

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in Preventing the Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Many African countries underwent a shift from military to civilian leadership in the 1990s in response to calls for democratic changes from both domestic and international arenas. Unfortunately, the military dictatorship has made a comeback in Africa with a stunning surge of new military coups that have succeeded, along with several failed or abandoned attempts. Six (6) successful coups in the West African sub-region between 2012 and 2023 have complicated attempts to shed the region's image as a "coup belt." This research is primarily qualitative. For this research, the researcher used the qualitative research method by reviewing books, articles, and online interviews. This study aims to examine and challenge the ideas, theories, and policies that the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) has implemented to thwart the rise in military takeovers in the region. The research also covers the military's functions and how military action affects civil society. Considering the reasons, which include diminishing optimism, growing levels of insecurity, falling economies, and persistently low performance in human development, the research study concludes with these findings. The Economic Community of West African States and other relevant stakeholders that are interested in reducing military coups should invest more in finance. Rather than trying to employ coercive tactics to end the ongoing military coups in West Africa. In the same vein, they should also focus on resolving the root causes of conflicts and investing in local communities, rather than sacrificing them for hidden geo-strategic interests or agendas.

Keywords: Military coup, ECOWAS, Democracy, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

(ECOWAS) was established as a regional economic community whose primary aim was to facilitate trade among its members. However, as conflicts expanded throughout the region, ECOWAS also began to prioritize a military agenda. The incapacity to focus only on regional economic integration and the connection between peace, security, and economic advancement are among the lessons that may be drawn from Liberia and Sierra Leone. Since the 1990s, with the adoption of legal frameworks such as the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, ECOWAS has provided military, mediation, and peace-building support to its member states (Mills, 2022).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has a strong record of setting regional norms on governance and democracy (Musah, 2023). Yet the organization now faces significant challenges in how to reorient its role and credibility amid a rise in the military and "constitutional" or "civilian coup" coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and most recently, Niger. The two (constitutional coup or civilian coup) refer to how civilian rulers act in a way that is so military that it undermines democratic procedures. In this

instance, the political leaders, who are civilians, are hesitant to permit an easy political transition and are manipulating the laws of the state to abuse their position of authority (Dagia, 2022).

These efforts have often come up short, particularly when it comes to preventing and responding to coups. Until recently, West Africa had appeared to have shed its history of coups and to be on a path toward more peaceful transfers of power. Unfortunately, from 2012 to 2023, there seems to be an upward trend of coups and coup attempts, with the most recent ones being in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Niger. ECOWAS's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, adopted in 2001, has an approach for tackling such an unconstitutional takeover. The protocol also includes provisions about democratic governance in the ECOWAS member states, including election regulations, judicial independence, and military neutrality. But even though all ECOWAS members are signatories to the protocol, some are failing to adhere to these stipulations (Mills, 2022)

While ECOWAS's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance does state that "every accession to power must be made through free, fair, and transparent elections," with zero tolerance for heads of state who obtain power through unconstitutional means, if a leader can prove they were elected through the ballot box, their regime is legitimized. This narrow framing of democracy allows leaders to circumvent critiques that they are defying rules as long as an election has taken place (ECOWAS, 2001). This dilemma results from both the structure of ECOWAS and the individuals who are now working for the national governments. The most prominent example of this is the need for the chairman of ECOWAS to be a head of state in power. Even leaders who obtained power via coups have been selected for this position, effectively legitimizing their rule. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that the researcher seeks to investigate the role of ECOWAS in countering the resurgence of military coups in West Africa.

Statement of Problem

In response to the deteriorating security situation in Western Africa, the international community is extending assistance. However, insecurity has recently spread to West Africa via nations from other West African sub-regions, including Ghana, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Ivory Coast. Mali used to be the region's epicenter for terror attacks, but that is no longer the case as Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Niger have emerged as the new hotspots for instability (United Nations, 2020). As a result, there have been several military deployments globally and locally. Despite the deployments, terrorist incidents have continued to occur. As the ECOWAS and its allies are devising innovative strategies to contain the pandemic, a resurgence of coup d'état in the region poses a threat to further destabilize the already precarious situation. The most recent coup took place in Niger in July 2023 and saw the forcible removal of President Mohamed Bazoum, who was democratically elected. This was the sixth coup in three years in West Africa (Brooke-Holland, 2023). Most of the countries affected by these recent coups are at the forefront of the fight against terrorism and violent extremism.

Given the current perilous security situation, there are concerns that terrorist organizations may use the uncertain political climate to consolidate their hold and move to other parts of West Africa and outside. With the escalating insecurity and a resurgence of military coups in the West African regions, there is a need for ECOWAS to be more attentive in their methods of combating terrorism and coups in West Africa., with a regional focus on the problem of the return to favor of military coups in West Africa.

Literature Review

This research is built on the foundations already laid by several works on the vocation of ECOWAS in the face of the 'return of the uniform to politics' (Coups d'États en Afrique: Le retour de l'uniforme en politique", 2022). Our review of the literature will therefore be structured around the scientific debate on the issue, which has a regional impact on the problem of the return to favour of military coups in West Africa.

A December 2021 Kofi Annan Foundation Report by E. Gyimah-Bouadi entitled “Democratic Retrenchment in West Africa: Characteristics, Causes, and Solutions” provides an overview of democratic developments in West Africa in recent years to support and contextualize the discussion. It presents a brief history of post-Cold War democratic consolidation in West Africa, assesses and seeks to explain the recent decline in democratic norms and values; and highlights the democratic peace dividend in West Africa and the links between democracy, human rights, and security. The author’s overview, in the form of an assessment and an outline of potential solutions, has its merits, even though the backward slide in democracy to which the author refers is the result of the resurgence of other means of devolving power in Africa after a more or less controversial assessment of the democratisation processes, among which military coups feature prominently.

In an article published in Policy Brief in August 2022 entitled “The role of ECOWAS in the management of internal political and security crises in its member states”, author Oumnia (Boutaleb, 2022) analyses the role of ECOWAS in the management of conflicts that took place at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, which is of key importance. Since its creation, the regional organization has represented the symbol of democratic progress in its member countries, but it is now facing a setback in terms of democratic governance and influence. It has established itself as the most advanced continental organization in terms of peace-building. However, West Africa has been marked by a backward slide in democracy over the past two years. With their terms of office coming to an end, some leaders have taken measures to keep them in power beyond the legal deadlines set by the constitutions of their respective countries. Faced with the recent political crises in the region and the impact on democracy in several states, the ECOWAS authorities have failed to find solutions to these abuses, indicating a loss of power and influence of the regional organization in maintaining peace and security.

In a special issue of the Bulletin FrancoPaix entitled “Coups d’États en Afrique: le retour de l’uniforme en politique”, published by the Raoul-Dandurand Chair in Strategic Studies, the authors of this article highlight the caricatured approaches of certain schools of thought in analyzing theories of military-civilian relations, where the former is generally perceived as the executioner of the latter. This perception contrasts with the scenes of popular jubilation that accompany the so-called “new putschists.”. From a completely different angle, another dichotomy is presented; between the normative idealism to which African regional institutions cling and political realism in the face of putschists, and on this point in particular, not finding sufficient satisfaction in the authors’ developments, we intend to forge theses well’, in much greater depth, we hope, to have more elements to identify this dichotomy between normative idealism and political realism of African regional and sub-regional institutions in the face of the exasperation of putschs.

Conceptual and Theoretical Grounding

The rise in military takeovers in West Africa, especially in the last few years under the banner of “the new generation of putschists,” has tended to draw attention to the role of sub-regional integration bodies, most notably the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The scope of these events, beyond their rationales or even their bases, contributes to the international perception of Africa as nearly permanently vulnerable to political instability. Realist theory has been a dominant concept in international relations, with classical realists like Morgenthau and modern structural realists like Waltz contributing significantly. Realism views world politics as shaped by self-interested rational states competing for power and influence, with morality and ideals playing little role in state behavior. This perspective challenges liberal assumptions of a “democratic peace” emerging through compliance with norms and institutions.

Classical realists focused on the inherent selfishness of states and tendencies towards aggression and violence in a dangerous Hobbesian struggle for survival. International norms and cooperation were seen as fragile against the pursuit of interests defined in terms of power. They also saw power balancing as key in great power politics during and after the Cold War.

However, Waltz and other structural realists diverged in seeing system structure rather than human nature as the cause of violent competition. They saw state interests and rationales for power being dictated less by leaders and more by the constraints of a decentralized international order and pressures on survival. Factors of power, alliances for security, and a balance of threat are used to explain balancing coalition states for or against cohesion.

John J. Mearsheimer Expects states to aggressively pursue expansion of power whenever opportunities arise, suggesting states should exploit any opening from coups and state weakness. However, collective interests in stability may check individual ambitions at times (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Realist perspectives on international institutions like ECOWAS emphasize how they reflect and foster the interests of stronger states rather than transcending national interests or binding state behavior contrary to interests. This cynicism extends to the optimism of overcoming security dilemmas through community building at the regional level, as military advantages remain zero-sum.

Evaluating ECOWAS responses and impediments to addressing coups through a realist lens would emphasize the misalignment of interests between potential regional hegemon, extra-continental partners, and coup initiators themselves in destabilized states.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology chosen for this research is qualitative, using previously published research papers, articles, and books. The emphasis has been put on the examination of documents, books, newspapers magazines, internet websites, policy documents, and ECOWAS Publications In addition, interviews were obtained through online interviews with selected key informants from the ECOWAS region. The informants were mainly former ECOWAS officials directly involved in responding to recent coups, diplomats engaged in mediation efforts, deposed political leaders, civil society advocates monitoring regional democracy issues, and experts who have advised ECOWAS institutions. After the data collection and classification analysis have been carried out using descriptions based on logic and reasoning,

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The reasons why are there coups in West Africa with the existence of the ECOWAS Protocol on democracy and good governance.

The ongoing mismatch in civil-military relations and the fragility of democratic institutions in many West African countries continue to foster coups despite the ECOWAS Protocol on democracy and good governance. Stable democracies, which are often lacking in these places, require civilian control over the armed forces, according to Huntington's 1957 theory. Moreover, the establishment of strong democratic institutions is a prerequisite for the consolidation of democracy, as stressed by (O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986). These views are supported by the data, which demonstrate that in times of political turmoil, the military may act disproportionately when civilian oversight is lacking. A climate that is conducive to coups is produced by the combination of weak democratic institutions and loose military control.

In a similar vein, the democratic deficit theory and talks about governance failures are consistent with the decline in public confidence in democratic institutions as a result of these failures. According to (Pippa Norris, 2011) problems with governance, such corruption and poor leadership, are a factor in the public's

loss of faith in democratic institutions. According to (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010), public disillusionment is cultivated by widespread unhappiness resulting from government failures. The study's conclusions support these hypotheses by demonstrating how problems like corruption and poor leadership breed discontent among the populace and create an environment in which the military is perceived as a likely means of reestablishing order.

On the other hand, Theories about international agreements and compliance are consistent with the shortcomings in protocol enforcement. According to (Huth, Croco, & Appel, 2011) member states' constant execution and enforcement of international accords is what determines their effectiveness. According to Keohane's compliance theories (1984), agreements must be followed consistently in order for their goals to be met. The study's conclusions support these arguments by showing that the Protocol's deterrent impact against coups is weakened by inconsistent application and enforcement of the law. Disparities in execution among participating nations compromise the legitimacy and deterrent potential of the Protocol.

Likewise, failure to address underlying socioeconomic grievances and institutional weaknesses resonates with theories on the root causes of political instability and conflict. (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998) Stresses that addressing underlying socioeconomic grievances is crucial to preventing political instability. (Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, September 17, 2013) Highlight the role of weak institutions in perpetuating political instability. The study's findings align with these theories, emphasizing the significance of tackling socioeconomic disparities and institutional weaknesses to effectively prevent coups. The absence of proactive measures addressing these fundamental issues limits the Protocol's effectiveness in averting political instability.

This theme corresponds to theories of political culture and historical legacies (ALMOND & VERBA, 1963) discuss how historical experiences shape political culture, influencing attitudes toward coups. Additionally, studies on historical legacies (Przeworski, 2005) highlight their impact on contemporary political attitudes. The study's findings resonate with these theories, indicating that historical cycles of political instability and the acceptance of past coups as viable means for change contribute to the perpetuation of coup cycles.

The study's findings, substantiated by established theories and supporting literature, underscore the complex interplay of factors contributing to persistent coups in West Africa. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands comprehensive reforms encompassing civilian-military relations, governance improvements, institutional strengthening, and alterations in political culture to foster sustainable democratic stability.

How ECOWAS is preventing coups?

The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance stands as a fundamental instrument for ECOWAS, aiming to thwart coups by institutionalizing democratic principles and prohibiting unconstitutional seizures of power. This aligns with theories emphasizing the role of legal frameworks in preventing democratic backsliding. (Norris & Mattes, 2004) Argue that legal frameworks can help safeguard democratic systems. The findings support this notion, indicating the Protocol's role in promoting democratic values and dissuading military interventions. However, the uneven enforcement of consequences for violations resonates with theories of international law and compliance. Keohane (1984) discusses how inconsistent application weakens the effectiveness of international agreements. Similarly, the study's findings highlight that, despite the Protocol's foundational role, inconsistent enforcement across member states diminishes its deterrent effect against coups. Additionally, the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Mechanism (ECOWARN) serves as a proactive approach to identify and address threats to stability, including coup risks. This aligns with theories of conflict prevention and peace building. (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011) Discuss early warning systems as essential tools for preventing conflicts. Similarly, the findings

highlight ECOWARN's role in detecting and addressing potential threats, including coup risks. Yet, the variable operational effectiveness echoes literature on the challenges of early warning systems in diverse contexts. (Lischer, 2007) Discusses the complexities and limitations of early warning systems in conflict prevention. The study's findings emphasize the need for improved coordination and responsiveness within ECOWARN to enhance its efficacy in preventing coups.

Also, ECOWAS engages in electoral monitoring to uphold democratic processes and pre-empt potential instability leading to coups. This aligns with theories of democratic peace building. (Norris, Cameron, & Wynter, Electoral Integrity in America: Securing Democracy, 2018) Emphasizes the role of election monitoring in safeguarding democracy. The findings echo this, highlighting the importance of observer missions in ensuring transparent and credible elections. However, challenges in ensuring immediate crisis resolution align with the literature on the limitations of observer missions. (Birch, Daxecker, & Ho'glund, 2020) Discusses the challenges of election observer missions in achieving immediate conflict resolution. The study underscores the need for ECOWAS to not only monitor but also effectively address electoral shortcomings to prevent subsequent instability and potential coups.

ECOWAS, as an institution, deploys sanctions and suspensions as deterrents and accountability measures against coup plotters. This aligns with theories of coercive diplomacy and international intervention. (Pape, 1997) Discusses how coercion can influence state behavior. Similarly, the study's findings highlight ECOWAS' readiness to employ diplomatic and, if necessary, military means to restore democratic governance. However, uneven enforcement challenges the effectiveness of these measures, resonating with theories on the limitations of sanctions in diverse political landscapes. (Drezner, 2003) Discusses the challenges of effective sanction enforcement. The study underscores the importance of consistent and decisive enforcement of sanctions to serve as credible deterrents against coups.

Similarly, it resorts to diplomatic leverage and mediation to defuse tensions that might precipitate coups. This aligns with theories of conflict resolution and mediation (Bercovitch & Jackson, 2009) emphasize mediation's role in resolving conflicts. Similarly, the study's findings highlight their diplomatic interventions as responsive measures. Nonetheless, challenges in achieving swift and lasting resolutions resonate with theories on the complexities of mediation. (Wallenstein & Svensson, 2014) Discusses the limitations and challenges of mediation efforts in achieving lasting peace. The study underscores the need for enhanced regional coordination and context-specific strategies tailored to each crisis for effective mediation outcomes.

ECOWAS employs multifaceted strategies encapsulated within the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWARN, electoral monitoring, sanctions, and diplomatic interventions to prevent coups. These strategies, aligned with established theories on conflict prevention, coercion, mediation, and legal frameworks, offer a comprehensive approach. However, challenges in enforcement, operational effectiveness, and achieving lasting resolutions underscore the need for enhanced coordination, responsiveness, and consistent application of these strategies to effectively deter military coups in the region.

ECOWAS response to the latest coups in West Africa

An analysis of the findings indicates that ECOWAS has swiftly condemned coup attempts and applied sanctions against perpetrators, showcasing a commitment to anti-coup norms embedded in the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. This aligns with theories on international norms and institutions. (Finnemor & Sikkink, 1998) Discuss how international norms influence state behavior. Similarly, the study's findings emphasize ECOWAS' commitment to upholding democratic principles through explicit condemnations. However, challenges in the effectiveness of sanctions resonate with literature on the limitations of coercive diplomacy. (Pape, 1997) Discusses the variable impact of coercion, reflecting the study's findings that despite swift condemnations and sanctions, their effectiveness has been inconsistent

due to varying political landscapes and uneven adherence to democratic principles among member states.

Additionally, gaps in uniformity and decisiveness in enforcement pose challenges to ECOWAS' coup response, allowing the entrenchment of extra-legal regimes. This aligns with theories of international organizations and enforcement mechanisms. (Abbott & Snidal, 2000) Discuss the challenges faced by international organizations in achieving consistent enforcement. Likewise, the study's findings highlight the limited deterrent effect due to inconsistencies in enforcement across member states. The observations emphasize the necessity for greater coherence in the application of anti-coup measures and regional coordination to strengthen the efficacy of sanctions.

However, ECOWAS encounters difficulties in translating condemnations and penalties into timely restoration of constitutional governance post-coups. This aligns with theories of conflict resolution and post-conflict transitions. (Paris, 2004) Discusses the challenges of transitioning from conflict to stable governance. Similarly, the study's findings underscore the complexities and internal dynamics hindering immediate resolutions after ECOWAS interventions. Restoring constitutional rule demands managing complex internal dynamics and navigating resistance within these countries, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches and sustained engagement.

The findings reveal that the intricate internal political landscapes within countries experiencing coups pose substantial challenges to ECOWAS' crisis response. This aligns with theories of state fragility and internal conflict. (Rotberg, 2002) Discusses the complexities of fragile states and their governance challenges. Similarly, the study's findings highlight resistance from military or political factions and divergent interests among stakeholders hindering the restoration of constitutional rule. Transformative governance restoration requires not only elections but also structural reforms addressing underlying tensions and fragmented interests.

Moreover, the fragility leading to coup reversals emphasizes the necessity for sustained regional engagement and enhanced mediation leadership from ECOWAS. This aligns with theories of conflict resolution and mediation. (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2011) Discuss the importance of sustained engagement and dialogue in conflict resolution. Likewise, the study's findings emphasize the value of sustained dialogue and deeper engagements with conflicting parties for successful returns to constitutional rule. Building common visions from fragmentation necessitates sustained partnerships and expertise in navigating transitional processes.

ECOWAS' responses to coups involve swift condemnations, sanctions, and mediation efforts, aligned with established theories on international norms, conflict resolution, and state fragility. However, challenges in enforcement coherence, navigating internal dynamics, and sustained engagement highlight the complexities in restoring constitutional order post-coups. Addressing these challenges requires nuanced approaches, sustained engagement, and strengthened regional coordination within ECOWAS.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals the reasons behind military coups in West Africa, despite regional prohibitions. It highlights the imbalanced civil-military relations and fragile democratic institutions, which allow military factions to interfere in political affairs. The lack of civilian oversight mechanisms, executive dominance, and weaknesses in checks and balances also contribute to the persistence of coups. Governance grievances from corruption, inequality, and leadership failures have eroded public trust in democratic systems, making coups an appealing alternative for some military leaders.

The ECOWAS Protocol's anti-coup provisions have been weakened by gaps in adherence and enforcement, and the absence of efforts to address root socioeconomic disparities and fragility risks has allowed coups to

emerge as manifestations of misery and alienation. The study suggests that breaking this paradigm requires fostering conditions where coups lose validity through people-centered governance.

ECOWAS has principles against military political seizures, but bridging ambitions with outcomes requires enhanced coordination, enforcement consistency, and context-specific support for democratic processes. Sustaining stability requires multilayered initiatives fortifying inclusive institutions to meet citizens' needs. Preventing reversions to unconstitutional orders interrupting constitutional rule requires comprehensive measures buttressing civic structures against fragility. The study suggests opportunities for ECOWAS to actualize intentions through operationalized architecture and accountability mechanisms. Concerted regional-national efforts upholding democracy's credibility through justice and participation can nurture prosperity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ECOWAS Institutions and Representatives:

ECOWAS should create a committee or oversight body specifically tasked with monitoring and ensuring that the Protocol is implemented and upheld consistently throughout all of its member countries. This body must have the authority to investigate violations, ensure that democratic principles are being followed, and, if necessary, recommend or impose sanctions.

Investing in technological advancements and institutional capacity-building will increase ECOWAS's forecasting ability. This might include establishing a common intelligence hub, improving information-sharing guidelines, and promptly notifying member nations.

Establish an ECOWAS Mediation Task Force comprised of experienced diplomats, lawyers, and conflict resolution experts. This task force should be equipped with the necessary resources to be sent out swiftly to countries experiencing coups.

National governments within ECOWAS:

National governments ought to set up systems for thorough civilian supervision of the armed forces, with a focus on adherence to constitutional requirements, professional growth, and ethical education. This entails establishing a culture of respect for civilian authority, strengthening accountability frameworks, and clearly defining military tasks within democratic administration.

National governments must place a high premium on institutional reforms that protect democratic institutions' independence and strengthen the rule of law. Examples of this include judicial independence, anti-corruption groups, legislative oversight, and electoral commissions. Building upon these pillars can strengthen administrative legitimacy while decreasing the appeal of military intervention.

Political parties, the military, civic society, and ethnic groups should all be included in inclusive discussions and reconciliation procedures that are prioritized by national governments. National reconciliation commissions or forums can be established to foster communication, resolve complaints, and foster agreement on transitional plans. These programs can lessen tensions following a coup and promote societal cohesiveness.

Civil Society Organizations:

Civil society organizations ought to step up their campaigns inside national governments to promote accountability, transparency, and good governance. This entails keeping an eye on government operations, closely examining policies, and vigorously promoting changes that increase accountability, reduce

corruption, and fortify democratic institutions.

Civil society organizations ought to concentrate on civic education initiatives that educate people about their rights and obligations and the value of actively engaging in democratic processes. To bring together a variety of stakeholders, such as political parties, community leaders, youth organizations, and marginalized groups.

Civil society organizations should establish impartial forums for discussion. These forums may be used to facilitate positive communication, settle disputes, and promote understanding amongst various social groupings.

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