African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research

ISSN: 2689-5129

Volume 9, Issue 2, 2026 (pp. 73-89)

www.abjournals.org

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXIT OF THE SAHELIAN STATES FROM ECOWAS

Emmanuel Ezi Obuah

Department of History and Political Science, College of Arts and Sciences, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, Alabama 36088.

Email: eobuah@tuskegee.edu

Cite this article:

E. E., Obuah (2026), The Implications of the Exit of the Sahelian States from ECOWAS. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 9(2), 73-89. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Manuscript History

Received: 18 Dec 2025

Accepted: 13 Jan 2026

Published: 24 Mar 2026

ABSTRACT: *This paper examined the implications of the exit of the Sahelian States from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS was created by fifteen West African states to promote economic integration and cooperation to raise the living standards of its people and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among member states, and contribute to the progress and development of the African continent. Since its founding, ECOWAS has grown from the classical free trade to an economic and political union It has promoted trade liberalization and free movement of people and established several institutions, including the Community Parliament and Community Court. Recently, the number of ECOWAS members has shrunk from fifteen to twelve, with the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger withdrawing in 2024. Mauritania had withdrawn from ECOWAS in December 2000. The relationship between ECOWAS and the three Sahel states became very tense following military coups and the imposition by ECOWAS of crippling sanctions, including the threat of the use of force to restore democratic rule in Niger. In January 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), or Alliance des États du Sahel and accused ECOWAS of being too close to Western powers. Their withdrawal will have significant implications not only for the Sahelian states but also for ECOWAS. Using the theoretical frameworks of liberal institutionalism and economic integration, the study adopted a qualitative historical descriptive methodology to assess the implications of the exit of these countries for ECOWAS and the Sahelian states. The study, among other things, identified potential implications in terms of trade, political architecture, security, economics, and food security.*

KEYWORDS: ECOWAS, Sahelian States, Liberal Institutionalism Theory, Integration Theory, Coup Belt, Sahel exit.

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

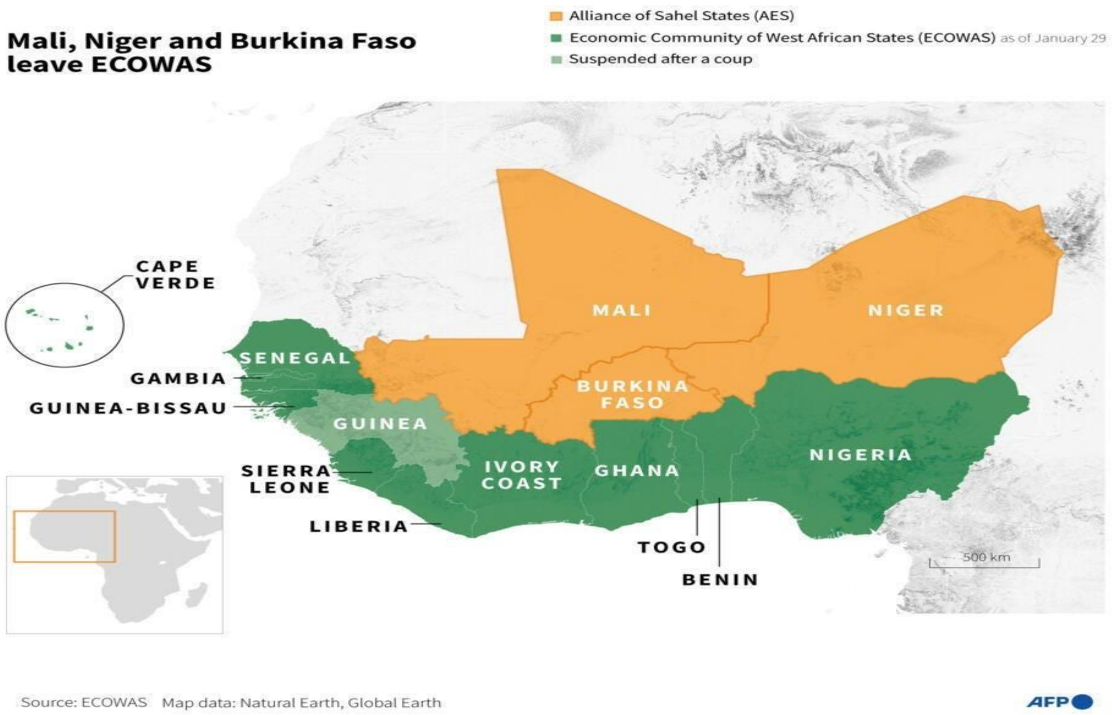
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

INTRODUCTION

The recent decision by the military-led governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) to withdraw from ECOWAS, referred to by some as "Sahelexit," marks a significant development in the history of regionalism in Africa. This coordinated withdrawal is the culmination of a decade of deepening political instability commonly referred to as the "Coup Belt" or the "region with more terror deaths than the rest of the world" (Orrell, 2025). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was founded in 1975 to promote economic integration in the region at a time when regions with small and fragmented markets were encouraged to integrate not only to create larger and integrated markets but also to enhance their bargaining positions in the global economy. At the very height of the Cold War and many years of negotiations, 15 states in West Africa with shared Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone colonial history came together under the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, establishing ECOWAS to promote cooperation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic union in West Africa in order to raise the living standards of its peoples and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among member states and contribute to the progress and development of the African continent.

These aims would be achieved through harmonization and coordination of national policies and the promotion of integration programs; harmonization and coordination of policies for the protection of the environment; promotion of the establishment of joint production enterprises; the establishment of a common market; economic union; the promotion of joint ventures by private sector enterprises and other economic operators; the establishment of an enabling legal environment; the harmonization of national investment codes leading to the adoption of a single Community investment code, etc.

Since its establishment, ECOWAS has followed the Balassa classical linear economic integration schema, moving from a free trade area to a customs union, a common market and an economic and political union.



Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

During its nearly fifty years of corporate existence, ECOWAS has implemented a trade liberalization scheme in both primary agricultural products and manufactured industrial products, introduced community codes on foreign investment and free movement of factors of production and continues to support stability in the region through interventions and peacekeeping through its ECOMOG operations in Liberia (1990 and 2003), Sierra Leone (1997), Guinea-Bissau (1999), Cote d'Ivoire (2003), Mali (2013), and The Gambia (2017). Furthermore, it has created institutions and structures for the development and deepening of integration. These include the Secretariat, Commission, ECOWAS Parliament, the Community Court of Justice, Ecowas Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), West African Health Organization (WAHO), and the Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing in West Africa (GIABA).

However, despite these positive developments, the number of members of ECOWAS has shrunk from fifteen to twelve, with the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger terminating their membership in 2024.

The relationship between ECOWAS and the three Sahel states became very tense following military coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023 and the imposition of crippling sanctions, including the threat of the use of force to restore democratic rule, especially on Niger. In January 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and accused ECOWAS of being too close to Western powers. Although these countries have officially exited ECOWAS, the doors of ECOWAS are still open to them. While these countries are among the poorest in the region, with a population of over 76 million and more than half of the total geographical area of ECOWAS, their withdrawal will have significant consequences not only for the Sahelian states but also for ECOWAS.

The aim of this paper is to examine the implications of the departure of the Sahel states after 50 years of economic integration in the region. To this end, the paper will examine the aims and objectives of ECOWAS as articulated in the revised Treaty of 1993, the timeline and legal process of the withdrawal of the Sahelian states, the major accomplishments of ECOWAS, and the implications of the exit of its three Sahelian members. The paper relied on the use of content analysis of existing sources and data culled from diverse sources to provide an understanding of the effects and impacts of the withdrawal both on ECOWAS and the Sahelian States.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The work adopted both integration and liberal institutionalism theories.

The Liberal institutionalism or institutional liberalism, is a theory of international relations that holds that international cooperation between states is feasible and sustainable, and that such cooperation can reduce conflict and competition. Liberal institutionalists highlight the role of international institutions and regimes in facilitating cooperation between states. Liberal institutionalism theorists argue that the international system could remain stable in the absence of a hegemon (Robert, 1984)

Liberal institutionalism further points out that international cooperation could be sustained through repeated interactions, transparency, and monitoring. According to Keohane (1984) and other liberal institutionalists (Martin, 1995; Fearon, 1998; Victor, 2011; Poast, 2012),

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, providing information, making commitments more credible, establishing focal points for coordination, facilitating the principle of reciprocity, extending the shadow of the future, and enabling interlinkages of issues, which raises the cost of noncompliance

In the case of the creation of ECOWAS, liberal institutionalism and integration theory anchored on the need for development formed the basis for its formation. Although liberal institutionalism has been questioned following the exit of United Kingdom from the European Union and now the exit of the Sahel states from ECOWAS, it continues to provide the theoretical basis for understanding integration efforts and the creation of alliances and groups in the global system, which is characterized by conflicts, competition, divergent and competing national interests, and self-help.

In international relations integration refers to the process of bringing countries or regions closer together through economic, political, and social cooperation and integration. Integration can take many forms, including economic integration, political integration, and cultural integration. ECOWAS is essentially an economic integration, a process of creating a single market or economic union among countries or regions, often through the removal of trade barriers and the creation of common economic policies. Since its formation in 1975, ECOWAS has gradually expanded economic integration and moved towards the establishment of common political and legal institutions.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive historical method derived from content analysis of existing published primary and secondary sources.

The Aims and Objectives of ECOWAS

The aims and objectives of ECOWAS as provided by the revised treaty of 1993 are

1. To promote cooperation and integration, leading to the establishment of an economic union in West Africa in order to raise the living standards of its peoples, and to maintain and enhance economic stability, foster relations among Member States, and contribute to the progress and development of the African Continent.

2. To achieve the aims set out in the paragraph above, and in accordance with the relevant provisions of this Treaty, the Community shall, by step, ensure

a) the harmonization and co-ordination of national policies and the promotion of integration programs, projects and activities, particularly in food, agriculture and natural resources, industry, transport and communications, energy, trade, money and finance, taxation, economic reform policies, human resources, education, information, culture, science, technology, health, tourism, legal matters;

b) the harmonization and co-ordination of policies for the protection of the environment;

c) the promotion of the establishment of joint production enterprises;

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

d) the establishment of a common market through;

   i. the liberalization of trade by the abolition, among Member States, of customs duties levied on imports and exports, and the abolition, among Member States, of non-tariff barriers in order to establish a free trade area at the Community level;
   ii. the adoption of a common external tariff and a common trade policy vis-a-vis third countries;
   iii. the removal, between Member States, of obstacles to the free movement of persons, goods, services and capital, and to the right of residence and establishment;

e) the establishment of an economic union through the adoption of common policies in the economic, financial, social and cultural sectors, and the creation of a monetary union;

f) the promotion of joint ventures by private sector enterprises and other economic operators, in particular through the adoption of a regional agreement on cross-border investments;

g) the adoption of measures for the integration of the private sectors, particularly the creation of an enabling environment to promote small and medium scale enterprises;

h) the establishment of an enabling legal environment;

i) the harmonization of national investment codes leading to the adoption of a single Community investment code;

j) the harmonization of standards and measures;

k) the promotion of balanced development of the region, paying attention to the special problems of each Member State particularly those of landlocked and small island Member States;

l) the encouragement and strengthening of relations and the promotion of the flow of information particularly among rural populations, women and youth organizations and socio-professional organizations such as associations of the media, business men and women, workers, and trade unions;

m) the adoption of a community population policy which takes into account the need for a balance between demographic factors and socio-economic development;

n) the establishment of a fund for co-operation, compensation and development; and

o) any other activity that Member States may decide to undertake jointly with a view to attaining Community objectives.

Although in theory, ECOWAS was conceived to progress through the trajectory of Balassa's classical linear mode of free trade area, customs union, common market, economic and total economic integration, it took different paths because of the level of development of its members, the accentuation of the process of globalization and the adoption of hybrid policies that address the need for regulation while encouraging the participation of foreign capital.

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

The Institutional Organs of the ECOWAS

The institutional organ of ECOWAS consists of the following:

1. The Authority of States and Government (The Authority)

This is the highest policy-making body of ECOWAS, which is made up of all the Heads of the States and Government of ECOWAS. Its functions include the appointment of the executive secretary of the ECOWAS; taking decisions on issues relating to the sub-regional economy; recommending the approval of the Council of Ministers; approval of all ECOWAS treaties; and approval of proposals for the amendment of the ECOWAS treaty.

2. The Council of Ministers

This organ consists of two representatives from each member state who meet twice yearly to discuss vital issues affecting the Community and the direction of integration. Their functions include the following: preparation of the agenda of the meeting of the Authority; the implementation of the decisions and resolution of the Authority; preparation of ECOWAS' budget for the approval of the Authority; recommendation of the appointment of the executive secretary and their deputies; and the appointment of the managing director of the ECOWAS Fund.

3. The Executive Secretariat

This constitutes the administrative headquarters of ECOWAS and has an executive secretary as the head, who holds office for four years and may be reappointed after the first tenure. The functions of the Executive Secretariat include the handling of all the organization's files, records and correspondences; the preparation of the organization's annual budget; the preparation of meeting agendas; assisting in formulating policies of ECOWAS; being responsible for the day-to-day administration of the organization; and the control of the Fund of ECOWAS.

4. The Fund for Cooperation, Compensation and Development (The Fund)

The Fund handles the common account of ECOWAS. It has its headquarters in Lomé. Its functions include financing projects in member states; promoting compensation to member states; guaranteeing foreign investment; and promoting development projects in less developed member states of the Community

5. The Community Court of Justice

This is the judicial organ of ECOWAS. Its functions include the interpretation of the Treaty of the Community and the settlement of disputes among member states and ensuring compliance and general adherence to the Community laws and justice.

6. Technical/Specialized Commissions

a. Trade, Customs, Immigration, Monetary and Payment

b. Transport, Telecommunication and Energy

c. Industry, Agriculture and Natural Resources

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

d. Social and Cultural Affairs

Basic Data of Member States of ECOWAS

From being one of the largest regional groups in the world, ECOWAS has been reduced to twelve countries. These countries have mono-cultural economies and are at different levels of development. Of the fifteen least developed countries in Africa according to the UN Human Development Index, four (Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau) are members of ECOWAS (Benson, 2022). Also, the GDP of members of ECOWAS is low, with Cabo Verde earning the highest in 2023.

Figure 1: GDP per capita of ECOWAS, 2023.

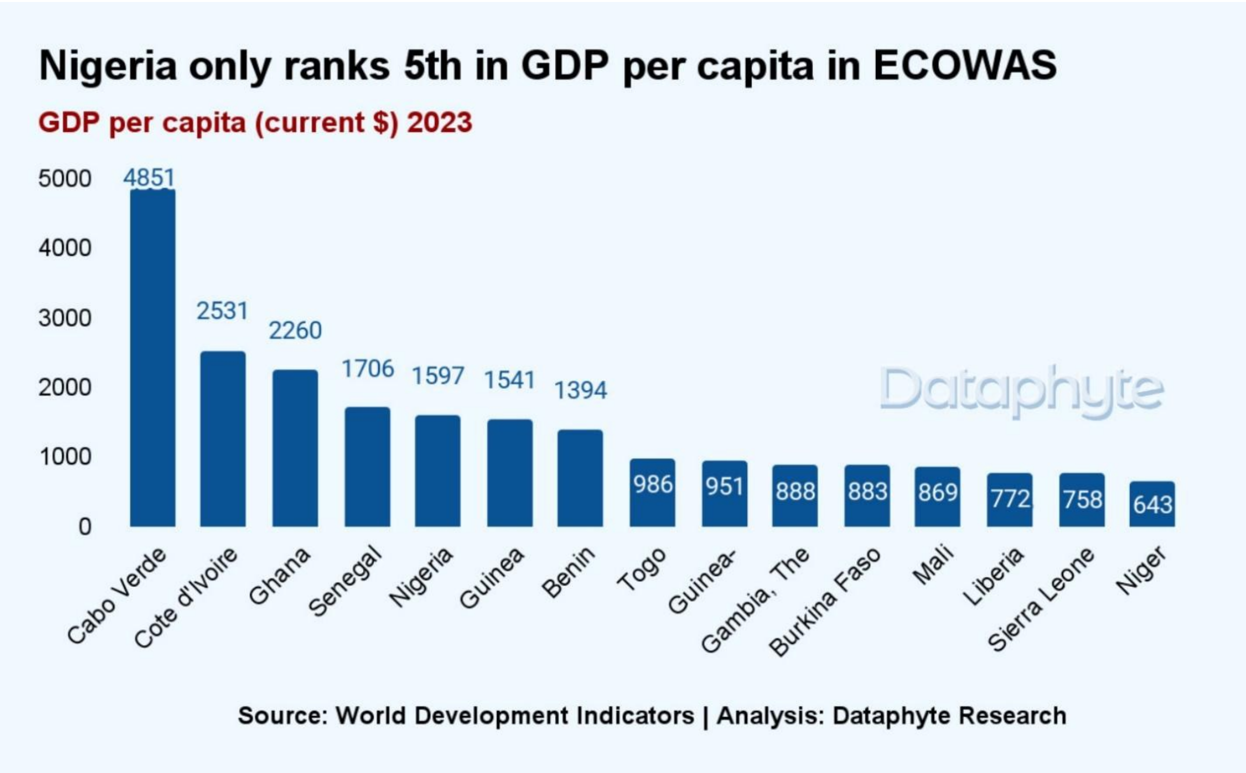


Table 2: Representation in the Community Parliament

Countries	Population	Date of Independence	Language	GDP (US$bn)	Governance
Benin	10,323,000	August 1, 1960	French	19.68	Presidential Republic
Cape Verde	500,000	July 5, 1975	Portuguese	2.53	Unitary semi-presidential
Cote d'Ivoire	27,000,000	August 7, 1960	French	78.88	Presidential Republic
The Gambia	2,000,000	February 18, 1965	English	2.40	Presidential Republic
Ghana	27,000,000	March 6, 1957	English	76.37	Unitary Presidential
Guinea	10,000,000	October 2, 1958	French	22.20	Presidential Republic
Guinea-Bissau	2,000,000	September 24, 1973	Portuguese	2.05	Presidential Republic
Liberia	5,300,000	July 26, 1847	English	4.24	Republican

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Nigeria	213,000,000	October 1, 1960	English	363.85	Federal presidential
Senegal	16,000,000	April 4, 1960	French	30.85	Presidential Republic
Sierra Leone	8,000,000	April 27, 1961	French	6.41	Presidential Constitutional Republic
Togo	8,500,000	April 27, 1960		9.17	Presidential Republic

The Governance Structure of the ECOWAS

According to the ECOWAS governance regime, it consists of the following branches: the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary

The executive consists of the Authority of Heads of State and Government that is headed by a chairman who is appointed by other heads of state and government to oversee the affairs for a period of one year. The minister in charge of ECOWAS affairs in the country of the Chairman of the Authority automatically becomes the Chairman of the Council of Ministers; similarly, that country presides over all other ECOWAS statutory meetings for the year (ministerial and senior level, such as the Technical Committees). At the helm of the executive arm of the Community is the President of the ECOWAS Commission, appointed by the Authority for a non-renewable period of four years. S/He is assisted by a vice president and 13 commissioners.

The legislative arm of the Community is the Community Parliament. It is headed by the Speaker of the Parliament. The administrative functions of the Parliament are directed by the Secretary General of the Parliament. Although elections to the Community Parliament are by direct universal suffrage, members are currently seconded by their national Parliaments to the Community Parliament for a period of four years. The Community Parliament consists of 97 (following the exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), distributed based on the population of each member state

Country	Parliament Seats
Benin	5
Cape Verde	5
Gambia	5
Ghana	8
Guinea	6
Guinea-Bissau	5
Ivory Coast	7
Liberia	5
Nigeria	35
Senegal	6
Sierra Leone	5
Togo	5

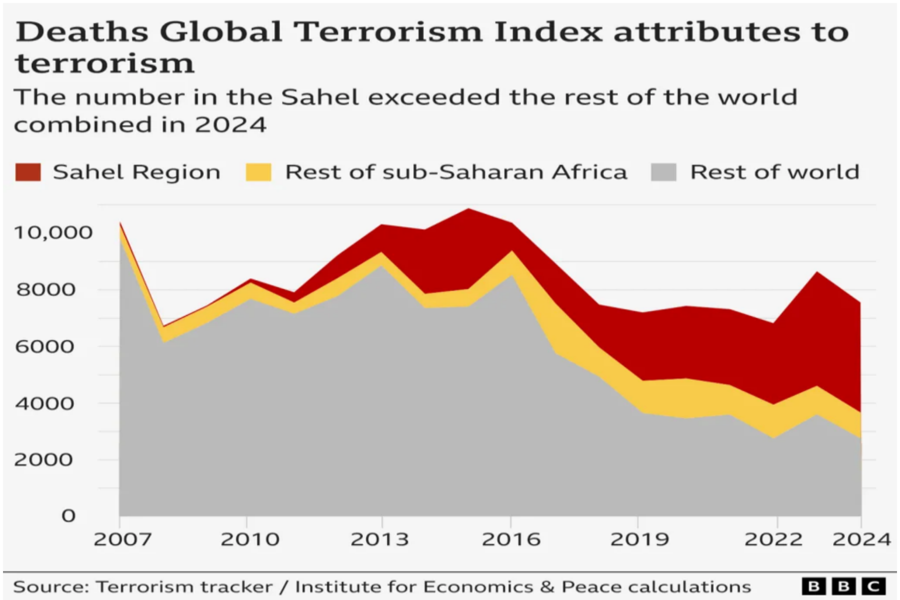
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ECOWAS#Structure

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Finally, the judicial arm of the Community is the Community Court of Justice (CCJ), headed by the President. The CCJ was established under Article 6 of the Revised Treaty of the Community in 1993. Members of the CCJ are seconded by the Supreme Courts of their respective member states to fill the country's positions. The Court ensures the interpretation and application of Community laws, protocols and conventions. The administrative functions of the court are handled by the court registrar, who is assisted by other professionals.

The Timeline and legal process of the exit of the Sahelian States

Mali initiated this trend with two military coups in quick succession, first in August 2020 and again in May 2021. Both events were precipitated by widespread civil society discontent over the government's failure to contain the burgeoning Jihadist insurgency that had destabilized the country since 2012 (Oumarou, 2023). Following Mali's lead, Burkina Faso experienced two coups in 2022 one in January and another in September, with the military citing the same primary justification: the government's inability to protect citizens and territorial integrity from violent extremist organizations. The wave crested in July 2023 when the presidential guard overthrew the democratically elected government of President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger, citing deteriorating security and corruption. These events saw thousands of deaths in the region, hence the region with more 'terror deaths' than the rest of the world combined" (Orrell, 2025).



These events further established a consistent pattern where national security failure was leveraged as the primary legal and moral rationale for the military's seizure of power, effectively challenging the regional body's reliance on democratic legitimacy alone (ECOWAS Protocol Review, 2024).

The friction between the three juntas and ECOWAS stemmed directly from the regional body's established policy of opposing unconstitutional changes of government (ECOWAS, 2024). It is important to note that the actions of the coup juntas in the three states contravened the ECOWAS 2001 Protocol, which, inter alia, states in Article 1 (b & C) that "every accession to power must be made through a free, fair and transparent election" and "zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means."

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

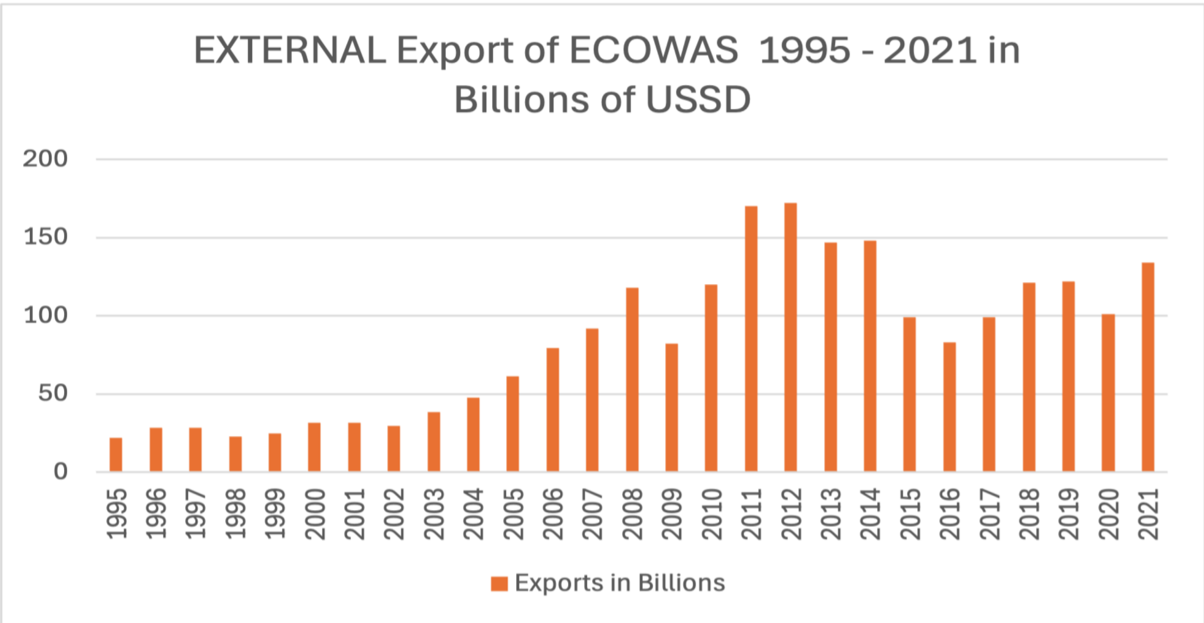
Accordingly, ECOWAS responded to the coups with escalating measures, including suspensions from its institutions, travel restrictions on leaders, and economic sanctions, aimed at pressuring a return to civilian rule. This punitive posture led the juntas to frame ECOWAS as a hostile entity infringing upon their national sovereignty. The public turning point occurred on January 28, 2024, when the three governments issued a joint communiqué declaring their decision to withdraw "with immediate effect" (Reuters, 2024; BBC, 2024). This statement was intended to be both a political rejection of ECOWAS' sanctions and a legal assertion of intent. However, the legal reality of the withdrawal hinged not on the political statement but on the provisions of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty, the Community's basic legal instrument.

The core legal principle governing the withdrawal is contained in Article 91 of the Revised ECOWAS 1993 Treaty. This clause mandates a specific, formal procedure: any member state wishing to withdraw must provide one year's notice in writing to the executive secretary. Significantly, the treaty states that the notifying state "shall cease to be a member of the Community" only if the notice is not withdrawn at the end of the year (ECOWAS, 1993). Consequently, the "immediate" political announcement in January 2024 did not produce an instant legal cessation of membership. The one-year written notice requirement established a fixed transitional period during which the three states remained legally bound by their treaty obligations (African Union, 2024). This legal fact shaped the diplomatic and administrative landscape for the following twelve months.

Implications of the Exit of the Sahel States

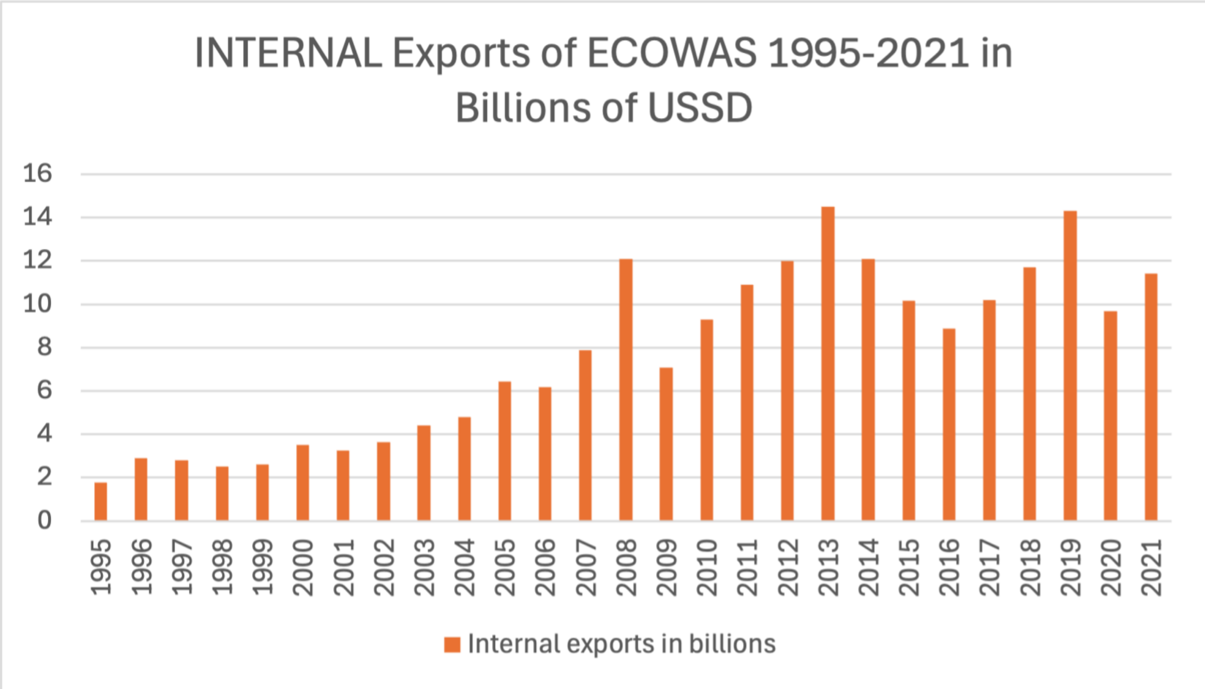
Trade

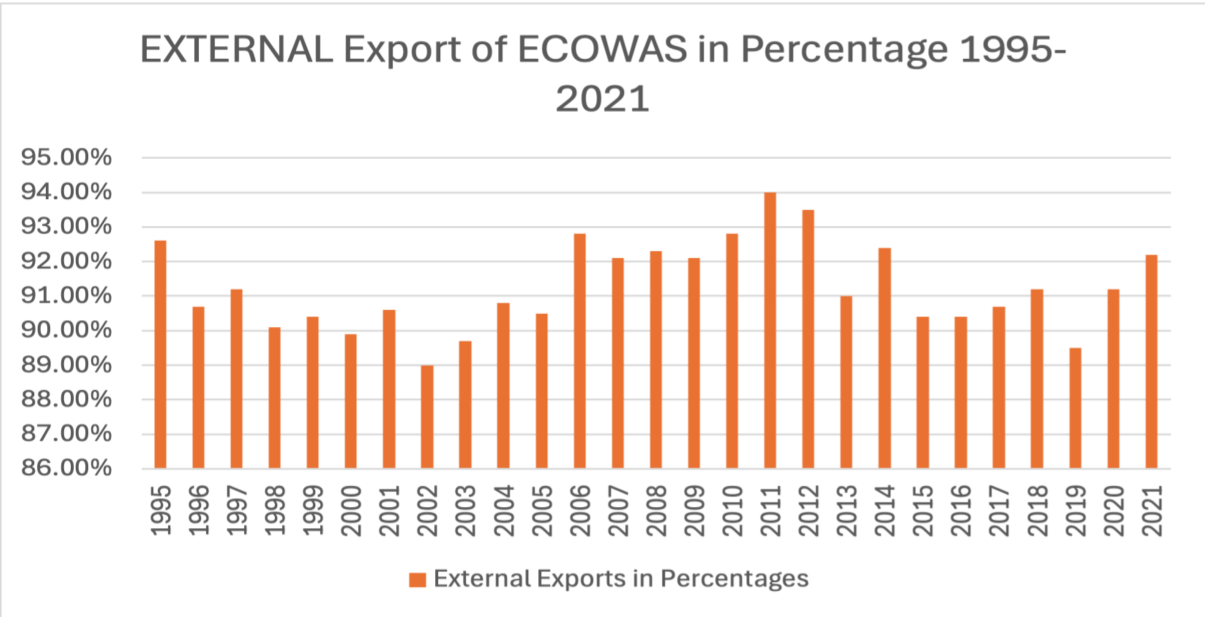
Trade is at the heart of the creation of ECOWAS. Since its establishment, ECOWAS has wanted to grow intra-state trade among its members. To this end, it began with the creation of trade liberalization on primary agricultural products produced in the sub-region, and later it introduced trade liberalization on manufactured products. So far, despite the trade liberalization efforts, internal trade among members of ECOWAS is significantly lower, as shown in the various graphs.



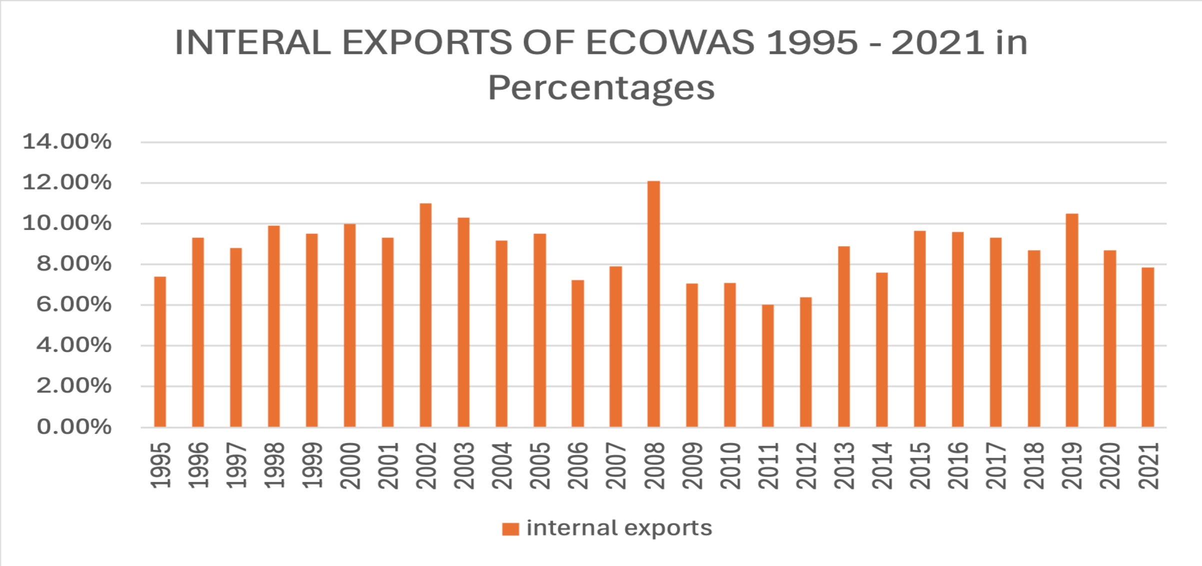
Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research
ISSN: 2689-5129
Volume 9, Issue 2, 2026 (pp. 73-89)





Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV



In terms of the Sahelian countries within ECOWAS, they stand to lose trade, especially as most of their trade is in food, vegetables and agriculture, which fall under trade liberalization on primary products. Although the volume of intra-ECOWAS trade (imports and exports) is low, as shown in table 3, the Sahelian will be treated as non-members and therefore be subject to external tariffs.

Table 3: Sahelian States International Trade and Intra-ECOWAS Trade 2011–2014 in Million US$

International Trade	**IMPORTS**			
Burkina Faso	2778	3554	4364	3581
Mali	3358	3465	3819	3926
Niger	1919	1687	1745	2199
	EXPORTS			
Burkina Faso	2429	2270	2501	2600
Mali	2402	2624	2772	2849
Niger	944.4	1204	1297	1159
Intra-ECOWAS Trade	**IMPORTS**			
Burkina Faso	711.9	810.3	986.0	893.4
Mali	1403	1610	1509	1504
Niger	277.8	318.8	353.8	388.1
	EXPORTS			
Burkina Faso	188.5	172.8	275.3	457.4
Mali	366.9	308.2	366.9	308.5
Niger	112.9	367.2	540.5	474.2

Sources: ECOWAS http//: ecowasstats.ecowas.int; https//: ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=15 (Burkina Faso); https//:ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=8 (Mali); https//:ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=9 (Niger)

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Political Implication

The departure of the Sahel states demonstrates the rising anti-Western sentiment and a shift towards military governance in these countries. Hence, it might lead to increased isolation from the sub-regional political frameworks and influence. The Sahelian states were coterminous and suspended by both the ECOWAS and African Union (AU). From past experiences, returning to civil rule can be expensive and protracted. For instance, in Mali on May 14, 2025, the military government officially dissolved all political parties, thus bringing an abrupt end to any remaining hope of a transition to civilian rule. What was initially presented as a temporary intervention aimed at stabilizing the country has instead evolved into a prolonged period of military control. The promise of restoring democratic governance has faded, and Mali now faces a deepening political and economic crisis. The future of democracy in the country remains uncertain, with growing concerns about long-term stability and the erosion of civic freedoms (CDS Africa). In Burkina Faso, insecurity and various forms of misgovernance, which were reasons cited for military takeovers, coupled with the exit from ECOWAS, have derailed the hitherto transition to civil rule agenda. In fact, in September 2024, military president Traoré stated that his “priority was addressing insecurity and safeguarding the nation—not elections” (ISS, 2024). According to Human Rights Watch (2025), Niger’s transition to civilian governance is bleaker, as the military government of Abdourahamane Tiani has moved the transition plan from three years to five years due to the worsening security situation in the Sahel (Mudge, 2025).

Furthermore, considering the prevalence of military coups in West Africa over the decades, there is a serious possibility that the establishment of military regimes via coups in these Sahel states might have demonstrative and contagious effects on other states that are fragile or at different stages of transition to civil rule. For instance, while Al Jazeera (2023) estimated the number at 214 coups in Africa from 1950 to 2022, others estimated that between 1960 and 2022, about 200 military coups (both successful and failed) occurred in Africa, of which West Africa produced 104 (successful and failed) coups (Chilaka & Peter, 2022). In fact, between 2020 and 2025, there were seven coups in West Africa: two in Mali on August 19, 2020, and May 24, 2021, respectively; one in Guinea in 2021; two in Guinea-Bissau in 2022 and 2025; one in Burkina Faso in 2022; and one in Niger. There was also a failed coup in the Republic of Benin on December 7, 2025 (Chilaka & Peter, 2022; Maclean, 2022; Alder, 2025). The exit from ECOWAS, the reluctance to embrace transition to democratic governance among these states, and the offering of safe passage by neighboring states to plotters of unsuccessful coup attempts may embolden other countries with similar sentiments, potentially leading to further fragmentation in ECOWAS. In fact, a recent military coup occurred in Guinea-Bissau on November 26, 2025, and it was immediately suspended by the AU (McMakin & Sambu, 2025). ECOWAS and other schemes in Africa must not only condemn but also take serious actions to deal with perpetrators of coups to serve object lessons to those nursing the ambition to overthrow legitimate democratic governments.

Security Concerns

In 2019, leaders of West African countries adopted the ambitious 2020-2024 Priority Action Plan to Eradicate Terrorism in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Region. The exit raises serious concerns about the implementation of this project and about the security of the sub-region, especially in the fight against terrorism and other organized crimes. The exit of the Sahel states means that they will not take part in and benefit from the

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

coordinated and combined efforts by the ECOWAS to establish a sub-regional force of 5,000 troops as part of a broader regional security strategy to curb terrorism and cross-border crimes (Obiezu, 2025). The expunging of French forces, who hitherto were helping to fight and combat terrorism in the subregion, would diminish the security architecture of the area. Furthermore, the exit of these states from ECOWAS will make it very difficult for these things to be met in a manner that would allow speedy deployment.

Economic implication

ECOWAS was created to enlarge and expand the sub-regional market, which was hitherto rigid and segmented, ensure free movement of people and factors of production, and enhance their bargaining power on the continent and in the world. The loss of the Sahel states means that ECOWAS will lose an estimated 76 million of its 446 million people and more than half of its total geographical area. ECOWAS provided a platform for free movement of people and goods within the sub-region. With the breakaway of the AES, the stability of trade and economic relations within the sub-region would be at risk. There will be an introduction of restrictions on movement, trade, and border controls, which could further exacerbate economic hardship in these countries already struggling with the consequences of conflict and humanitarian crises (Zanns, 2025).

Although intra-ECOWAS trade has been low, the exit of the Sahel states would further affect the volume of trade in ECOWAS as well as reduce ECOWAS' trade with Sahel states. Both the Sahel states and ECOWAS will be impacted.

The implications of exit are most obvious for trade relations because the trio is leaving the ECOWAS customs union. Since 2015, import tariffs for intra-ECOWAS goods were eliminated, and a common external tariff (CET) with five tariff bands was levied on imports from non-ECOWAS countries regardless of the first port of entry into the group. As a consequence of their expected departure, the AES trio will be obligated to adhere to the CET rates for their imports into ECOWAS and revert to using the WTO's Most Favored Nation rates on imports from ECOWAS countries. They will be further hurt by the community levy, a 0.5% tax ECOWAS imposes on goods from non-ECOWAS member states to fund the bloc's budget (Resnick. 2025). In the area of food security, the exit of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) might have severe consequences. Since the AES countries are landlocked, the economic impact from the tariff increases and the loss of coastal port access in Dakar, Cotonou, Abidjan, Tema, Lagos, and Lomé will be worse for them than for their remaining ECOWAS counterparts. For instance, almost 60% of Burkina Faso's vegetable exports and 90% of its live animal exports go to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. Onions are one of Niger's main exports, with Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin making up its main export markets. Moreover, the decision may have unintended consequences for the AES countries' goal of combating security concerns; when Mauritania left ECOWAS in 2000, the resulting differences between tariffs and trade rules fueled smuggling and corruption that was used as a source of revenue for militant groups in the region (Resnick, 2025).

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges faced by African states making the transition to democratic governance should not be seen as an invitation to military juntas to use the barrel of the gun to overthrow the elected governments. Democracy has inbuilt mechanisms and processes for addressing challenges and problems in society; these mechanisms and processes should be encouraged to take place. It is clear from the histories of many African states that have had military regimes that those regimes did not offer any alternative path to their development. Based on the foregoing, the study makes the following recommendations:

ECOWAS must continue to encourage democratic governance by encouraging and creating democratic institutions such as the rule of law, conflict resolution intervention mechanisms, and regular free and fair elections.

Condemn and punish member states under military regimes. The punishment could range from sanctions to outright expulsion from the group. ECOWAS must be steadfast in its resolve in keeping to its protocols on democratic governance in the region.

Member States must desist from offering safe passage or harboring unsuccessful coup juntas. On the contrary, juntas of failed coups should either be extradited to the countries where they perpetrated the coups or tried in the national courts of the host countries. Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger must be condemned for offering safe passage to Lt. Col. Pascal Tigri who organized the failed coup in Benin and was granted a stay in Niger (Habib, 2025; Ibrahim, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the implications of the exit of the Sahelian states from ECOWAS. Using the theoretical frameworks of liberal institutionalism and economic integration and a qualitative historical descriptive and content analysis methodology, the paper concluded that there are potential implications in various areas, including trade, economic, political and security architecture. The AES would be treated as a non-member of ECOWAS and would therefore lose all the benefits of economic integration. Furthermore, the exit of AES and its suspension from the AU would in the mid and long term affect its bargaining stature in Africa and global politics.

REFERENCES

African Union. (2024, January 29). *Communiqué of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the announcement of the immediate withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).* https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20240130/communique-withdrawal-three-ecowas-member-states

Alder, N. (2025). Benin coup attempt updates: Interior minister says coup attempt thwarted https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/12/7/benin-attempt-coup-live-soldiers-on-state-tv-claim-to-have-toppled-talon

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Al Jazeera (2023). https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/22/african-union-suspends-niger-with-immediate-effect-for-july-26-coup

BBC (2024). Three military-run states leave West African bloc - what will change? https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c5yvd91j72eo

Benson, E.A. (2022). Here are 15 most underdeveloped countries in Africa. *Business Insider Africa*. https://africa.businessinsider.com/local/lifestyle/15-most-underdeveloped-countries-in-africa-based-on-uns-human-development-index/d3fznt5

CDS Africa (2025). Restoring Democratic Governance in Mali: A Call to Collective Action https://www.cdsafrica.org/restoring-democratic-governance-in-mali-a-call-to-collective-action/

Chilaka, F.C. & Peter, T.O. (2022). Resurgence of military coups in West Africa: Implications for ECOWAs. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities,* 5(2) pp. 52 – 64. DOI:10:52589/AJSSHRw9F5VAXE

ECOWAS (2001). 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. https://www.eisa.org/pdf/ecowas2001protocol.pdf

ECOWAS Protocol Review. (2024). Legal Analysis of the Protocol on Democracy and Governance:
The Limits of Intervention. *ECOWAS Legal Journal, 12*(1), 5-29.

ECOWAS (1993) Revised Treaty. https://ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Revised-treaty-1.pdf Article 3, pp. 10-11)

ECOWAS (2024). Priority Action to Plan to eradicate Terrorism in the ECOWAS region 2020 – 2024. https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Priority-action-plan-to-eradicate-terrorism-in-the-ECOWAS-region-2020-2024.pdf

ECOWAS http//: ecowasstats.ecowas.int; https//: ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=15
(Burkina Faso); https//:ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=8 (Mali); https//:ecowasstats.ecowas.int/Browsedata.aspx?id=9 (Niger)

Fearon, J.D. (1998). Bargaining enforcement and international cooperation. *International Organization*, 52, 2, pp. 269 – 305.

Habib, G (2025). Leader of failed Benin coup reportedly hiding in Togo. https://punchng.com/leader-of-failed-benin-coup-reportedly-hiding-in-togo/

Ibrahim, O. (2025). Benin coup plotter Pascal Tigri traced to Niger, as accusing fingers pointed at President Tchiani. https://newsng.ng/benin-coup-plotter-pascal-tigri-traced-to-niger-as-accusing-fingers-pointed-at-president-tchiani/

Institute of Security Studies (2025). Burkina Faso: progress and problems after two years of transition https://issafrica.org/iss-today/burkina-faso-progress-and-problems-after-two-years-of-transition

Johnson, T & Andrew Heiss, A. (2018). Liberal Institutionalism. In Weiss, T. and Wilkinson, R (eds.)
International Organization and Global Governance, 2nd. Routledge.

Keohane, R.O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy.* Princeton University Press.

Keohane, R.O. & Victor, D.G. (2011). The Regime complex for climate change. *Perspectives on Politics*, 9, (1), 7 – 23. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592710004068

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV

Keohane, R.O. & Martin,L.L. (1995). The promise of institutionalist theory. *International Security*, 22(1), 39 – 51. DOI:10.2307/2539214

Mudge, L. (2025) A Bleak Future for Democracy in Niger National Commission Calls for a Minimum 5-

Year Transition, Amnesty for Coup Leaders. https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/02/21/bleak-future-democracy-niger

Maclean, R. (2022). Five African Countries. Six Coups. Why Now? ***New York Times***
https://www.nytimes.com/article/burkina-faso-africa-coup.html

McMakin, W & ASSANA Sambu, A. (2025). African Union suspends Guinea-Bissau after coup and former president flees to Republic of Congo *AP News.* https://apnews.com/article/guineabissau-african-union-coup-4b9c1c983ec563534cab435436f2ebad

Obiezu, T. (2025). ECOWAS regional bloc activates counterterror force. https://www.voanews.com/a/ecowas-regional-bloc-activates-counterterror-force/8008619.html

Orrell, H. (2025). The region with more 'terror deaths' than rest of world combined https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8vyl3j5kko

Oumarou, M. (2023). *Security Failure and the Erosion of Legitimacy: A Citizen's Perspective on the Sahelian Coups.* Niamey: Niamey Research Institute.

Poast, P. (2012). Does issue linkage work? Evidence from European Alliance Negotiations, 1860 to 1945. *International Organization*, 66(2), 277 – 310. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818312000069

Resnick, D. (2025). The ECOWAS breakup: Implications for West African food security and regional cooperation. https://africa.ifpri.info/2025/01/29/the-ecowas-breakup-implications-for-west-african-food-security-and-regional cooperation/#:~:text=Since%202015%2C%20import%20tariffs%20for%20intra-ECOWAS%20goods%20were,the%20first%20port%20of%20entry%20into%20the%20bloc

Reuters. (2024, January 28). *Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger quit West African bloc ECOWAS.* Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-africa-bloc-announces-formal-exit-three-junta-led-states-2025-01-29/

Think Tank European Parliament (2024). 'Sahelexit' in West Africa Implications for ECOWAS and the EU https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762295/EPRS_BRI(2024)762295_EN.pdf

Zanns, U.A. (2025). The Implications of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger's exit from ECOWAS. https://humanglemedia.com/the-implications-of-burkina-faso-mali-and-nigers-exit-from-ecowas/ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ECOWAS#Structure

Article DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV
DOI URL: https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-TV9VBFCV