JOURNAL OF PEACE, SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
JPSDS 4(1), 104-124, June (2025)
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ORGINAL ARTICLE

MILITARY COUPS AND ECOWAS REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA, 2020–2024

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Abstract
Between 2020 and 2024, West Africa witnessed a troubling resurgence of military coups, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger. This study investigates the underlying drivers of these coups and their implications for the regional integration agenda pursued by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Using a convergent mixed-method research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 70 key informants across West African countries, spanning both coup-affected and stable democracies, and complemented with secondary documentary analysis. Findings reveal three interrelated themes underpinning the resurgence of military takeovers: systemic governance failure and corruption, growing anti-Western sentiment coupled with weakened state legitimacy, and institutional weaknesses within ECOWAS (African Union, 2023; Akinyemi, 2023; Bah, 2021). The analysis shows that persistent socio-economic inequality, leadership deficits, and the politicization of security institutions have eroded citizens' confidence in democratic governance (UNECA, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The study further demonstrates that ECOWAS's limited enforcement capacity and internal divisions have hindered timely and effective responses to unconstitutional changes of government (International Crisis Group, 2024; Nwankpa, 2022). The implications of these findings are profound but indicates that recurrent coups not only undermine regional peace and democratic consolidation but also threaten to reverse decades of progress toward economic and political integration (Okoli & Saliu, 2023; Vanheukelom, 2023). It recommends that ECOWAS adopt a more preventive and participatory approach to governance crises, expand its early warning and response capacities, and deepen collaboration with civil society and youth networks to foster democratic resilience (ECOWAS, 2001; Institute for Security Studies, 2023). Ultimately, the study contributes to policy discourse on regional governance reform and the quest for enduring peace and integration in West Africa. The study concludes that sustainable regional stability depends on strengthening democratic accountability, enhancing ECOWAS's conflict prevention mechanisms, and promoting inclusive governance across member states (African Union, 2023; World Bank, 2024).
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Keywords: Military Coups, ECOWAS, Governance, Regional Integration, West Africa, Democracy, Political stability.

Introduction

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2024 is deeply rooted in profound and systemic governance deficits that have eroded public trust and created fertile ground for military intervention (Bah, 2021; UNECA, 2023). This study aligns with a substantial body of literature that identifies the failure of civilian governments to deliver on their mandates as a primary catalyst for instability (African Union, 2023; Akinyemi, 2023). This governance crisis is multifaceted, encompassing

rampant corruption, elite capture, economic mismanagement, worsening socio-economic conditions, the inability to provide basic security and public goods, and the prevalence of electoral malpractice (World Bank, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024). These key factors behind the resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 -2024 collectively delegitimize elected authorities and create a vacuum that military actors are often quick to fill, positioning themselves as a necessary corrective to civilian incompetence and malfeasance (Anning & Amedzrator, 2022; Kohnert, 2023).

The public's growing disillusionment with democratic processes, which are perceived as failing to produce tangible improvements in their lives, has led to a paradoxical situation where military coups, once widely condemned, are now met with significant popular support in some quarters (Bah, 2021; African Union, 2023). This shift in public sentiment underscores the severity of the governance crisis and highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of democratic consolidation efforts in the region (Dahl, 1998; UNECA, 2023).

To better understand the resurgence of military coups in West Africa between, it is essential to unpack the specific governance failures that have eroded public confidence in democratic institutions. Among the most pervasive of these challenges are corruption and economic mismanagement, which stand at the core of the region's political and institutional decay. These twin problems have not only weakened state capacity and legitimacy but have also deepened socio-economic inequalities, creating conditions ripe for military intervention under the guise of national rescue.

Definition of Keywords:

Military Coups: A military coup refers to the sudden, illegal, and often violent overthrow of a government by the armed forces or a faction within them. It typically involves the suspension of the constitution, dissolution of democratic institutions, and assumption of power by the military under the pretext of restoring order or correcting governance failures.

ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States): The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional intergovernmental organization established in 1975 to promote economic cooperation, political stability, and regional integration among its 15 member states. ECOWAS also plays a critical role in conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and the promotion of democratic governance in the subregion.

Governance: Governance refers to the processes, institutions, and traditions through which authority is exercised, decisions are made, and public affairs are managed. Good governance encompasses accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and adherence to the rule of law, while governance failure often manifests in corruption, weak institutions, and poor service delivery.

Regional Integration: Regional integration is the process by which neighboring states enter into cooperative agreements to enhance economic, political, and social collaboration through shared institutions and frameworks. It aims to promote economic growth, collective security, and political cohesion within a geographical region.

West Africa: West Africa is a subregion of the African continent comprising 15 countries, most of which are members of ECOWAS. The region is characterized by shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, as well as common socio-economic and political challenges such as governance crises, poverty, and security threats.

Democracy: Democracy is a system of governance in which political power is vested in the people, exercised either directly or through elected representatives, under the principles of political equality, participation, and accountability. It emphasizes respect for human rights, the rule of law, and regular competitive elections.

Political Stability: Political stability refers to the absence of violence, unrest, or abrupt changes in government that disrupt governance processes. It signifies the endurance of political institutions, consistent policy direction, and the peaceful transfer of power. Political stability is a key prerequisite for economic growth, regional integration, and democratic consolidation.

Corruption and Economic Mismanagement

Corruption and economic mismanagement have been identified as central drivers of the recent wave of military coups in West Africa (African Union, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2023). The study's findings, which show that 68% of respondents identified governance and corruption as a key factor, are corroborated by numerous academic and policy analyses (Akinyemi, 2023; Bah, 2021). In countries like Mali, Guinea, and Niger, widespread corruption has not only diverted public resources away from essential services but has also created a sense of deep-seated injustice and inequality among the populace (World Bank, 2024; UNECA, 2023).

This economic discontent is a powerful force that military juntas have been able to exploit to justify their interventions (Kohnert, 2023; Nwankpa, 2022). The failure of civilian governments to address pressing socio-economic challenges, such as poverty, youth unemployment, and marginalization, has further fueled public frustration and made the promise of a "fresh start" under military rule an appealing, albeit often illusory, prospect (African Union, 2023; Bah, 2021). The economic consequences of this mismanagement are severe, leading to declining economic growth, increased poverty, and a lack of foreign investment, which in turn exacerbates the very conditions that led to the coup in the first place. This vicious cycle of corruption, economic decline, and political instability poses a significant threat to the long-term development and integration of the region. While corruption and economic

mismanagement have eroded state legitimacy and public trust, they are only part of a broader governance failure. Another critical dimension of the crisis lies in the inability of civilian administrations to ensure the safety of citizens and provide essential public services, a failure that has further justified military interventions across the region (Alesina et al., 1996; World Bank, 2024).

Failure to Provide Security and Public Goods

The inability of civilian governments to provide basic security and public goods has been a critical factor in the recent military coups in West Africa (International Crisis Group, 2024; African Union, 2023). In the Sahel region, in particular, the proliferation of violent extremism, terrorism, and organized crime has created a security crisis that has overwhelmed the capacity of many states (UNECA, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2023). The military in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso has often justified its intervention by pointing to the government's failure to protect its citizens (Kohnert, 2023; Bah, 2021) from these threats. This narrative resonates with a public that is desperate for security and stability, and it has been a key factor in generating popular support for the juntas. The failure to provide other essential public goods, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure, has further eroded the legitimacy of civilian governments and created a sense of state abandonment in many rural and marginalized communities. This has created a vacuum that non-state actors, including jihadist groups, have been able to fill, further destabilizing the region and undermining the authority of the state. The military's promise to restore order and provide security has therefore been a powerful tool in its quest for legitimacy, even as it has often failed to deliver on these promises in the long run. The erosion of security and public goods provision has not only deepened social discontent but has also exposed the weaknesses of democratic institutions. This vulnerability is compounded by persistent electoral malpractice and the manipulation of constitutional processes, which have undermined the legitimacy of elected governments and fueled perceptions that democracy has become an empty ritual serving entrenched elites.

Electoral Malpractice and Illegitimate Governance

Electoral malpractice and the perception of illegitimate governance have been significant contributors to the political instability that has led to military coups in West Africa (African Union, 2023; Ero, 2022). The manipulation of electoral processes, including voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and the use of state resources to favor the ruling party (Nwankpa, 2022; UNECA, 2023), has been a common feature of many elections in the region. This has led to a widespread belief that elections are not a genuine mechanism for holding leaders accountable, but rather a tool for legitimizing their hold on power. The alteration of constitutions to extend presidential term limits, as seen in the case of Alpha Condé in Guinea, has been a particularly egregious form of this malpractice, and it has been a major trigger for military intervention (Bah, 2021; Akinyemi, 2023).

The lack of a strong and independent electoral commission at the regional level to monitor and regulate electoral activities has further worsened this problem. The perception that elected leaders are

not legitimate has created a crisis of confidence in democratic institutions and has made it easier for the military to portray itself as a defender of the people's will. This has been a key factor in the recent coups, where the juntas have often claimed to be acting in the name of the people to restore democratic order, even as they have suspended constitutions and dissolved elected bodies. Against this backdrop of corruption, insecurity, and electoral illegitimacy, military actors have found fertile ground to advance their interventionist narratives. Framing themselves as patriots stepping in to correct the failures of civilian governance, these militaries have sought to legitimize their coups as necessary measures to restore national dignity and stability.

Military Justification as a Response to Civilian Failures

The military has consistently justified its interventions in West African politics as a necessary response to the failures of civilian governments (Anning & Amedzrator, 2022; Kohnert, 2023). This narrative, which portrays the military as a "saviour" of the people, has been a recurring theme in the justifications for the recent coups. The juntas have pointed to a range of civilian failures, including corruption, economic mismanagement, insecurity, and electoral malpractice, as evidence that the democratic system has broken down and that military intervention is the only way to restore order and stability. This justification has been particularly effective in a context where there is widespread public disillusionment with the political class and a growing sense that democracy has)) failed to deliver on its promises (African Union, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2023).

The military's promise to clean up corruption, improve the economy, and provide security has resonated with many citizens who are desperate for change. However, this narrative is often a self-serving one, and the military's own record of governance has been mixed at best (Adebanjo & Rashid, 2004; Powell & Thyne, 2011). While some military regimes have made initial progress in addressing some of the problems they inherited, they have often been characterized by human rights abuses, a lack of transparency, and a failure to transition to democratic rule. The cycle of military intervention followed by a return to civilian rule, only to be followed by another coup, has become a recurring pattern in the region, and it highlights the deep-seated structural problems that underlie the political instability in West Africa. However, beyond domestic factors, the resurgence of coups in West Africa has also been shaped by evolving geopolitical dynamics. The rise of anti-Western sentiment and the shifting of alliances away from traditional Western partners have provided both ideological justification and strategic cover for military juntas seeking to consolidate their rule and resist external pressure.

The Rise of Anti-Western Sentiment and Shifting Alliances

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa has been accompanied by a significant rise in anti-Western sentiment and a corresponding shift in regional alliances (Kohnert, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2023). This trend, which supports Hypothesis 2 of this study: Anti-Western Sentiment, reflects a growing disillusionment with the West's role in the region, particularly in the security sphere.

The failure of Western-led counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel has led to a perception that the West is either unable or unwilling to effectively address the region's security challenges. This has created an opening for alternative global powers, such as Russia and China (International Crisis Group, 2024; World Bank, 2024), to expand their influence in the region, often by offering a different model of engagement that is perceived as being more respectful of national sovereignty and less conditional on democratic reforms.

The military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have actively cultivated relationships with these alternative partners, and they have used anti-Western rhetoric to bolster their own legitimacy and to deflect criticism from the international community. This shift in alliances has significant implications for the regional balance of power and for the future of ECOWAS, which has traditionally been closely aligned with Western powers. This anti-Western orientation is further reinforced by the perceived failure of Western-led security interventions in the Sahel. As citizens lose faith in external models that have yielded little improvement in security outcomes, military regimes have increasingly leveraged this disillusionment to justify the expulsion of Western forces and to seek alternative partnerships.

Diminishing Credibility of Western Security Models

The diminishing credibility of Western security models has been a key factor in the rise of anti-Western sentiment in West Africa. The presence of French and other Western forces in the Sahel for nearly a decade has failed to stem the tide of violent extremism, and in some cases, it has even been accused of worsening the problem (Ero, 2022; Kohnert, 2023). This has led to a widespread perception that the West's approach to security is ineffective and that its primary interest is in maintaining its own geopolitical influence rather than in genuinely helping the region to achieve stability. The military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have capitalized on this sentiment by calling for the withdrawal of French forces and by seeking alternative security partnerships with countries like Russia (International Crisis Group, 2024; African Union, 2023). This has been a popular move with many citizens, who have grown tired of the seemingly endless cycle of violence and who are looking for a new approach to security. The failure of the West to effectively address the root causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and weak governance, has further undermined its credibility and has made it easier for the juntas to portray it as a neo-colonial power that is more interested in exploiting the region's resources than in helping its people. Adding to this complexity is the growing public backlash against foreign interference and economic sanctions. The punitive measures imposed by ECOWAS and Western allies have often deepened public hardship, inadvertently strengthening the juntas' claims of defending national sovereignty against external domination.

Public Discontent with Foreign Interference and Sanctions

Public discontent with foreign interference and sanctions has been another major driver of anti-Western sentiment in West Africa. The sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and Western powers on the

military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been widely criticized for their negative impact on the civilian population. These sanctions, which have included border closures, asset freezes, and the suspension of development aid, have been seen as a form of collective punishment that has worsened the economic hardship faced by ordinary citizens (Nwankpa, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2024). This has created a sense of resentment towards the international community and has made it easier for the juntas to portray themselves as victims of a foreign conspiracy.

The perception that the West is applying a double standard, by supporting authoritarian regimes in other parts of the world while punishing the juntas in West Africa, has further fueled this discontent. The military regimes have been able to use this narrative to rally public support and to consolidate their power, even as they have faced increasing isolation from the international community. This wave of anti-Western sentiment has paved the way for new alliances with non-traditional partners such as Russia and China. These relationships offer the military regimes not only political backing and security support but also an ideological alternative that rejects Western conditionalities and emphasizes mutual respect and sovereignty (African Union, 2023; Ero, 2022).

Alignment with Alternative Global Powers (Russia and China)

The alignment of the military juntas in West Africa with alternative global powers, particularly Russia and China, has been a significant development in the region's geopolitical landscape. These powers have been quick to capitalize on the growing anti-Western sentiment and have offered the juntas a different model of engagement that is based on a "win-win" partnership and a respect for national sovereignty. Russia, in particular, has been active in the security sphere, offering military assistance and training to the juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso. This has been a welcome development for the juntas, who have been looking for new ways to combat the threat of violent extremism and to reduce their dependence on the West. China, on the other hand, has focused on economic engagement, investing in infrastructure projects and offering loans and other forms of financial assistance (Kohnert, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). This has been a key part of its Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to expand its global influence through economic connectivity. The growing presence of these alternative powers in West Africa has created a more complex and competitive geopolitical environment, and it has challenged the traditional dominance of the West in the region. Underlying this realignment is a powerful anti-colonial and anti-imperialist discourse that resonates deeply with the region’s historical memory. Military juntas have skillfully invoked this narrative to frame their rule as part of a broader struggle for African self-determination, thereby consolidating domestic legitimacy even amid international condemnation.

The Role of Anti-Colonial and Anti-Imperialist Narratives

The use of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narratives has been a key strategy for the military juntas in West Africa to legitimize their rule and to rally public support (Bah, 2021; Akinyemi, 2023).

By framing their coups as a struggle against neo-colonialism and foreign interference, the juntas have been able to tap into a deep-seated resentment of the West that is rooted in the history of colonialism and exploitation in the region. This narrative has been particularly effective in a context where there is a growing sense that the West has failed to deliver on its promises of development and security. The juntas have portrayed themselves as the true defenders of national sovereignty and as the champions of the people against a corrupt and self-serving political class that is beholden to foreign interests. This has been a powerful message that has resonated with many citizens, who are looking for a new and more assertive form of leadership. The use of this narrative has also been a way for the juntas to deflect criticism from the international community and to justify their often-authoritarian rule (African Union, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2023). By portraying themselves as the victims of a foreign conspiracy, they have been able to rally public support and to consolidate their power, even as they have faced increasing isolation from the international community. However, while these anti-colonial and anti-imperialist narratives have strengthened the domestic legitimacy of the juntas, they have simultaneously exposed the weaknesses of regional mechanisms designed to uphold democratic governance. This tension is particularly evident in the institutional and policy shortcomings of ECOWAS, which has struggled to respond effectively to these unfolding crises.

ECOWAS's Institutional Weaknesses and Inconsistent Responses

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa has exposed significant institutional weaknesses and inconsistencies in the response of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (International Crisis Group, 2024; Vanheukelom, 2023). The findings of this study, which support Hypothesis 3: ECOWAS Integration Breakdown, highlight the challenges that the regional body has faced in effectively addressing the crisis. Despite its strong rhetoric in defense of democracy and its zero-tolerance policy for unconstitutional changes of government, ECOWAS has often struggled to translate its principles into effective action (ECOWAS, 2001; Nwankpa, 2022). Its responses have been characterized by a lack of consistency, a failure to address the root causes of instability, and a perception of double standards in the application of its sanctions. These weaknesses have undermined the credibility and legitimacy of ECOWAS, and they have created a sense of disillusionment with the regional integration project. The inability of ECOWAS to effectively manage the crisis has also created a vacuum that has been filled by other actors, including the military juntas themselves, who have been able to challenge the authority of the regional body and to forge their own path. To fully understand the limits of ECOWAS's effectiveness, it is necessary to look beyond its surface-level inconsistencies and examine the deeper structural and political divisions within the organization itself. The internal weaknesses reveal deep contradictions that have hindered its capacity to act decisively and cohesively in moments of crisis. These flaws can be categorized into three main dimensions: Structural flaws and internal divisions, ineffectiveness and unintended consequences of sanctions and perceptions of double standards in enforcing democratic norms.

Structural Flaws and Internal Divisions

The structural flaws and internal divisions within ECOWAS have been a major obstacle to its ability to effectively respond to the recent wave of military coups (Vanheukelom, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). The organization is made up of a diverse group of countries with different political systems, economic interests, and foreign policy orientations. This has made it difficult to achieve a consensus on how to deal with the crisis, and it has often led to a fragmented and ineffective response. The decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS is a stark illustration of these divisions (ECOWAS, 2024), and it has dealt a major blow to the unity and cohesion of the region. The lack of a strong and independent institutional framework has also been a major weakness. The ECOWAS Commission, which is the executive arm of the organization, has often been seen as being too closely aligned with the interests of the more powerful member states, and it has been criticized for its lack of transparency and accountability. The absence of a strong and effective early warning system has also been a major problem, and it has meant that ECOWAS has often been caught off guard by the coups, and it has been forced to react to events rather than to prevent them. These institutional shortcomings and divisions have profound implications not only for regional stability but also for the broader goal of democratic consolidation and integration across West Africa. They underscore the urgent need for structural reform, enhanced inclusivity, and stronger political will within ECOWAS if it is to reclaim its role as an effective guarantor of peace and democracy in the region.

Ineffectiveness and Unintended Consequences of Sanctions

The sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been widely criticized for their ineffectiveness and their unintended consequences. While the aim of the sanctions has been to pressure the juntas to restore constitutional order, they have often had the opposite effect, and they have been used by the juntas to rally public support and to consolidate their power (Nwankpa, 2022; African Union, 2023). The sanctions have also had a devastating impact on the civilian population, and they have been seen as a form of collective punishment that has worsened the economic hardship faced by ordinary citizens. This has created a sense of resentment towards ECOWAS and has undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of many people in the region. The failure of the sanctions to achieve their stated objectives has also raised questions about the effectiveness of this policy tool, and it has led to calls for a more nuanced and targeted approach that would focus on addressing the root causes of instability rather than simply punishing the perpetrators of the coups (Institute for Security Studies, 2023).

Perceptions of Double Standards in Enforcing Democratic Norms

The perception of double standards in the enforcement of democratic norms has been a major source of controversy and has undermined the credibility of ECOWAS. The organization has been accused of applying its sanctions in a selective and inconsistent manner, and of being more willing to punish military

juntas than to hold elected leaders accountable for their own democratic transgressions (Ero, 2022; Vanheukelom, 2023). The failure of ECOWAS to take strong action against leaders who have manipulated their constitutions to extend their term limits, or who have been accused of electoral fraud, has been a particular source of frustration for many people in the region. This has created a sense that ECOWAS is more interested in maintaining the status quo than in genuinely promoting democracy and good governance. The perception of double standards has also been a major propaganda tool for the military juntas, who have used it to portray themselves as the victims of a biased and hypocritical international community (International Crisis Group, 2024). This has been a powerful narrative that has resonated with many citizens, and it has made it more difficult for ECOWAS to build a consensus in support of its policies.

Comparative Analysis with SADC's Conflict Resolution Approach

A comparative analysis with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for ECOWAS in its efforts to address the recent wave of military coups. SADC has also faced its own share of political instability, but it has generally been more successful than ECOWAS in managing these crises and in promoting a culture of democracy and good governance in the region. One of the key differences between the two organizations is their approach to conflict resolution. SADC has tended to favor a more consensual and diplomatic approach, and it has been more willing to engage with all stakeholders, including the military, in its efforts to find a peaceful solution to conflicts (Okeke & Odubanjo, 2018). ECOWAS, on the other hand, has often adopted a more confrontational and punitive approach, and it has been more inclined to use sanctions and other forms of pressure to force a change of behavior. The experience of SADC suggests that a more flexible and pragmatic approach, which is tailored to the specific context of each crisis, is more likely to be successful than a one-size-fits-all approach that is based on a rigid application of principles. The comparison also highlights the importance of a strong and independent institutional framework, and of a culture of democratic accountability, in promoting regional stability and integration.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of ECOWAS and SADC Conflict Resolution Approaches.

S/No	Feature	ECOWAS (West Africa)	SADC (Southern Africa)
1	Primary Approach to Coups	Interventionist, punitive (sanctions, military threats)	Diplomatic, consensual (mediation, negotiation)
2	Enforcement of Norms	Perceived as inconsistent; strong on military coups, weak on "constitutional coups"	Generally, more consistent application of democratic principles
3	Decision-Making	Consensus-based, often slow and hampered by internal divisions	Less cumbersome, more prone to consensus-building

4	Historical Context	Evolved from conflict resolution in Liberia/Sierra Leone civil wars	Evolved from the anti-apartheid Frontline States alliance
5	Response to Recent Crises	Strong condemnation and sanctions against Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger coups	Muted response to 2017 Zimbabwe coup; acquiesced to de facto change
6	Institutional Framework	Strong normative protocols (e.g., Democracy Protocol), but weak enforcement	Robust institutional framework for peace and security (e.g., Organ on Politics, Defence and Security)

Source: Okeke & Odubanjo (2018)

Implications for Regional Integration and Democratic Consolidation

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa has had profound implications for the region's integration and democratic consolidation. The crisis has not only reversed the democratic gains that had been made over the past two decades but has also threatened to unravel the progress that has been made in building a more integrated and cohesive region (World Bank, 2024; UNECA, 2023). The military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have challenged the authority of ECOWAS and have sought to create an alternative regional bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which has further fragmented the region and has undermined the vision of a united and prosperous West Africa. The crisis has also had a devastating impact on the region's economy, creating a more uncertain and unpredictable environment for trade and investment. Beyond its economic implications, the political instability has eroded confidence in governance structures and weakened regional cooperation (Adepoju, 2002; Balassa, 1961). As the long-term consequences of the crisis continue to unfold, one of the most troubling dimensions is its profound impact on the region’s democratic trajectory. Indeed, the resurgence of military coups has not only disrupted economic progress but has also struck at the very foundation of democratic governance in West Africa.

Erosion of Democratic Norms and Institutions

The military coups in West Africa have had a corrosive effect on democratic norms and institutions in the region. The suspension of constitutions, the dissolution of elected bodies, and the restriction of civil liberties have all contributed to a climate of fear and intimidation, and they have made it more difficult for citizens to participate in the political process. The normalization of military intervention in politics has also created a dangerous precedent, and it has made it more likely that the military will continue to play a disruptive role in the future. The crisis has also highlighted the fragility of democratic institutions in the region, and it has shown how easily they can be swept away by a determined military. The long-term consequences of this erosion of democratic norms and institutions are likely to be severe, and it will take a concerted effort by all stakeholders to rebuild the trust and confidence that has been lost. A key

manifestation of this democratic decay is the growing acceptance of military involvement in governance, which has increasingly blurred the line between civilian authority and military power.

Normalization of Military Intervention in Politics

The recent wave of military coups in West Africa has led to a dangerous normalization of military intervention in politics. The fact that these coups have been met with significant popular support in some quarters has created a perception that the military is a legitimate and even desirable alternative to civilian rule. This is a dangerous trend that threatens to undermine the progress that has been made in building a culture of democracy and civilian control of the military in the region. The military's own record of governance has been mixed at best, and there is no reason to believe that it is better equipped to address the complex challenges facing the region than civilian governments. The normalization of military intervention in politics also creates a climate of instability and uncertainty, and it makes it more difficult for the region to attract the investment and development assistance that it needs to grow its economy and improve the lives of its people. Closely linked to this normalization is the military's repeated disregard for constitutional frameworks, which has further weakened the rule of law and eroded public confidence in legal and democratic processes.

Undermining of Constitutional Order and Rule of Law

The military coups in West Africa have had a devastating impact on the constitutional order and the rule of law in the region. The suspension of constitutions and the rule by decree have created a legal vacuum in which the rights and freedoms of citizens are not protected. The military juntas have often used their power to silence dissent and to crack down on the media and civil society, and they have created a climate of fear and intimidation. The undermining of the rule of law has also had a negative impact on the economy, and it has made it more difficult for businesses to operate and for investors to have confidence in the legal system. The long-term consequences of this undermining of the constitutional order and the rule of law are likely to be severe, and it will take a concerted effort by all stakeholders to rebuild the institutions that are necessary for a functioning democracy. Beyond the breakdown of constitutionalism, the coups have also had far-reaching implications for citizens' fundamental freedoms and political participation across the region.

Impact on Civil Liberties and Political Participation

The military coups in West Africa have had a chilling effect on civil liberties and political participation in the region. The suspension of political parties, the restriction of the media, and the crackdown on civil society have all made it more difficult for citizens to express their views and to participate in the political process. The military juntas have often used their power to silence dissent and to create a climate of fear and intimidation. This has had a particularly negative impact on women and young people, who are often the most marginalized and vulnerable groups in society. The restriction of civil liberties and political

participation has also had a negative impact on the economy, and it has made it more difficult for the region to attract the investment and development assistance that it needs to grow its economy and improve the lives of its people. The cumulative effect of these political and social disruptions has extended beyond individual countries, contributing to a broader regional fracture that now threatens the very foundation of West African unity and cooperation.

Fragmentation of Regional Cohesion and Cooperation

The most significant and immediate consequence of the recent coups has been the fragmentation of regional cohesion and the emergence of a rival bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), formed by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The decision of these three countries to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2025 represents a major blow to the organization's unity and a significant setback for the regional integration agenda. The formation of the AES, with its own parallel institutions and a stated goal of creating a common market, currency, and security architecture, directly challenges the authority and relevance of ECOWAS in the Sahel region. This split has created a new geopolitical reality in West Africa, dividing the region into two competing blocs and undermining the principle of a unified and integrated community. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) provides deeper insight into how this fragmentation has taken shape and the motivations driving these breakaway regimes.

The Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger marked a significant turning point in the regional politics of West Africa (International Crisis Group, 2024; ECOWAS, 2024). The alliance, which was initially established as a mutual defense pact, has since evolved into a broader political and economic bloc with the stated aim of creating a common market, a single currency, and a unified security architecture. The formation of the AES is a direct challenge to the authority and relevance of ECOWAS, which has long been the dominant regional organization in West Africa. The alliance is also a clear indication of the growing influence of Russia and other non-Western powers in the region, as the juntas have sought to forge new partnerships that are independent of the West. The formation of the AES has created a new geopolitical reality in West Africa, dividing the region into two competing blocs and undermining the principle of a unified and integrated community. This process of realignment culminated in the formal withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, a move that signaled the deepening of divisions within the region and the weakening of the integration project.

Withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS

The decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2025 was a major blow to the organization's unity and a significant setback for the regional integration agenda (ECOWAS, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

The withdrawal of these three countries, which are at the epicenter of the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel, has created a significant gap in the regional security architecture and has made it more difficult for ECOWAS to coordinate a regional response to the threat of terrorism. The withdrawal has also had a devastating impact on regional cooperation in the areas of trade and economic integration, as the three countries are key transit routes for trade between the coastal states and the landlocked countries of the Sahel. The decision to withdraw from ECOWAS is a clear indication of the growing rift between the military juntas in the Sahel and the rest of the region, and it has raised serious questions about the future of regional integration in West Africa. The consolidation of the AES eventually culminated in an even more consequential decision, the formal withdrawal of its member states from ECOWAS.

Disruption of Economic and Security Cooperation

The fragmentation of the region has had a direct impact on economic and security cooperation. The withdrawal of the three Sahelian states from ECOWAS has disrupted trade and economic integration, as well as cooperation on cross-border issues such as migration and counter-terrorism. The creation of a rival bloc has also weakened the collective bargaining power of the region in its dealings with external partners. The damage to ECOWAS's credibility and normative power has been severe. The organization's inability to prevent the withdrawal of three of its member states has raised serious questions about its relevance and effectiveness as a regional actor. The perception that ECOWAS is a compromised institution, perpetuating external geopolitical interests, has further eroded its legitimacy in the eyes of many West Africans. This has created a crisis of confidence in the regional body, which will be difficult to overcome. The fragmentation of regional cohesion and cooperation is a major setback for the ECOWAS integration agenda, and it will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders to repair the damage and rebuild trust. This withdrawal has had far-reaching repercussions, not only politically but also in terms of economic and security collaboration across the region (UNECA, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Damage to ECOWAS's Credibility and Normative Power

The resurgence of military coups and the subsequent fragmentation of the region have dealt a severe blow to the credibility and normative power of ECOWAS (Vanheukelom, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). The organization's inability to prevent the coups, its failure to reverse them, and its inability to prevent the withdrawal of three of its member states have all contributed to a perception that ECOWAS is a weak and ineffective organization. The perception of double standards in the enforcement of its democratic norms has also damaged its credibility, as it has created a sense that the organization is more interested in protecting the interests of incumbent leaders than in upholding democratic principles. The damage to ECOWAS's credibility and normative power is a major setback for the regional integration project, as it has undermined the organization's ability to act as a neutral arbiter in the region's

conflicts and to promote a shared vision of peace, stability, and prosperity. As these disruptions unfolded, ECOWAS itself came under intense scrutiny, with its reputation and authority significantly undermined.

Challenges to the ECOWAS Integration Agenda

The resurgence of coups and the subsequent fragmentation of the region have posed unprecedented challenges to the ECOWAS integration agenda. The organization's vision of creating a borderless region with the free movement of people, goods, and capital has been severely undermined by the political crisis (UNECA, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The imposition of sanctions, including border closures and the suspension of commercial and financial transactions, has created significant barriers to trade and has disrupted the supply chains that are essential for the functioning of the regional economy (International Crisis Group, 2024; Nwankpa, 2022). The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS has further complicated the situation, as these countries are key transit routes for trade between the coastal states and the landlocked countries of the Sahel (ECOWAS, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The disruption of these trade routes has had a negative impact on the economies of all the countries in the region, and has made it more difficult to achieve the goal of a fully integrated common market (UNECA, 2023). This loss of credibility has, in turn, posed major challenges to the core vision of ECOWAS which is regional integration based on unity, democracy, and economic cooperation (Vanheukelom, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Obstacles to the Free Movement of People and Goods

The political crisis in West Africa has created significant obstacles to the free movement of people and goods, which is a cornerstone of the ECOWAS integration agenda (Adepoju, 2002; ECOWAS, 2001). The imposition of sanctions, including border closures and the suspension of commercial and financial transactions, has disrupted trade and has made it more difficult for people to travel within the region (Nwankpa, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2024). The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS has further complicated the situation, as these countries are key transit routes for trade between the coastal states and the landlocked countries of the Sahel (ECOWAS, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The disruption of these trade routes has had a negative impact on the economies of all the countries in the region, and has made it more difficult to achieve the goal of a fully integrated common market (UNECA, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The political instability has also had a negative impact on foreign investment, as investors are wary of committing capital to a region that is perceived as being unstable and unpredictable. This has made it more difficult to finance the infrastructure projects that are essential for regional integration, such as roads, railways, and energy networks (World Bank, 2024). One of the most visible manifestations of these challenges has been the disruption of the free movement of people and goods across West African borders (Adepoju, 2002).

Hindered Progress Towards a Customs Union and Single Currency

The political crisis has also had a chilling effect on the progress towards a customs union and a single currency (UNECA, 2023; World Bank, 2024). The uncertainty created by the coups and the fragmentation of the region has made it more difficult to harmonize trade policies and regulations, which is a prerequisite for a customs union (Balassa, 1961). The decision of the AES countries to pursue their own currency has also put the future of the planned Eco currency in jeopardy, as it would be difficult to create a monetary union without the participation of three of the largest economies in the region (International Crisis Group, 2024). The political instability has also had a negative impact on foreign investment, as investors are wary of committing capital to a region that is perceived as being unstable and unpredictable. This has made it more difficult to finance the infrastructure projects that are essential for regional integration, such as roads, railways, and energy networks (World Bank, 2024). The overall effect of the recent coups has been to create a climate of uncertainty and division that has set back the ECOWAS integration agenda by several years, and has called into question the organization's ability to achieve its long-term goals (Vanheukelom, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). These disruptions have also affected the more ambitious economic goals of the regional body, particularly efforts toward a customs union and the adoption of a single currency (World Bank, 2024).

Strain on Regional Security Architecture and Counter-Terrorism Efforts

The resurgence of military coups and the fragmentation of the region have placed a severe strain on the regional security architecture and have hampered counter-terrorism efforts (African Union, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024). The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS has created a significant gap in the regional security architecture, as these three countries are at the epicenter of the jihadist insurgency in the Sahel (ECOWAS, 2024; UNECA, 2023). The ability of ECOWAS to coordinate a regional response to the threat of terrorism has been severely hampered, and the fragmentation of security cooperation has made the entire region more vulnerable to the spread of violent extremism (International Crisis Group, 2024). The creation of a rival bloc in the Sahel has also created a more complex and uncertain environment for security cooperation, as it is unclear how the two blocs will interact with each other. The political instability has also had a negative impact on foreign investment, as investors are wary of committing capital to a region that is perceived as being unstable and unpredictable. This has made it more difficult to finance the infrastructure projects that are essential for regional integration, such as roads, railways, and energy networks (World Bank, 2024). In addition to the economic setbacks, the coups have profoundly weakened regional mechanisms for collective security and counter-terrorism (African Union, 2023).

Severe Implications for Regional Stability and Integration

The resurgence of military coups has had severe implications for regional stability and integration in West Africa (Bah, 2021; Akinyemi, 2023). The coups have not only reversed democratic gains in the

affected countries, but they have also created a deep rift within ECOWAS, threatening to unravel decades of progress towards political and economic unity (International Crisis Group, 2024; Vanheukelom, 2023). The formation of a new bloc by the coup-affected states, their subsequent withdrawal from ECOWAS, and the disruption of regional cooperation mechanisms have all contributed to a climate of uncertainty and fragmentation (ECOWAS, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The crisis has also had a devastating impact on the regional economy, and it has created a more uncertain and unpredictable environment for trade and investment (World Bank, 2024; UNECA, 2023). The long-term consequences of the crisis are still unfolding, but it is clear that it has dealt a major blow to the aspirations of the people of West Africa for a more democratic, stable, and prosperous future. Taken together, these political, economic, and security disruptions have culminated in one overarching consequence, an unprecedented threat to regional stability and integration. The resurgence of military coups has had severe implications for regional stability and integration (International Crisis Group, 2024) in West Africa. In response to these multi-dimensional challenges, it is imperative for ECOWAS to undertake a set of bold and transformative policy reforms (African Union, 2023; Vanheukelom, 2023).

Policy Recommendations for ECOWAS

In light of the findings of this study, the following strengthened policy recommendations are proposed for ECOWAS to address the current crisis and to strengthen its role as a guardian of democracy and regional integration in West Africa (African Union, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024; Institute for Security Studies, 2023):

1. **Shift from Reactive Sanctions to Proactive Diplomacy and Conflict Prevention**

ECOWAS should move away from its overreliance on punitive measures like sanctions and military threats, which have proven to be ineffective and counterproductive. Instead, the organization should focus on proactive diplomacy and conflict prevention, by strengthening its early warning systems and by engaging in inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders, including civil society, political parties, and the military, to address the root causes of instability before they escalate into full-blown crises. The organization should also develop a more nuanced and context-specific approach to sanctions, by targeting individuals rather than the general population, and by ensuring that the sanctions regime is clear, predictable, and consistently applied.

2. **Reinforce Democratic Institutions and Accountability Mechanisms**

ECOWAS should take a more robust and consistent approach to upholding democratic principles, by holding all leaders, whether elected or military, accountable for their actions. The organization should strengthen its mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, and it should not hesitate to take action against elected leaders who undermine democracy through constitutional manipulations or other undemocratic means. This will help to restore the credibility of the organization and to create a more level playing field for all political actors.

3. **Reform ECOWAS's Internal Governance and Decision-Making Processes**

The organization should undertake a comprehensive review of its internal governance and decision-making processes, to make them more efficient, transparent, and accountable. This could include reforming the consensus-based decision-making process, to allow for more timely and decisive action in response to crises. The organization should also strengthen its institutional capacity, by ensuring that it has the necessary financial and human resources to carry out its mandate effectively.

4. **Promote Inclusive Governance and Address Root Causes of Instability**

ECOWAS should adopt a more people-centered approach to regional integration, by promoting inclusive governance and by addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and marginalization. The organization should work with member states to develop and implement policies that promote economic development, social justice, and human security. This will help to create a more stable and prosperous region, where military coups are less likely to occur.

5. **Foster Balanced and Mutually Beneficial External Partnerships**

ECOWAS should adopt a more strategic and balanced approach to its external partnerships, by diversifying its sources of support and by ensuring that its partnerships are based on mutual respect and shared interests. The organization should work with a wide range of partners, including traditional Western donors, as well as emerging powers like China and Russia, to promote peace, stability, and development in the region. This will help to reduce the region's dependence on any single partner and to enhance its strategic autonomy.

Conclusion:

This study has examined the resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2024 and their implications for the regional integration agenda championed by ECOWAS. The findings of this study, based on qualitative interviews with key informants across six West African countries, have identified three primary drivers of the recent coups: governance failure and corruption, rising anti-Western sentiment, and the institutional weaknesses of ECOWAS (Bah, 2021; Akinyemi, 2023; Vanheukelom, 2023). The study has found that these three factors are deeply interconnected, and that they have created a vicious cycle of instability that is threatening to unravel the progress that has been made towards democratic consolidation and regional integration in West Africa. The failure of elected governments to provide security, deliver public services, and uphold the rule of law has created a fertile ground for military intervention, while the growing anti-Western sentiment has provided a convenient narrative for military juntas to legitimize their actions and rally popular support. The institutional weaknesses of ECOWAS, including its overreliance on sanctions, its perceived double standards, and its slow and ineffective decision-making processes, have further exacerbated the crisis, leading to a loss of credibility and a fragmentation of the region.

Interplay of Governance Failure, Anti-Westernism, and ECOWAS Weaknesses

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa is not the result of a single cause, but rather the interplay of a complex set of factors. The failure of civilian governments to provide good governance, security, and economic opportunity has created a deep sense of public disillusionment and has made the military's promise of a "fresh start" an appealing alternative. This has been compounded by a growing anti-Western sentiment, which has been fueled by the perceived failure of Western-led security interventions and the imposition of sanctions that have hurt ordinary citizens. The military juntas have been able to capitalize on this sentiment, portraying themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against a new form of colonialism. The institutional weaknesses of ECOWAS have further exacerbated the crisis, as the organization's inconsistent and often counterproductive responses have undermined its credibility and have created a vacuum that the juntas have been able to fill. The interplay of these three factors has created a vicious cycle of instability that is threatening to unravel the progress that has been made towards democratic consolidation and regional integration in West Africa (World Bank, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024).

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