratic power retention to flourish in both military and civilian contexts.
- 2.** ECOWAS and international development partners should strengthen civic education and public engagement by supporting national institutions and civil society organizations working to educate citizens about constitutionalism, democratic rights, and the dangers of authoritarianism, which is essential to building long-term democratic resilience.

About the Author

Benjamin Serebour is the Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator of the Danish Gulf of Guinea Maritime Security Programme. He is also a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, where his research explores the nexus between social media, political participation, and democratic consolidation in Ghana.

How to cite this Publication

Serebour, B. (2026). Disparate Responses to Constitutional and Military Coups in West Africa: A Threat to Democratic Development. Policy Brief March, Accra: KAIPTC

About the Centre

Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) is an ECOWAS Centre of Excellence that provides globally recognised capacity for international actors on African peace and security through training, education and research to foster peace and stability in Africa.



KAIPTC
...where peace begins