

Ecowas Diplomacy and Political Conflict Management in West Africa: Lessons from the Gambia, and Côte D'ivoire.

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts over contested elections and power transitions have been significant challenges to democracy, peace and regional stability in West Africa. The study was a comparative analysis of the Gambia's 2016-2017 political crisis compared to Côte d'Ivoire's 2010-2011 post-election crisis, on the theme of ECOWAS diplomacy and political conflict management in West Africa. In particular, it reviewed and explored the nature, causes and dynamics of the conflicts, the nature of the diplomatic strategies used by ECOWAS, African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) and determinants of successful and unsuccessful diplomatic attempts in both situations. The study was of a qualitative research design and adopted the Conflict Resolution Theory as a theoretical framework. Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed journals, books, policy reports, and official ECOWAS, AU and UN documents from bases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate and Semantic Scholar. Qualitative content analysis and thematic categorization were used to analyzed the data. Fundamentals revealed that in the Gambia, there was an absence of ethnic polarization, coordinated regional response, sensitive mediation process, and conflicting geopolitical interests contributing to the non-militarized nature of the conflict; whereas, the Côte d'Ivoire conflict was triggered by such conditions as ethnic polarization, incoordinated regional response, weak mediation processes and disparate geopolitical interests, leading to the militarization of the conflict. The research also identified several benefits of ECOWAS's success in The Gambia, including strong regional consensus, constitutional validity and beneficial international partnerships. But these efforts were hindered in Côte d'Ivoire by divisions that went within the diplomatic community, as well as by slow action taken to prevent a crisis and counter-disabilities in enforcement. The study, therefore, proposed to increase the implementation of preventive diplomacy in the region, increase coordination between ECOWAS, AU and the UN actors, and enhance the status of democratic institutions to minimise political conflicts within the region.

INTRODUCTION

Political violence, electoral violence, constitutional crisis, and instability in governance have become a common phenomenon in Africa. However, over the years, elections, authoritarianism, ethnic tensions, military incursion in politics and lack of democracy have remained the sources of crises that have posed threats to peace and security in West Africa (Adebajo, 2002; Francis, 2009). These difficulties led to a reconfiguration of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from a purely economic body created in 1975 to a significant regional diplomatic and security body tasked with peacekeeping, mediation, preventative diplomacy, and promotion of democracy (ECOWAS, 1975; Hartmann, 2017). In 1999, ECOWAS became more involved in the management of political crises in its member states via the establishment of the Conflict Prevention Mechanism and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001. This development grew out of the increasing perception that instability in one country in West Africa can easily seep across borders through refugee flows, economic instability and regional insecurity (Murithi, 2009; Aning & Bah, 2010). As a result, ECOWAS became one of Africa's most active regional organizations in the mediation and diplomatic intervention of conflicts in the sub-region, such as those in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and the Gambia (Adebajo, 2015; Gambari, 2008).

The effectiveness of ECOWAS diplomacy in West Africa can be seen in the political crises in Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia. The political dynamics of Côte d'Ivoire were already highly unstable, rooted in ethnic conflict, citizenship exclusion, election-related disputes, and power struggles, which led to civil war and the violent post-election crisis in 2010-2011 following the rejection of the internationally accepted results of the elections by Laurent Gbagbo (Akindès, 2011; McGovern, 2011). Several peace talks and various diplomatic initiatives by ECOWAS, the AU and the UN failed to resolve the conflict, which led to numerous killings and a serious humanitarian crisis (Zounmenou & Lamin, 2011). The Gambia political crisis, however, was resolved within a short period of time, with ECOWAS applying preventive diplomacy, mediation and coordinated regional pressure to lead to the voluntary relinquishing of power by Yahya Jammeh, who had refused to accept the election results (Perfect, 2017; Jeng, 2018). The different outcomes have led to academic debates regarding the elements of effective regional diplomacy and the underlying causes, including political will, regional unity, legitimacy, cooperation of regional international organisations and the dynamics of the region (Souaré, 2014; Okeke, 2016).

The democratic transition process in the Gambia was relatively successful, whereas ECOWAS's role in Côte d'Ivoire was beset by difficulties in relation to the complexity of the conflict and the competing political interests. These contrasting experiences offer a significant opportunity to study the nature and the dynamics of political conflicts in both countries, the diplomatic moves of the AU, ECOWAS and UN, as well as the elements that influenced the effectiveness and failures of ECOWAS diplomatic interventions.

Statement of the Problem

Political conflicts fuelled by contested elections and disputed transfers of power have continued to pose a risk to regional stability and democratic governance, despite the growing importance of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in advancing peace, democracy and constitutional order in the region. The post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011) and the political impasse in the Gambia (2016-2017) were two significant political conflicts that challenged the effectiveness of ECOWAS diplomacy in managing conflict in the sub-region. In Côte d'Ivoire, the election defeat of incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo by Alassane Ouattara, the winner recognized by the international community, sparked violent confrontations, political unrest and a humanitarian crisis that reportedly resulted in more than 3,000 deaths and displaced more than one million people (Human Rights Watch, 2011; United Nations, 2011). In an effort to resolve the conflict, ECOWAS (along with the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN)) engaged in various forms of mediation, diplomatic dialogue and political pressure, but the crisis continued to worsen until finally a solution was found and armed confrontation broke out (Bassett, 2011; Piccolino, 2012).

The Gambia's political crisis of 2016 to 2017, however, was relatively brief to resolve, lasted only until the President, Yahya Jammeh, refused to accept the results of the presidential election, despite conceding the outcome; it was spurred by the use of preventive diplomacy, regional mediation, threats of Gambia being subject to sanctions, and coordinated pressure by ECOWAS and others, (Perfect, 2017; Hartmann, 2017). The differential impacts of these two crises have created doubts about the conditions that facilitate the success of ECOWAS diplomatic brokerage in dealing with political conflicts in West Africa. While many academic publications have addressed conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and democratization in West Africa, there has been only a limited amount of comparative work focused specifically on the diplomatic dimension of the ECOWAS interventions in the Côte d'Ivoire crisis of 2010-2011 and the Gambia crisis of 2016-2017. Existing research is either too broad in its scope to examine military intervention and electoral violence or too unbalanced in its explanation of the mechanisms and conditions that led to the two outcomes (Souaré, 2014; Arthur, 2010). In addition, the uncertainty about power transfer, political instability and election disputes, particularly in parts of West Africa, remains an obstacle to the credibility and consistency of ECOWAS in implementing the democratic norms and effectively resolving conflicts (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016). This situation presents an opportunity to understand the results of diplomacy, which was relatively successful in the Gambia but less successful in Côte d'Ivoire, despite the presence of similar regional and international actors. It is on this note that this study aims to explore the nature and dynamics of the political conflicts in the two countries, analyse the diplomatic strategies adopted by ECOWAS, the AU and the UN, and ascertain the factors that helped or hindered the effectiveness of ECOWAS diplomatic efforts in the Côte d'Ivoire and Gambia crises.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To examine the nature, causes, and dynamics of the political conflicts in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire.
- ii. To analyze the diplomatic strategies and mechanisms employed by ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) in managing the political conflicts in both cases.
- iii. To identify and compare the determinants that shaped the success and failure of ECOWAS diplomatic interventions in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively.

Scope of the Study

Content Scope

The study examines diplomacy as a tool for managing political conflicts in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire, with a focus on the 2010–2011 and 2016–2017 crises, respectively. It analyzes the diplomatic roles of ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN in resolving the conflicts.

Temporal Scope

The study is limited to the post-election conflict in Côte d'Ivoire (2010 – 2011) and the political crisis in The Gambia (2016 – 2017).

Geographical Scope

The study is geographically constrained to West Africa, with the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire being selected as case studies.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

The Concept of Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution

Diplomacy is a general term used to describe the process that states, regional organizations and international actors use to engage in dialogue, negotiations, mediation, persuasion, and other peaceful modes to manage inter-state relationships and resolve conflict without violence or war (Berridge, 2015; Satow, 1979). Nicolson (1963) defines diplomacy as the process of negotiating international affairs. According to Murithi (2009), diplomacy is a necessary instrument for facilitating dialogue, mediation, reconciliation and collective security in societies at risk of political turmoil and armed conflict.

Conflict resolution, in contrast, is the techniques and procedures which can be used to manage the root causes, processes and outcomes of conflict in a way that returns stability and stops further violence from occurring (Burton, 1990; Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2016). International relations recognises that, in addition to traditional state-to-state negotiations, diplomacy can also serve the goals of preventive, coercive, multilateral and regional diplomacy, as practised by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Bercovitch, 1996; Touval & Zartman, 2001). Diplomacy has gained greater significance in Africa, particularly in the face of frequent occurrences of political crises associated with allegations of electoral fraud, unconstitutional changes of government, ethnic divisions and the lack of democratic institutions (Adebajo, 2015; Francis, 2009).

ECOWAS, which began as an economic body, has now become a regional security and diplomatic body with a focus on conflict management in West Africa (Hartmann, 2017). Increasingly, ECOWAS has acted to resolve conflicts using tools such as mediation, peaceful talks, sanctions, peace agreements and preventive action in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and the Gambia, with a view to maintaining regional peace and democratic governance (Aning & Bah, 2010).

The concept of political conflict in West Africa

Political conflict in West Africa is a contestation of political power, authority, governance, legitimacy and control of political institutions, often manifesting in electoral violence, civil war, coup d'etat, constitutional crisis, ethnic tensions, separatist agitation and political representation problems (Adebajo, 2002; Francis, 2009). Coser (1956) believes that political conflict is a contest over values, status, power and scarce resources between two or more groups, in which the two groups fight against each other and try to defeat or destroy the other group. Politicized ethnic identities, uneven resource allocation, electoral manipulation, elite competition for state position and economic control are also factors that fuel political conflicts in Africa (Osaghae, 1998). Political conflict is not a strange occurrence in West Africa, particularly in countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and the Gambia (Aning & Bah, 2010). These countries have suffered from protracted civil wars, military coup d'état, electoral violence, terrorism and governance challenges that have led to the erosion of democratic institutions, economic underdevelopment, displacement of millions of individuals and a risk to regional peace and security (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Williams, 2014).

Other drivers of political instability in West Africa include weak democratic consolidation, high youth unemployment rates, corruption, poverty, identity politics, and unconstitutional prolonging of the powers (Joseph, 1999; Reno, 2011). Electoral conflict is another dimension of political conflict in the region; it is known to occur when political elites manipulate electoral processes, reject election results, or even go to the extent of undermining electoral institutions to ensure political control in the region (Adejumobi, 2000). In several West African nations, elections have turned into an arena for conflict instead of a tool for democratic change, as political participants increasingly view state power as the most important route to economic access, political access and patronage (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). This has led to elections that have been disputed, and political confrontations that have been violent in countries like Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011), Kenya (2007-2008), Nigeria (in multiple electoral cycles) and The Gambia (2016-2017) (Straus & Taylor, 2012).

ECOWAS and Regional Security Management

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is one of the leading regional groups in Africa in the areas of security management, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and diplomatic intervention. In general terms, regional security management is the combined action of participating states and regional bodies and entities that are implemented in the region to prevent, manage and resolve security threats to peace, stability and political order through diplomatic, political, military and institutional means (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Ayoob, 1995). In response to the occurrence of weak institutions, internal conflicts, transnational security threats, and some of the threats in Africa, Deng and Zartman (1991) suggest an increased need for regional security management. Created in 1975 under the Treaty of Lagos with the main objective of promoting economic integration and cooperation between the West African countries, the organisation became one of the most important security players within the region following a series of civil wars, military coups, refugee crises, electoral violence and political instability in the late 1980s (ECOWAS, 1975; Adebajo, 2002).

Aning and Bah (2010) state that the Liberian civil war of 1989 was a watershed in ECOWAS' transition from an economic community to a regional body actively engaged in peacekeeping and conflict resolution. The failure of the international community to respond quickly to the Liberian crisis forced ECOWAS to set up the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), one of the earliest regional peacekeeping forces in Africa (Adebajo, 2015). The result of this intervention was to put in place aspects of wider West African security duties and to highlight the wider interplay of Africa's insecurity between states - via refugee movements, arms trafficking, organized crime and economic disruption (Williams, 2014). Accordingly, ECOWAS has established several legal and institutional instruments in the area of regional security management, such as the Revised Treaty of 1993, the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security of 1999 and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of 2001 (Hartmann, 2017). The frameworks provided ECOWAS with the power to intervene in member states in cases of armed conflict, unconstitutional change of government, gross violation of human rights and threats to regional stability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory of conflict resolution

According to the theory of conflict resolution, conflicts often emerge from unmet human needs, structural inequalities, and competing political or economic interests (Burton, 1990). The theory argues that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through coercion or military force alone. Instead, lasting peace requires dialogue, negotiation, mediation, reconciliation, and institutional reforms that address the root causes of conflict (Ramsbotham et al., 2011). It also emphasizes the importance of trust, cooperation, and effective communication in resolving political disputes, especially in situations where legitimacy and power are contested.

Fisher and Ury (1981) identified negotiation as a key component of the theory, stressing that conflicting parties should be able to communicate directly in order to reach mutual agreements. They also highlighted mediation, where a neutral third party assists disputing actors in finding common ground and facilitating peaceful settlements. In addition to these mechanisms, the theory recognizes the role of diplomatic pressure, such as sanctions, political isolation, and other forms of non-violent coercion aimed at influencing the behaviour of parties in conflict (Zartman, 2001). Long-term peacebuilding is equally important, particularly through reconciliation processes and institutional reforms that strengthen democratic governance and stability (Lederach, 1997).

ECOWAS applied many of these conflict resolution mechanisms during the Gambian political crisis. The regional body employed negotiation, mediation, and diplomatic pressure in a coordinated manner, which contributed significantly to the peaceful transfer of power from Yahya Jammeh to Adama Barrow (Hartmann, 2017; Perfect, 2017). In contrast, the 2010–2011 post-election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire presented greater challenges. Coordination among national, regional, and international actors proved difficult, mediation efforts became fragmented, and diplomatic pressure was inconsistently applied. These shortcomings contributed to the escalation of violence during the crisis (Bassett, 2011; Piccolino, 2012).

The theory further explains that successful conflict resolution often depends on factors such as the willingness of parties to compromise, the credibility of mediators, and the presence of strong institutional support systems (Bercovitch & Gartner, 2009; Nathan, 2010). In The Gambia, these conditions were largely present, as ECOWAS worked closely with the African Union and the United Nations to pressure Jammeh into accepting electoral defeat (Jeng, 2018; Hartmann, 2017). This coordinated diplomatic effort strengthened the legitimacy of the intervention, upheld democratic principles, and prevented large-scale violence. However, in Côte d'Ivoire, deep political polarization, competing claims to legitimacy, and differing international interests weakened the effectiveness of negotiation and mediation efforts (Akindès, 2011; Zounmenou & Lamin, 2011). Eventually, the crisis was resolved through a combination of negotiations and military intervention after violence had already intensified (Human Rights Watch, 2011; McGovern, 2011).

The theory also acknowledges certain limitations in conflict resolution processes, including insincere negotiations, power struggles, and compromises that may deliver incomplete justice. For instance, although Jammeh was removed from power and exiled, he was not prosecuted for alleged human rights abuses committed during his rule (Perfect, 2017). Despite such limitations, Conflict Resolution Theory remains highly relevant to this study because it provides a useful framework for understanding how ECOWAS employed diplomatic tools such as negotiation, mediation, diplomatic pressure, and peacebuilding in managing the crises in both The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design was used for the study as it provides in-depth and contextual analysis of the ECOWAS diplomatic involvement in the political crisis in Gambia (2016-2017) and the post-election conflict in Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011). Only secondary sources of data were analyzed, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and documents from the ECOWAS, AU and UN that were accessed through searchable databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate and Semantic Scholar. The materials chosen were accessible and credible documents that appeared between 2000 and 2025 and clearly met the inclusion and

exclusion criteria, providing consistency, relevance and credibility of the data. The study centred on the comparative diplomacy of ECOWAS in Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa, and the role-play of the member states and international bodies like the AU and UN. Validity and reliability throughout the study were ensured through the systematic review procedures and through the consistent screening and predetermined thematic categories. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis and thematic categorization,

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The nature, causes, and dynamics of the political conflicts in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire.

The systematic literature noted the nature, causes and evolution of the political conflict in The Gambia (2016-2017) and Côte d'Ivoire (2010-2011). Both wars were brought about by electoral conflict but varied in degree of scale, complexity and impact.

Nature of the Political Conflicts

The Gambia

The presence of several factors contributed to a post-election political deadlock in the Gambia, especially as the president, Yahya Jammeh, refused to accept the very concession of the elections (Darboe, 2020). The crisis was described as political and constitutional rather than military, with both leaders, Jammeh and President-elect Adama Barrow (Bah), asserting their respective credibility as legitimate leaders (Fofanah, 2019; Camara, 2022). The conflict also caused a division at the institutional level in the judicial sector, public administration and security sector, which caused institutions to come to a standstill (Jallow 2019). The crisis was seen as predominantly civilian, but there was a risk of violence and instability from the influence of security forces that were loyal to Jammeh (Conteh, 2021). The conflict in totality was about transitioning back to democracy, rather than to entrenched authoritarianism.

Côte d'Ivoire

In fact, the Côte d'Ivoire conflict shifted from an election controversy to military confrontation between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara (Ahouangan, 2022). The conflict was more militarized than the Gambian conflict, with the involvement of militias, state security, and foreign actors (ISS Africa, 2021). Other scholars suggested that the problem emanated from that of ethnic polarization, of competing national identity, and political marginalization (Odobó et al., 2016). The crisis caused devastating humanitarian effects, such as the displacement and general violence (Jaye, 2005). In general, the conflict was a combination of political, military and socio-ethnic issues, leading to wider obstacles in its diplomatic solution.

Causes of the Political Conflicts

The Gambia

Yahya Jammeh's unwillingness to concede victory in the 2016 Gambia presidential election (Darboe, 2020) is the main reason for the conflict in the country. Other studies highlighted the root causes of the crisis as authoritarianism in government, centralism of power and the incapacity of democratic institutions in Haiti (Bah, 2019; Camara, 2022). In addition, there were also weak constitutional dispute resolution mechanisms which created tensions (Manneh, 2018). Further, there were stability is Structural aspects of governance and security, which further submerged instability (Jallow, 2019; Conteh, 2021). Moreover, polarization increased during the crisis with the spread of propaganda and misinformation by Jammeh's supporters (Janneh, 2020).

Côte d'Ivoire

Historical political, ethnic and institutional tensions in Côte d'Ivoire were the basis for the conflict in the country (Odobó et al. 2016). Electoral disputes and power struggles over legitimacy were the root causes of the crisis (Ahouangan, 2022). Overall, ethnic polarization and weak democratic institutions and poor handling of conflicts have been identified as important structural drivers (ISS Africa, 2021). Other factors that played into the

escalation of the conflict were the regional rivalries, financial crises and ineffective diplomatic efforts (Gnanguênon et al., 2025, Okere, 2015). In many instances, it was a case of total governance failure and a lack of resolution of socio-political issues.

Dynamics of the Political Conflicts

The Gambia

The conflict in Gambia went beyond an electoral level to one that involved the diplomacy of the region, calling for ECOWAS intervention (Darboe, 2020). This conflict developed due to the pressure from the diplomacy, the sanctions, and the recognition of Adama Barrow by various other countries as the rightful President of Gambia (Camara, 2022). The crisis also included making efforts to reach an agreement with security actors and pressuring Jammeh to step aside (Conteh, 2021). Religious and traditional leaders were very influential in diffusing tension and decreasing the risk of violence (Sanyang, 2018). Eventually, pressure from the region and military presence by ECOWAS resulted in the peaceful removal of Jammeh from office.

Côte d'Ivoire

The Ivorian conflict presented certain patterns of evolution towards violent armed confrontations (VAC) from political disagreement (Ahouangan, 2022). The conflict was compounded by the involvement of several militias, foreign actors, and different armed opposition groups against the government forces (ISS Africa, 2021). Frequently, diplomatic discussions were deadlocked as a result of the shortcomings in the implementation mechanisms and intra-ECOWAS member state divisions over issues (Gnanguênon et al., 2025). The Peace process was further complicated by the external geopolitical interests and the lack of credibility of the mediators (Anderson, 2025; IDEA/AU, 2010). This resulted in a long and bloody, undiplomatic war as well as one between tribes and the British.

The diplomatic strategies and mechanisms employed by ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) in managing the political conflicts in both cases.

Preventive Diplomacy

The Gambia

Preventive diplomacy in The Gambia was somewhat well organised, proactive and constituted, with early election monitoring, diplomatic engagement and issuance of warning signs by the ECOWAS before the outbreak of the crisis (Manneh, 2018; Camara, 2022). Yet, ECOWAS, through its constitutional instruments and the universal respect for democratic principles, ensured that its interventions were within the legal framework and maintained its credibility. Immediate and enthusiastic commitments were shown at the regional level by actors from Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana with regard to preventive measures (Darboe, 2020; Bah, 2019). The collective regional roles and warning instruments strengthened ECOWAS' ability to deal with conflicts early, so they will not worsen. Overall, preventive diplomacy in The Gambia proved to be effective, timely and coordinated in laying the groundwork for peaceful solutions to conflicts.

Côte d'Ivoire

The preventive diplomacy efforts, on the other hand, failed to be effective in Côte d'Ivoire, and often were conducted 'too little, too late,' to the extent that the situation deteriorated into violence, to ECOWAS's dismay (Ahouangan 2022). In the research, it has been established that there is no coordination of EWS with diplomatic interventions in the enforcement capability (Odobbo et al., 2016). ECOWAS lacked the political dynamics and powers to respond quickly and effectively in crisis prevention due to internal conflict (ISS Africa, 2021). The political and diplomatic process was also marred by regional responses that were fragmented and a lack of political consensus (Gnanguênon et al., 2025). Overall, preventive diplomacy did not prevent effective measures from being taken and has the potential to prevent it from spiralling into armed conflict.

Mediation

The Gambia

Mediation in The Gambia reflected a high level of regional cohesion and integration among the members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Darboe, 2020) and was organised and inclusive. Leaders of Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone were central in high-level talks with the two principals to facilitate the peaceful transfer of power, with both Jammeh and Barrow actively participating in peace talks. Another group of facilitators for dialogue and mitigating tension were traditional and religious leaders (Conteh, 2021; Sanyang, 2018). Mediation efforts were coordinated with the AU and the UN, which made the mediation efforts look legitimate and helped Barrow take the lead in his election victory (Camara, 2022). Much of this helped to make the Gambia mediation successful and led to a peaceful political transition.

Côte d'Ivoire

These highlighted factors of limited legitimacy of the mediator, lack of political polarization, and conflicting regional perceptions of the process all shaped the difficult context for mediation during Côte d'Ivoire's conflict (IDEA/AU, 2010; Ahouangan, 2022). The belligerents were fed up with the lack of trust among them, as some of the mediators were perceived as not neutral to ECOWAS. Moreover, external players such as France and the United Nations (UN) (ISS Africa, 2021) played a major role in the mediation process, undermining the mediation role of ECOWAS. Internal divisions among ECOWAS's member countries eroded the unity and power of the region in the negotiations (Gnanguênon et al., 2025). This, in turn, made it more difficult to achieve any mediation that would be effective in preventing escalation of the conflict.

Coercive Diplomacy

The Gambia

Sanctions, diplomatic isolation and credible military threats (Bah, 2019) resolved the Gambia crisis successfully. ECOWAS consolidated its position of strength by deploying ECOMIG troops to the country and managing pressure on Darboe (Jammeh) by other members of states in the region (Marcus 2020). Conformity was restricted by economic sanctions, constraints on flights, and restrictions on contact with Gambian security officials (Jallow, 2019). Having been able to diffuse possible resistance from the security sector, ECOWAS was not reported to have experienced any violence (Conteh, 2021). These actions were instrumental in helping Jammeh to step down peacefully as dictator.

Côte d'Ivoire

In Côte d'Ivoire, the use of coercive diplomacy was not as effective nor as well orchestrated as in The Gambia (Okere, 2015). ECOWAS lacked an eponymous enforcement mechanism, and there was a disagreement on the sanctions and military intervention policies (Odobo et al., 2016). There was also limited access to budgetary and other resources, and coercive measures were also not successful (Anderson, 2025). In this context, also other international military players, such as France and the UN (de Wet, 2013), were more powerful than ECOWAS was. It equally did not work against politicians and never prevented the escalation of the conflict into violence, so coercive diplomacy was deemed to be ineffective.

International Partnerships

The Gambia

At the same point, ECOWAS's demonstrated diplomacy, through international partnerships, proved to be a good thing in the Gambia crisis (Camara, 2022). Continued collaboration with AU, UN and bilateral partners enabled the credibility of the result in the Gambia's election of President Adama Barrow as the country's current President and a coordinated diplomatic response against Yahya Jammeh. There was less political ambiguity, and regional consensus was building, influenced by international actors (Bah, 2019). International partners were also instrumental in the fight against misinformation, as well as in bridging the gap to better transition into post-

conflict governance reform activities (Janneh, 2020; Mbye, 2021). Overall, the partnerships helped to enhance the effectiveness and credibility of ECOWAS intervention in The Gambia.

Côte d'Ivoire

Compared to Côte d'Ivoire, where the nature and composition of the partnerships are more diverse and complex, bringing less effectiveness to ECOWAS diplomacy (Ahouangan, 2022). In the midst of the crisis, however, strong external actors, such as France and the UN, have taken the place of ECOWAS's role (de Wet, 2013). Research revealed an ineffective coordination of the different actors in action due to conflicting needs and diverging geopolitical interests (Gnanguênon et al., 2025). Several kinds of engagement challenges arose, such as appointment of envoys, harmonisation of mandates and outside political pressures (IDEA/AU, 2010). Côte d'Ivoire, therefore, failed to achieve any positive results with its international co-operations in terms of ECOWAS' diplomatic autonomy and effectiveness.

The determinants that shaped the success and failure of ECOWAS diplomatic interventions in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively.

Strong Regional Consensus and Unified Position of ECOWAS Member States

One of the crucial factors that could contribute to the success of diplomacy in The Gambia was identified by Darboe (2020) as regional unity within the ECOWAS. According to Camara (2022), member countries expressed a joint message urging Yahya Jammeh to respect the decision of the elections and not spread alternative communication messages. The feeling of unity allowed the ECOWAS delegations to enjoy more credibility in their efforts and enhanced the combined pressure against Jammeh (Conteh, 2021). It also did not take place uniformly in the messages, which demoralized Gambian political leaders and security forces to think that they would have different responses from various ECOWAS respondents (Sanyang, 2018). Overall, the unity of the region gave a boost to the unity, legitimacy and effectiveness of ECOWAS diplomacy.

Clear Recognition of Constitutional Legitimacy

The rapid recognition of President Adama Barrow as the legitimate leader (Manneh 2018) was another factor which made ECOWAS a success. It followed the principles of “constitutional and electoral legalism”, which bolstered its status vis-à-vis the diplomatic community and removed Jammeh from the sense of legitimacy (Camara, 2022). This legal clarity caused a lack of understanding across the civil and security systems on whether they should stick to the government or the other (Bah, 2019). To the extent that the Constitutional Legitimacy, ECOWAS's negotiation approach and communication/anti-misinformation campaign (Janneh 2020) were strengthened. Therefore, as a result of legalism, the transition towards democracy was put together in a coherent and unified manner and provided a boost of support for the transition.

Pressure from Security Forces and Internal Military Realignments

The internal fighting between soldiers in Gambia had a huge impact on Gambia's diplomatic assistance for ECOWAS diplomacy (Diallo, 2020). The study found that there were conflicts or some divisions among security personnel and a lack of security officers' acceptance of Jammeh's activities to pressurize his existence. Other causes for the absence of resistance were concerns over the military response by the ECOWAS and the Gambia military (both undermotivated) to any military threat in the region, as well as the absence of mobilization efforts by other resistance elements such as exiled members of the IMSODA, taxi drivers and business interests (Njai, 2018). The military stance and the active role of the Senegal military also caused tension among Gambia's security actors (Keita, 2019). These security measures helped to reduce the danger of violence and paved the way for negotiations.

Use of Coercive Diplomacy and Credible Threat of Military Intervention

A credible threat of military action was one of the major factors that influenced diplomatic success in The Gambia (Keita 2019). ECOWAS, along with negotiations, diplomatic isolation and military preparations involving ECOMIG, helped to bring pressure on Jammeh (Bah, 2019). The AU and UN also gave ECOWAS its

credibility as it threatened that the Ebola virus would spread in the region. ECOWAS also gained credibility from the endorsements of the AU and UN (Cham, 2019). Together, the forceful actions hastened Jammeh's decision to step down peacefully.

Role of Domestic Actors and Local Mediation Networks

Domestic actors also had a key role to play in the ECOWAS diplomacy in the Gambian crisis (Sanyang, 2018). The religious leaders and traditional authorities, and civil society groups, encouraged and campaigned for restraint and peaceful transition. With Barrow's victory and people's approval of the results, ECOWAS' diplomatic position improved (Sanneh, 2020). It also increased the cohesion of the opposition coalition, which further strengthened the legitimacy of the democratic transition and lessened the possibilities to escalate (Jallow, 2019). As regards peace and resolution of the conflict, local actors supported the diplomatic work of the regional forces and played their role accordingly.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first objective examined the nature, causes, and dynamics of the political conflicts in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire. The results showed that there was a significant difference between the intensity, structuring and development of both crises despite their shared beginnings in the election results. In The Gambia, the conflict was mainly political and constitutional in nature, as a result of the refusal of the opposition President, Dr Jammeh, to accept the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, leading to an institutional tension and legitimacy crisis in the country. The violence was relatively limited, public support for democratic transition was high, and increasing divisions within the security sector provided a conducive environment for diplomatic intervention in the Gambian crisis.

The Côte d'Ivoire conflict, however, has become a violent and militarized conflict following the assertion of Alassane Ouattara's election results during the post-election crisis of 2010-2011, which were widely acknowledged by the international community. The results revealed that underlying structural issues, including ethnic polarization, divided national identities, political exclusion, poor democratic institutions, and historical governance tensions, were driving the crisis in the Ivory Coast. The Ivorian conflict differed from the Gambian conflict as militias, armed groups, and foreign military actors increased the violence and made diplomatic efforts difficult to resolve the conflict. The situation of the conflict also mirrored the lack of integrated regional responses, the surrendering of negotiations over and over, and the geopolitical factors from outside that helped to keep the conflict going.

The second objective analyzed the diplomatic strategies and mechanisms employed by ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) in managing the political conflicts in both cases. The results revealed that preventive diplomacy, mediation, coercive diplomacy and international cooperation played key roles in conflict management in both situations, but with varying effectiveness. In The Gambia, ECOWAS adopted a coordinated (multi-faceted) diplomatic approach to the conflict, through early warning, election monitoring, mediation by ECOWAS high-level leaders, sanctions, diplomatic isolation and credible threats to military intervention via ECOMIG.

The results also showed that the interaction with the AU and UN helped build international legitimacy and emphasize pressure to peacefully give up power to Yahya Jammeh. The tactics of mediation were uniform, inclusive, and regional positions were taken as a whole, and coercive diplomacy strengthened negotiating hand without resorting to large-scale violence. However, in Côte d'Ivoire, the results indicated that domestic disagreements within ECOWAS, a lack of unity in the mediation role and failures in the effectiveness of mediation, delayed prevention of violence, and disarticulated international cooperation all compromised the diplomatic approach. ECOWAS tried to engage in mediation, sanctions and diplomatic efforts but failed to exert a unified pressure because of the differences within the organisation and because of the pressure of external protagonists like France and the UN.

The third objective identified and compared the determinants that shaped the success and failure of ECOWAS diplomatic interventions in the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire, respectively. The findings showed that the

effectiveness of the ECOWAS diplomatic efforts in both nations was influenced by a number of political, institutional, military and international factors. Diplomatic success in The Gambia was connected to the fact that the ECOWAS member states had a strong consensus, there was immediate acceptance of the constitutionality of the President of The Gambia, functional international partnerships, disunity within the Gambia military, and the prospect of military action. The studies indicated that ECOWAS leaders were united, persisted in their mediation process, and used both diplomacy and pressure to strengthen the effectiveness of mediation.

Diplomatic efforts were also reinforced by a variety of domestic actors, including civil society groups, religious figures, and opposition groups, who also assisted in promoting a peaceful democratic transition. On the other hand, Côte d'Ivoire's diplomatic failures have been blamed on the lack of a coherent regional alliance, the lack of credibility of the mediators, delays in preventive measures, ineffective mediation structures and enforcement, and competing geopolitical interests of the mediators (Gnanguênon et al., 2025; Okere, 2015). The results also showed that the militarization of the conflict, a wave of ethnic polarization and the absence of a regional unity of action in the region also put hindrances to the consideration of effective diplomatic solutions by ECOWAS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The preventive diplomacy and early-warning mechanisms of ECOWAS should be beefed up, ensuring a swift, coordinated and coordinated response to electoral disputes and political tensions that can escalate to violent conflicts. This should involve enhanced election monitoring, prompt mediation and more effective strengthening of democratic and constitutional values among member states.
- ii. There should be increased cooperation and a concerted approach between ECOWAS, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) in the event of political crises in the West Africa sub-region. Better coordination of regional and international actors would help make mediation efforts more credible, consistent, and effective, and less fragmented as in Côte d'Ivoire.
- iii. To support transparent elections and peaceful transfers of power in West Africa, governments need to improve democratic institutions, electoral systems and constitutional frameworks. There is a need for more investment in institutional reforms, political inclusiveness, and civic education to combat structural drivers of political conflicts and to decrease the likelihood of post-election crises in the region.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study found that ECOWAS has made a good contribution in the diplomacy, mediation, preventing capacity of political conflicts in both The Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire, both in the country and region. The effects of the interventions varied, however, because of the variation amongst the different regions in terms of level of unity, constitutional legitimacy, the credibility of the mediator, the security situation, and perhaps the level of support of the international community. In The Gambia, ECOWAS had some success with coordinated and timely actions, whereas in Côte d'Ivoire, political fragmentation and delayed reactions made activities more difficult. The study therefore highlights the need to promote political stability and sustainable peace in West Africa through building a consensus within the region, good diplomatic efforts and more robust democratic institutions.

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