



WEST AFRICAN CRISES: WHY IS ECOWAS SUCCESSFUL IN IMPOSING DEMOCRATIC NORMS IN SOME WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND UNSUCCESSFUL IN OTHERS?

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ABSTRACT: *This research examines the successes of ECOWAS in some West African countries after its adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in countries where there has been unconstitutional change of government such as Guinea Bissau in 2012, the Gambia in 2017, Mali in 2013 and Côte d'Ivoire in 2003. Also, it explores countries such as Mali in 2020, Guinea in 2021, Burkina Faso 2022, and Niger in 2023 where ECOWAS has failed in upholding and restoring democratic ideals. The study adopts qualitative data with both primary materials such as official ECOWAS documents, reports, and communiqués and secondary sources such as academic literature, media reports, and scholarly assessments. The main argument of the study is that despite ECOWAS' successes in upholding democratic norms in some West African countries after its adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, internal dynamics, Western influences, failure to introduce term-limits, and ineffective and inconsistent sanctions account for its drawbacks.*

KEYWORDS: West Africa, Democratic Norms, Democratic Backsliding, ECOWAS.



INTRODUCTION

In the published 2020 *Freedom in the World* report, Freedom House makes the case that five of the twelve nations with the biggest global year-over-year score reductions in 2019—Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Nigeria—are in West Africa. Senegal and Benin moved from Free to Partly Free status in Freedom House's classification of nations, which leaves Ghana and the island republic of Cape Verde as the only free countries in the region. On a scale of 100 points, Benin alone dropped 13 points, a significant decline for any democracy (Termin & Linzer, 2020; Freedom House Report, 2020). According to Afrobarometer Round 8 surveys conducted between 2019 and 2020, the result shows that 75% of people prefer democracy above other forms of government while 86% disapprove authoritarian regime such as one-man rule, 84% turn down one-party rule or dominant and 87% disprove military rule or incursion in politics (Gyimah-Boadi, n.d.).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded on 28 May, 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos. Its main goal is to promote cooperation and integration towards establishing an economic union in West Africa. This is aimed at improving the living standards of the people, maintaining, and enhancing economic stability, fostering relations among Member States, and contributing to the progress and development of the African continent. The fifteen (15) Member States of ECOWAS, with a combined landmass of 5,112,903 km², include Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (Osadolor, 2011; Maiangwa, 2021; Ani, 2024).

However, given the bloc's severe political unpredictability and the ongoing civil wars that left many of its members crippled, it was difficult for it to achieve its goals (Mhaka, 2023). Acknowledging that long-term political stability and peace are prerequisites for real economic integration, major changes to the integration and development agenda were brought about by the 1993 revision of the ECOWAS Treaty, which strengthened decision-making bodies, established appropriate mechanisms for preventing and resolving conflicts, and expanded the scope of regional cooperation and the integration process, particularly in important areas like peace and security, monetary integration, industrial cooperation, the private sector, and the environment (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020; ECOWAS Vision 2050 Report, 2022).

The bloc then adopted the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in December 2001. It stipulates that member states must show "zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means" and that "every accession to power must be made through free, fair, and transparent elections." In addition to establishing that "armed forces, the police, and other security agencies [in member states] shall be under the authority of legally constituted civilian authorities." The protocol also contains several other articles pertaining to elections, the rule of law, and human rights (Mhaka, 2023; Gyimah-Boadi, n.d.; Melly, 2024).

Because of these frameworks, there has been a substantial decrease in major civil wars since 2000. However, contemporary events from 2020, demonstrated through military coups and an unlawful change of leadership, have eroded the democratic gains the regional bloc has recorded. For example, subsequent coups in Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Niger (July 2023), and Guinea (September 2021) have put serious doubts on the regional bloc's ability to achieve its stated objectives and questioned the viability of democracy in the West Africa (Mhaka, 2020; Melly, 2024).



Why is there democratic governance recession or retreat in some parts of the West African countries in recent years despite the steady increase in democratic gains in the first decade of the turn of the 21st century? To field this question, this paper aims to examine why ECOWAS is successful in imposing democratic norms in some West African countries and failing in others after the adoption of the December 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. To give a thorough knowledge of ECOWAS' role in fostering democratic principles, this research makes use of a combination of primary materials which include official ECOWAS documents, reports and communiqués, and secondary sources such as academic literature, media reports, and scholarly assessments, among others.

Given the recent disruption in the democratic process in part of West Africa despite the preference for democracy, this research is pertinent and timely to provide insight into the intricate and complex crises bedeviling some West African countries. Also, this study contributes to existing research through its integration of primary and secondary data from relevant government agencies to understand the involved democratic landscape West Africa is steering.

This study is ordered in the following manner. The first section provides insight and context into the ECOWAS democratic framework—specifically, the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. The next section delves into the success of ECOWAS through its military intervention while attempting to uphold and impose democratic ideals in countries where there has been unconstitutional change of government such as Guinea Bissau in 2012, the Gambia in 2017, Mali in 2013 and Cote d' Ivoire in 2003. On the other hand, the subsequent section focuses on countries where ECOWAS slacks in upholding the Supplementary protocol—countries such as Mali in 2020, Guinea in 2021, Burkina Faso 2022, and Niger in 2023.

The study provides qualitative data to argue that despite ECOWAS' success in upholding democratic norms in some Western African countries after its adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001, internal dynamics or domestic factors, member states, Western influences, failure to introduce term-limits, ineffective and inconsistent sanctions account for its failures.



Figure 1: Map of West Africa

Source: National Online Project

LITERATURE REVIEW

Democratic Framework in West Africa: ECOWAS 2001 Supplemental Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance as a Point of Departure

Before the adoption of Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in December 2001, ECOWAS' Head of States met in Cotonou, Benin in 1993 to reaffirm the treaty establishing the Economic Community of West African states signed in Lagos on May, 1975 while keeping in mind the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the Economic Community of West African States' Declaration of Political Principles, which were agreed in Abuja on July 6, 1991 during the Fourteenth Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government.¹ According to Article 56, Chapter X of the revised treaty titled *Cooperation in Political and Judicial Legal Affairs, Regional Security and Immigration*, it stipulates that "Member States undertake to co-operate on political matters and, in particular, to take appropriate measures to ensure effective application of the provisions of this treaty."²

From this revised treaty, it shows that the sub-regional organization pays less attention to democracy and good governance. Rather, the emphasis has been on timely prevention of

¹ (<https://www.ECOWAS.Int/Wp-Content/Uploads/2022/09/Vision-2050-EN.Pdf>, n.d.)

² (<https://www.ECOWAS.Int/Wp-Content/Uploads/2022/09/Vision-2050-EN.Pdf>, n.d.)



conflict and outbreak of civil war. This is evident in *Article 58 of the 1993 revised treaty*, “Member States undertake to cooperate with the community in establishing and strengthening appropriate mechanisms for the timely prevention and resolution of intra-state and inter-state conflicts...”³ Relatedly, ECOWAS’ initial concentration on prevention of conflict can be attributed to the devastating impact of the 1990 Liberia Civil War.

Several key events necessitated the adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. First, given that thirteen West African nations were ruled by military administrations between 1983 and 1989. Second, the beginning of the 1990s was characterized by a dramatic increase in the process of democratization, which coincided with the growth of national conferences in numerous countries, and a dramatic decline in the number of regimes under military control. Third, the only ECOWAS nation with a functioning government in 1999 was the outcome of a military takeover. Finally, seven of the fifteen Heads of State who were in office were former military officers who transitioned to civilian life either before or after assuming office or engaging in governance. Among several reasons, these events led to the adoption of the Supplemental Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (West African Network on Security and Democratic Governance, 2005).

Fourteen of the fifteen ECOWAS member states' heads of state and government signed the Supplementary Protocol in Dakar in 2001. Also referred to as the PROTOCOL A/SP1//12/01 ON DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE, it is a manifestation of the ECOWAS member states’ renewed political will to advance the process of averting and ending violent conflicts as well as achieving peace and security via the advancement of democracy and responsible governance. The protocol represents a turning point in the political evolution of the sub-region, which was long defined by the military's extensive participation in political decision-making. As of 2001, it offers a clear declaration of how military rule and participation in politics are incompatible with democracy and effective administration (West African Network on Security and Democratic Governance, 2005).

It is pertinent to highlight some of the democratic values ensconced in the Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance. Some of the provisions set out in Article 2 of the Protocol of 10 December 1999 b, c, d, and e respectively include: “every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections,” “zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means,” “popular participation in decision-making, strict adherence to democratic principle and decentralization of power at all levels of governance,” and “the armed forces must be apolitical and must be under the command of a legally constituted political authority; no serving member of the armed forces may seek to run for elective political.”⁴ Unlike the 1993 revised treaty in Cotonou, Benin that targets conflict prevention and civil war, the 2001 Supplementary Protocol aims to strengthen democratic values in ECOWAS members’ states.

Significant change, relative peace and socio-economic development accompanied ECOWAS’ revision of 1993 as well as December 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adoption given that democratic governance advanced consistently across the ECOWAS region in the first decade and a half of the new century. With the help of these frameworks, democratic gains have been gradually stabilized around the principles of

³ (<https://www.ECOWAS.Int/Wp-Content/Uploads/2022/09/Vision-2050-EN.Pdf>, n.d.).

⁴ (<https://www.Eisa.Org/Pdf/ECOWAS2001protocol.Pdf>, n.d. p2)



constitutional convergence, which include, among other things, the separation of powers, citizen participation in politics, democratic control, zero tolerance for unconstitutional seizure of power, freedom of the press, and freedom of expression (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020; ECOWAS Vision 2050 Report, 2022: 32).

The bloc's unwavering position towards the coup leaders and its attempts to exert pressure on them to take steps towards the restoration of elected rule are based on its 2001 democracy and good governance agreement (Melly, 2023).

Successes of ECOWAS in Imposing Democratic Norms in West Africa

Since implementing the protocol and making preserving and advancing peace, stability, and democracy its top priority, ECOWAS has accomplished several remarkable goals and demonstrated sterling capacity in managing conflict in some West African countries. More so, ECOWAS has long been a regional bloc leader in promoting democratic values throughout Africa. At one point, it even nearly institutionalized a two-term limit for all West African heads of state. At various points in time, ECOWAS used both military and diplomatic strategies. For example, ECOWAS used force to intervene in the crises in Sierra Leone and Liberia and saw some degree of success; nonetheless, the intervention was contentious due to claims of violations of human rights (Termin & Linzer, 2020; Maiangwa, 2021; Mhaka, 2023).

Maiangwa (2021) contends that unconstitutional changes in administration contributed to a significant portion of the conflicts in West Africa between 1989 and 2020. These included Guinea Conakry (2007–2010), Guinea Bissau (2005–2009), Côte d'Ivoire (1992–2002; 2010–2011), Liberia (1989–2005), and Sierra Leone (1991–2002). While some scholars have argued that past conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire have political undertones and led to a breakdown of democratic and public order, this study attempts to focus on the success of ECOWAS after the adoption of Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in December 2001. These cases include Guinea-Bissau in 2004, Mali in 2013, Burkina Faso in 2015 and Gambia in 2017.

Guinea-Bissau (2004)

Following the adoption of the frameworks outlined in the December 1999 Protocol on the Conflict Prevention Mechanism and the December 2000 Supplementary Protocol, ECOWAS resumed its activities in Guinea-Bissau in 2004, especially following the rebellion on October 6, 2004. In addition to deciding to establish a permanent presence in Guinea Bissau by designating a Special Representative of the Executive Secretary to work with local authorities and the international community to promote peace, ECOWAS also decided to provide a grant of US\$ 500,000 to cover a portion of the soldiers' salary arrears.

Tensions surrounding the June and July 2005 presidential elections were lessened with the assistance of ECOWAS. ECOWAS and AU sent a joint high-level delegation to the nation, directly engaging it in preventive diplomacy efforts. The primary criticism leveled at ECOWAS by the actors and observers in Guinea-Bissau centers on the organization's limited ability to translate its political will to support the nation's sustainable stability into actual action or, at the very least, to pressure the bilateral and multilateral partners with significantly more financial and technical resources.



It must be noted, though, that despite the United Nations Security Council's adoption of resolution S/RES/2203 (2015) on February 18, 2015, which recognized ECOMIB's significant contribution to Guinea-Bissau's stabilization and urged support from the international community, ECOMIB continued to receive all its funding from ECOWAS. Despite the extremely challenging circumstances, the commission and the member states persisted in their efforts to successfully complete the mission in Guinea-Bissau. The ECOMIB's troop-contributing nations were Senegal, Burkina Faso, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria (Akale, Udegbunam & Sanda, 2018).

Mali (2013)

One of the main causes of the Malian Conflict of 2012 is the belief that the central government is incapable of carrying out some of the commitments to increased decentralization and reintegration made in the Tamanrasset (Algeria) Accords of January 6, 1991; the National Pact of April 11, 1992; and the Algiers Accords of 2006. The people's tenuous faith in the government's capacity to uphold its commitments was weakened by the government's persistent failures. Additionally, as Commander-in-Chief in the north of Mali, President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012) played a dubious role. This was evident in the appointment of controversial Tuareg commanders in the northern garrisons, the demoralizing effects of inadequate military equipment on Malian troops, and the refusal to acknowledge the camaraderie between Malian forces, terrorist elements, and criminal networks in the region. Following the coup in 2012, Mali experienced a breakdown of law and order, which was promptly used by armed groups to seize control of the country's north (Afolabi, 2019; Aljazeera, 2023).

In response to Captain Amadou Sanogo's military takeover on March 22, 2012, ECOWAS called an Extraordinary Summit of the Heads of State and Government in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire on March 27, 2012 to discuss strategies for returning the nation to constitutional order. As soon as the summit concluded, it suspended Mali's participation in all ECOWAS decision-making processes in accordance with the terms of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

To assist the Malian government in its conflict with rebels, ECOWAS supported the Africa-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) in 2013. Additionally, following President Amadou Toumani Toure's overthrow in a military coup, it negotiated the return of Mali to constitutional authority in April 2012. A UN Security Council resolution authorized the mission, which had a one-year initial mandate. The expedition was supported by other West African nations, including Gabon, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Burkina Faso, in addition to Nigeria, which provided many of the troops. Eventually, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization in Mali (MINUSMA) replaced it with AFISMA (Aljazeera, 2023; Mhaka, 2023).

**Burkina Faso (2015)**

Following President Blaise Compaore's resignation in October 2014 due to a political and institutional crisis in Burkina Faso in 2014–2015, ECOWAS intervened during the crisis and led a combined mission to Ouagadougou with the African Union and United Nations. A delegation led by the former president of Ghana, who was also the ECOWAS chairman at the time, and the former presidents of Senegal and Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, and Macky Sall, visited Burkina Faso. In response, the African Union, ECOWAS, and their allies demanded a peaceful, civilian-led transition to reinstate constitutional governance. More so, they urged all relevant parties to designate, by consensus, a suitable eminent civilian to lead the transition, form a transitional government for a year, and arrange for presidential and legislative elections by November 2015 (Saidou, 2018; Akale, Udegbumam & Sanda, 2018).

Furthermore, the President of Senegal established a contact group and designated a special envoy for Burkina Faso. But after the Presidential Guard (RSP) coup on September 16, 2015, the ECOWAS mediation effort was widely viewed as a failure and faced intense criticism. Because of its longer-standing association with President Blaise Compaore, the organization was accused of prejudice; eventually, the Burkinabe Army destroyed the RSP and restored the transitional institution. Nonetheless, ECOWAS facilitated the return of interim President Michel Kafando (Aljazeera, 2023; Mhaka, 2023; Asadu, 2023; Akale et al., 2018).

Gambia (2017)

Since the establishment of ECOWAS in 1975, the Gambia has been a member of the group. Following the wave of political changes and the increasing number of lengthy domestic violent crises in the region starting in the 1990s, ECOWAS took on a stronger political role. The organization's pledge to advance democracy and good governance and to embrace what would later be known as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was formally enshrined in the revised ECOWAS treaty (1993), particularly the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention (1999) and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2000). The ECOWAS mandate included electoral surveillance since the 1993 treaty revision. But the 2001 protocol provided more clarification on roles.

As a result, ECOWAS started to regularly follow all the member nations' national elections. In a very uncommon move, Yahaya Jammeh, the president of the Gambia at the time, declined to allow the ECOWAS Observation Team to monitor the presidential elections in December 2016. Election observation needs an invitation from national authorities. Thus, while ECOWAS determined action deserves credit, it also needs to be evaluated critically. The entire goal of democratization would have lost legitimacy if Jammeh's resignation had not been enforced. At the Gambian embassy in Dakar, Barrow took the oath of office as president and called for an ECOWAS military intervention. The three-day transition was guaranteed by the army. The mission, which ran until December 2021, was subsequently renamed the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG). Following the overthrow of longtime despot Yahyah Jammeh, there were great expectations for a democratic revival in the Gambia (Akale et al., 2018; Al Jazeera, 2023; Gyimba-Boadi, n.d; Hartmann, 2017; Mhaka, 2023; Asadu, 2023).

In addition, ECOWAS effectively outlaws military takeovers as a means of overthrowing governments. The implementation of regional pro-democracy conventions and protocols led to the governments of Togo (2005), Guinea (2008-2009), Niger (2009-2011), Côte d'Ivoire



(2010-2011), and Mali (2012) being denied official recognition by ECOWAS and having their membership suspended (Gyimba-Boadi n.d).

Table 1: A History of ECOWAS Military Interventions

Year	Country	Details
1990	Liberia	A peacekeeping force was sent to end the civil war in the country. The mission was accused of human right violation
1998	Sierra Leone	President Ahmad Kabbah was reinstated after ECOWAS intervened in the country's war to drive out a junta and rebel allies from the capital Freetown
1999	Guinea-Bissau	ECOWAS sent a multilateral force to preserve a peace deal in the coup-prone country. The force withdrew three months later after rebel seized power
2003	Ivory Coast	A west African force was sent to the country to support French troops to enforce a peace deal between the government and rebels
2012	Guinea-Bissau	The bloc deployed a mission to protect political figures and restore democracy and rule of law following a military coup. They left in 2020
2013	Mali	ECOWAS deployed soldiers as part of an African-led mission to combat Islamist militants from the North
2017	Gambia	West Africa troops were sent to force President Yahya Jammeh to go into exile and concede the presidency to Adama Barrow, who had defeated him in an election
2022	Guinea-Bissau	Military personnel were sent to help stabilize the country after a failed coup.

Note: Pre-2001 Supplementary ECOWAS intervention was included to show it success before the adoption of A/SP1/12/01⁵

⁵ Adapted from Ewokor and Seddon (2023, August 11). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66465146>



Challenges of ECOWAS in Imposing Democratic Norms in West Africa

Despite the fact that the strategic objectives and orientations of ECOWAS indicate that its Vision 2050 Pillars will strengthen regional peace and security, and human security in the region; prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts; strengthen democratic governance; consolidate the rule of law and justice delivery; and promote respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. Contemporary events manifesting through military incursion and unconstitutional changes of power show the weakness and failure of ECOWAS to uphold its Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of December 2001.⁶ For example, recent coups in Niger (2023), Burkina Faso (2022), Guinea (2021), Mali (2020) evince that West Africa is backsliding democratically under the radar of ECOWAS. This section highlights the challenge of ECOWAS with a closer concentration on the stated cases.

Mali (2020)

President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was overthrown in August 2020 by a gang of Malian colonels under the command of Assimi Goita. The coup came after accusations of corruption, contested legislative elections, and anti-government demonstrations over deteriorating security. The junta in Mali gave up power to a civilian-led temporary administration under pressure from its neighbors in West Africa. The interim government's job was to supervise the country's 18-month transition to democratic elections, which would take place in February 2022.

However, the leaders of the coup plotted against retired colonel Bah Ndaw, the acting president, and staged a second coup in May 2021. Goita was promoted to the presidency after serving as the vice president in transition. Following the military rulers' publication of a new electoral legislation and proposal for a two-year transition to democracy, ECOWAS eased some of the sanctions imposed on Mali. ECOWAS removed sanctions on October 6, 2020 to support the transition to civilian government (Aljazeera, 2021; Melly, 2024; Holland, 2023).

Guinea (2021)

President Alpha Conde was overthrown in September 2021 by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, the leader of the special forces. Widespread unrest had been sparked a year earlier when Conde altered the constitution to get around restrictions that would have kept him from running for a third term. After taking office as interim president, Doumbouya pledged to move toward democratic elections in three years.

Rejecting the deadline, ECOWAS sanctioned the junta members and their families, restricting their bank accounts among other things. Opposition parties claim that the military dictatorship has not done much to establish institutions and a plan for returning to constitutional governance, despite its later proposal to begin the 24-month transition in January 2023. The African Union, the UN, and the West African regional organization ECOWAS vehemently denounced the coups (Aradi, 2024; Melly, 2024; Holland, 2023).

⁶ (<https://www.ECOWAS.Int/Wp-Content/Uploads/2022/09/Vision-2050-EN.Pdf>, n.d. p 44)

**Burkina Faso (2022)**

Burkina Faso is an impoverished landlocked country in West Africa. President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, 64, has been in office since 2015. However, he came under increasing fire from both the military and the public for his government's failure to quell the Islamist insurgents wreaking havoc on the 21-million-person country. Up until 2015, Burkina Faso had mostly stayed peaceful. However, as part of a larger upheaval in the Sahel, in the large region of the land just south of the Sahara, terrorist organizations began a deadly campaign (New York Times, 2022).

President Roch Kabore was overthrown by the Burkina Faso army in January 2022, with the reason given being that he was unable to stop Islamist militant attacks. Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, the commander of the coup, promised to restore security, but as attacks increased, military morale declined. This resulted in a second coup in September 2022, when Captain Ibrahim Traore, the current head of the junta, took control (Melly, 2024; Holland, 2023).

In a statement, ECOWAS stated that it "firmly condemns" the coup and charged that Kabore was forced to step down "under threat, intimidation and pressure, including the suspension and imposition of sanctions" by the military (Aljazeera, 2022).

Niger (2023)

Niger plays a significant role in the Sahel region of Africa, which is a landmass that runs from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. President Mohamed Bazoum was taken into custody by members of Niger's presidential guard inside his palace in July 2023. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, President Bazoum is the only elected leader to replace another. His captors suspended the nation's constitution and crowned General Abdourahmane Tchiani as president. After the arrest, the guardsmen announced on national television that they were taking over to put an end to the "deteriorating security situation and bad governance" (Plummer, 2023; Holland, 2023).

A few days later, the junta proclaimed Abdourahamane Tchiani, the chief of the presidential guard, as the new head of state, sparking worries about regional security in an area where Niger has been a crucial ally of Western powers trying to quell insurgencies by organizations associated with the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. The main West African bloc, ECOWAS, attempted to talk with the leaders of the coup but stated that if diplomatic attempts were unsuccessful, it would send soldiers into Niger to restore constitutional order (Holland, 2023).

Days later, in response, ECOWAS imposed sanctions and threatened to use military force to coerce the ruling military junta to "stand down within a week or face a potential military intervention" (Liakos, Tanno, Goillandeau & Madowo, 2023).



Factors Responsible for the Failure of ECOWAS in Imposing Democratic Norms in West Africa

Failure to Introduce Term-Limit

For a time, it appeared as though ECOWAS could successfully defend democracy within its sphere of influence. Thankfully, from 2015 to 2020, there was not a single undemocratic transfer of power in West Africa. However, the bloc's failure to impose stringent term limits on its members' presidents proved disastrous for the region during this rare period of stability, opening the door for a fresh round of political violence and seriously impeding its professed goal of enhancing stability and economic integration among West African nations. Following objections from Togo and The Gambia, ECOWAS abandoned a proposal in May 2015 to limit the number of terms that West African presidents might hold in office (Mhaka, 2023; Melly, 2024).

As a result, Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, Alpha Conde of Guinea, Gnassingbe Faure of Togo and Yahyah Jammeh of Gambia spent more than their respective countries' constitutional term-limits in power. The accusation of hypocrisy or double standards—according to which the bloc acts tough when soldiers take civilians' places of power, but seldom speaks up or uses force when elected civilian leaders stage "constitutional coups" and alter the law to extend their own tenure, as occurred in Guinea in 2020—is one of ECOWAS' most awkward challenges as it attempts to thwart and reverse the tide of coups (Melly, 2024).

Western Influences

The junta that deposed democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger last in July 2023 severed diplomatic and military links with the former colonial power, France, and canceled an agreement with the United States. As a result, numerous Russian military instructors reached Niger as part of a deal with the junta that has severed ties with the West (Ewoker & Armstrong, 2024).

Asadu (2023) argues that the coup in Niger expands the influence of Russia's private military unit Wagner throughout West Africa, where it has become the go-to security partner—from Burkina Faso, where the regime welcomed Russia as a "strategic ally" following the removal of French troops in February, to Mali, where the unit assisted in fighting jihadi groups. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of Wagner, hailed the military takeover as "the fight of its people (Niger) against the colonizers," a reference to France, which is seen to be the final Western ally in the Sahel along with the United States, and which has hundreds of troops stationed in Niger.

Internal and Domestic Dynamics

In the past, coups were often considered adversely by Africans, who believed that they would stop democratization, incite violence, and increase dysfunction. However, it seems that people are supporting unlawful military takeovers, especially in the coup belt, these days. Conversely, this popular support for coup plotters is frequently ephemeral and primarily stems from residents' discontent, animosity, and disgust with their elected officials as well as the worsening socioeconomic circumstances (Lambert, 2024). The Niger junta was given a deadline by ECOWAS to reinstate the democratically elected government, but it was disregarded. Muslim clerics from northern Nigeria, which borders Niger for a considerable distance, pleaded with



Nigerian President Tinubu not to use force to remove the coup leaders prior to the bloc's meeting (Ewokor & Sedon, 2023).

Ineffective and Inconsistent Application of Sanction

The West African economic bloc resorted to sanctions against a member state after a coup in Niger. These have frequently shown to be ineffectual in the past, exposing the alliance's frailty. The suspension from membership is one of the strictest penalties. That is what transpired in the four member states where a coup overthrew their legal administrations. A social scientist in the capital city of Niamey, Niger, named Bounty Diallo, contends that despite economic pressure, sanctions in Mali and Burkina Faso have not succeeded in influencing the opinions of the governments and populace. To him, "To think that things will be different in Niger and that the government will give in in a week or two is an illusion" (Sadner, 2023). ECOWAS vowed to use force to restore democracy during the 2023 Nigerien constitutional crisis; however, the threat proved to be false as it was allowed to expire without any action being taken (Lambert, 2024).

Another case in point is in Togo where a reform roadmap was endorsed during the ECOWAS Summit in July 2018. ECOWAS recommended that the administration update the voter registration thoroughly before the parliamentary elections. The summit also suggested that the Independent National Electoral Commission be reconstituted with the participation of all relevant parties and that the Togolese diaspora be allowed to cast ballots in their home countries. Openly opposing the regional leaders, Togo opposed the reforms. As ECOWAS has previously done, fines or other penalties were not imposed because of this. ECOWAS' silence instead gave Gnassingbé and his backers the impression that they could disregard local opinion without consequence (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

The military regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali declared their intention to dispatch soldiers to back the Niger junta if the Economic Community of West African States engaged in military intervention. The three putschist regimes decided to establish the Alliance of Sahel States to defend their hard-won victories and further insulate themselves against potential risks of armed insurrection or outside attack. This mutual pact of the Alliance of the Sahel States equally constitutes a constraint to ECOWAS involvement in restoring democratic values in the coup-infested Sahel states (Lambert, 2024).

CONCLUSION

Many constitutions in West Africa lack the spirit of constitutionalism even with the creation of formal constitutional governance (Prempeh, 2018). Also, despite the fact that most citizens prefer elections over any other alternative means of selecting leaders, unconstitutional change of leaders has been prevalent in recent years (Afrobarometer 2023). With recent disruption in democratic order coming from Mali in 2020, Guinea in 2021, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023. These dents in democracy betray West Africa's record as a region that has once enjoyed significant stability and peace at the turn of the 21st century (Gyimah-boadi, n.d).

Is the Economic Community of West African States Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance A/SP1/12/01 just a symbolic measure of democratic norms or it has lived up to its objective and purpose? Why is ECOWAS successful in imposing democratic values in some



West African countries after its adoption of the Supplementary Protocol and unsuccessful in others? This study examines the recent West African crisis and advances the argument that while ECOWAS has been successful in upholding democratic norms in some West Africa countries, domestic factors and dynamics, Western influence, failure to introduce term-limits, inconsistency and hollow sanctions account for its shortcomings.

Adopting qualitative lens, it closely looks at some West African countries such as Guinea Bissau, the Gambia, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire where ECOWAS has successfully upheld democratic ideals after it adopted the Supplementary Protocol, including countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Guinea where it has experienced drawbacks in upholding its A/SP1/12/01.

However, the wave of unconstitutional change of power could be halted by enacting laws limiting presidential term limits and tenure extensions, strengthening regional early warning systems, maintaining constant surveillance, giving institution building the same priority as other security force support initiatives, and promoting inclusive growth and economic development. (Lambert, 2024). In addition, this study recommends strengthening of civil society in member countries and adopting a strategy to deal and relate with Western power who have connections in causing democratic backsliding. Also, consistent and effective sanctions and punitive measures should be put in place to ensure democratic stability in West African countries.

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