



ODUMUNC 2025 Issue Brief  
The Economic Community of West African States  
(ECOWAS)



## ECOWAS and authoritarian governments

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### Introduction

The resurgence of military coups across West Africa, overthrowing democratically elected governments in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger, reignited concerns over regional stability, governance, and security. What began as a mission for economic integration under the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has evolved into a

broader mandate of conflict resolution, democratic governance, and peacebuilding.



ECOWAS member states and the continent of Africa

The situation has enormous regional and global consequences. ECOWAS was originally created to promote regional trade and economic development. The population of its fifteen member states increased from 180 million in 1990 to 393 million in 2019, making it the third most populous region on the African continent. By 2043, the total population will be 765 million. GDP increased from USD 190 billion in 1990 to USD 633 billion in 2019. By 2043, the region's GDP will more than triple to USD 2 trillion.[1]

Over time, ECOWAS became progressively more active ensuring the democratization and political development of its member states.

1. Randy Aikins, *ECOWAS: Geographic Futures* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, June 30,

2024),  
<https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/recs/ecowas/>.

The issue is extremely delicate; the member states alone are sovereign, and ECOWAS has few tools at its disposal. Member states with military governments face pressure, but ECOWAS faces limits. Its efforts to curb unconstitutional changes in government have been increasingly challenged, as military juntas have continued to seize power, often citing security failures, corruption, and ineffective governance as justifications for their actions. The instability resulting from these coups not only threatens democratic institutions but also exacerbates security risks in the Sahel region, where jihadist groups have taken advantage of weakened state apparatuses.

This issue is of paramount importance to the international community due to its implications for global security, governance, and humanitarian efforts. The persistence of military takeovers undermines democratic norms and risks entrenching authoritarian rule in the region, further destabilizing an already fragile political environment.

Moreover, the disruption of governance has worsened the security situation, allowing extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates to expand their influence. The humanitarian consequences are severe, with millions of people in the region suffering from food insecurity, displacement, and the collapse of essential services.

At stake is the future of West Africa's democratic governance, the effectiveness of regional security efforts, and the lives of millions already affected by poverty and conflict. If unaddressed, these coups could encourage further military interventions in other countries, undermining decades of progress toward democracy and increasing regional instability. Additionally, the growing influence of external actors such as China and

Russia introduced new geopolitical dynamics that may further complicate efforts to restore constitutional order.

## Background: Growing commitment to democracy

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the primary aim of promoting economic integration and cooperation among its member states. However, over the past several decades, its role has expanded to include conflict prevention, management, and the promotion of democratic governance. This shift became particularly important as West Africa faced a series of civil wars and political crises in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Military coups have been a recurring challenge in the region, undermining democratic institutions and causing political instability. In recent years, a resurgence of coups has once again put ECOWAS at the center of regional efforts to restore order and stability. Originally focused on economic cooperation, ECOWAS expanded its mandate known as "*Regulation MSC/REG.1/01/08, The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework*" in response to the political and security crises that erupted in the 1990s.

The civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone prompted ECOWAS to take on a more active role in peace and security, leading to the establishment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in 1990. ECOMOG's interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone marked ECOWAS's first significant foray into regional security and conflict resolution, showcasing the organization's willingness to address crises that threatened the stability of West Africa. [2].

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2. ECOWAS, *The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework* (2008),  
<https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39184->

[doc140. the ecowas conflict prevention framework.pdf](#).

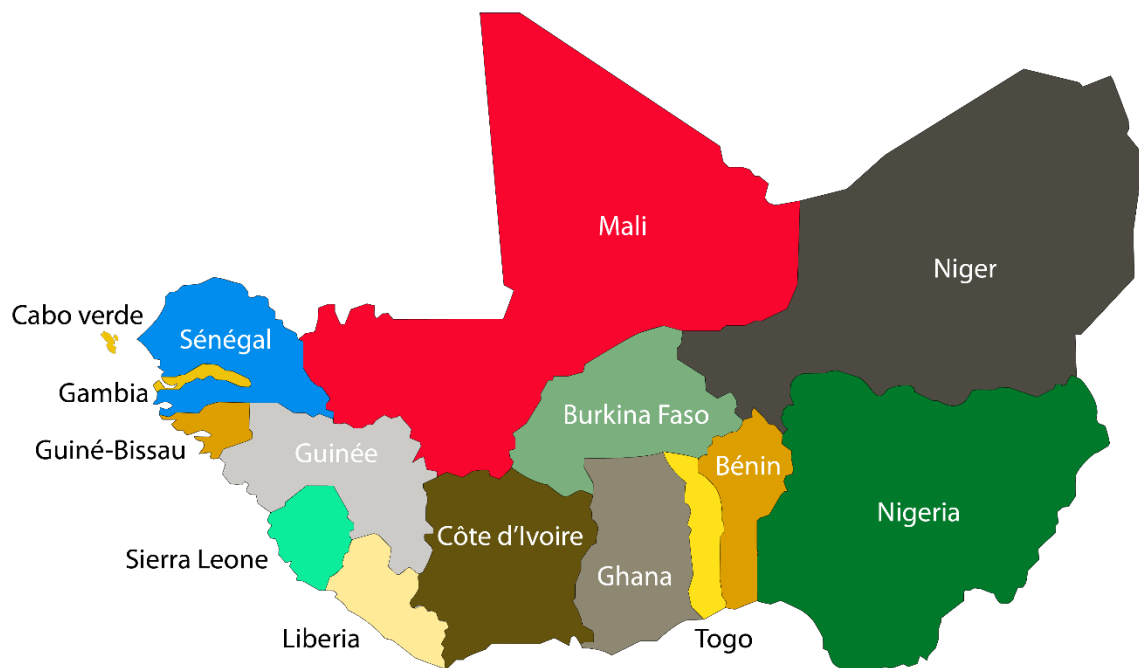


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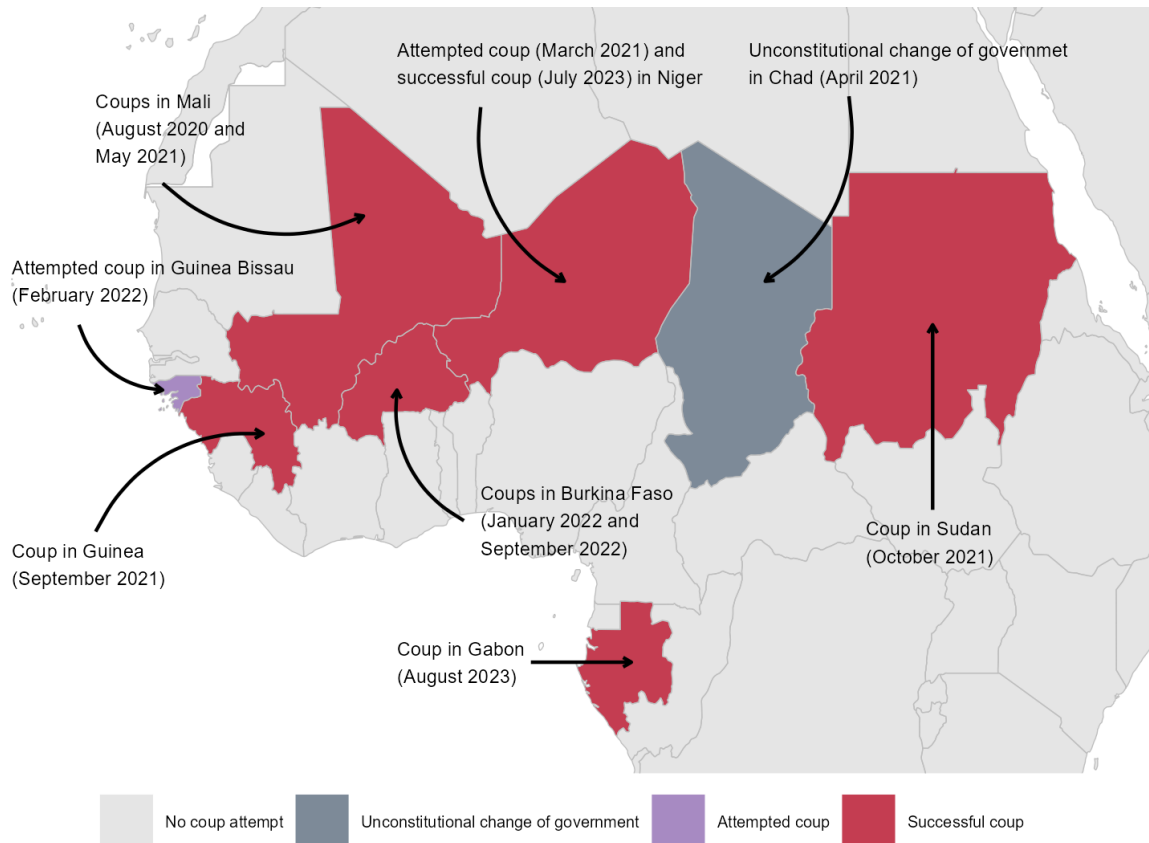
The fifteen Member States of ECOWAS are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo, including currently suspended or withdrawn members.

In the early 2000s, ECOWAS adopted *Protocol A/SP1/12/01*. This further solidified its commitment to democratic governance and the prevention of unconstitutional changes of government through the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001). This protocol established key principles for member states, including the prohibition of military coups, the promotion of free and fair elections, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. [3]

### Background: the coup challenge

These commitments reflected a regional consensus on the importance of democracy as a foundation for peace and stability. Despite the adoption of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, military coups persisted in West Africa during the 2000s and 2010s. ECOWAS responded to these events

with a range of diplomatic, political, and, at times, military interventions.



Map of contemporary military coups in ECOWAS and neighbouring states.

Source: Alexander Hudson and David Towriss, *Two more coups in Africa: similarities, differences, and what comes next*, Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 5 September 2023, <https://www.idea.int/blog/two-more-coups-africa-similarities-differences-and-what-comes-next>

In 2008, ECOWAS faced a significant test in Guinea, where a military junta seized power following the death of President Lansana Conté. ECOWAS, along with the African Union (AU) and the international community, condemned the coup and suspended Guinea's membership until a return to civilian rule was established [4]. Similarly, in 2012 a military coup in Mali prompted ECOWAS to impose sanctions, initiate mediation efforts, and deploy a regional intervention force to stabilize the country.

These interventions demonstrated ECOWAS's commitment to its principles of democratic governance and regional stability. However, they also exposed the organization's limitations. ECOWAS's reliance on diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions has often been hampered by the need for consensus among member states, varying national interests, and the complexities of each crisis. Moreover, while ECOWAS has sought to uphold democratic norms, the persistence of military coups revealed the deep-rooted political, economic, and security challenges

3. ECOWAS. (2001). *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance*. Economic Community of West African States.

4. Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002).

that many West African states continued to face.

In recent years, West Africa has experienced a resurgence of military coups, with four occurring between 2020 and 2023. The wave of coups began in Mali, where President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was ousted in August 2020 amid growing public discontent over corruption, poor governance, and the government's inability to address security threats posed by jihadist groups in the Sahel [5]. The coup leaders justified their actions as necessary to restore stability and address the country's systemic problems.

This was followed by another coup in Mali in May 2021, indicating ongoing political instability and a struggle for control within the transitional government. ECOWAS responded to the coups in Mali by imposing sanctions, suspending Mali's membership, and engaging in diplomatic efforts to facilitate a transition back to civilian rule. The organization brokered an agreement for a transitional government, which included a roadmap for elections. However, the subsequent coup in May 2021 complicated these efforts, leading to further tensions between the Malian military and ECOWAS [6].

In September 2021, Guinea witnessed a coup that ousted President Alpha Condé, who had controversially secured a third term in office through a constitutional amendment. ECOWAS condemned the coup, suspended Guinea's membership, and called for the release of Condé and a swift return to constitutional order. Despite these measures, the military junta in Guinea remains in power, highlighting the difficulty ECOWAS faces in enforcing democratic norms when political and security dynamics within member states are unstable.

Coups continued in Burkina Faso in January 2022 and Niger in 2023. In Burkina Faso, the military cited the government's failure to

effectively combat the rising jihadist insurgency as the primary reason for its intervention. The coup in Niger similarly underscored the growing discontent with governments that are perceived as corrupt, ineffective, and unable to provide security or basic services[7].

ECOWAS's efforts to address the recent coups have been further complicated by internal divisions and external geopolitical influences. The decision by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS in January 2024 and form the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) signalled a significant rift within the region. These countries accused ECOWAS of being ineffective in addressing security issues and of being too aligned with foreign powers, particularly Western nations, in its policy responses [8].

The creation of Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) indicates a divergence in regional priorities and challenges ECOWAS's authority and cohesion. External actors, including Russia and China, have also shown interest in the region, offering military and economic assistance to some West African states. This involvement has introduced new geopolitical dynamics that may either support or undermine regional stability, depending on how these influences interact with local and regional efforts to address the crises. The growing presence of foreign powers has further complicated ECOWAS's role as the primary actor in managing political crises in West Africa.[9] The resurgence of military coups and the resulting political fragmentation place ECOWAS at a crossroads.

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5. International Crisis Group, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, Report No. 286 (2020), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>

## Current Situation in West Africa

### Post-Coup Dynamics and Challenges

The aftermath of the recent military coups in West Africa has led to a period of heightened political uncertainty, security concerns, and regional fragmentation. Despite efforts by regional and international actors to restore constitutional order and address the root causes of instability, West Africa remains in a precarious state.

The situation has been characterized by continued political impasses, growing security threats, economic downturns, and evolving geopolitical dynamics, each contributing to a complex environment that requires strategic solutions. Following the military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, political transitions have been marred by uncertainty and contention.

In Mali, the transitional government, initially set up with the support of ECOWAS, has faced challenges in implementing a clear roadmap to democratic elections. The second coup in Mali in May 2021, which ousted the transitional leadership, further complicated the process. The military-led government has extended the transition period, sparking tension with ECOWAS, which imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions to pressure the Malian authorities to commit to a timeline for elections. [10]

In Guinea, the military junta that seized power in September 2021 has promised a return to civilian rule but has yet to provide a concrete timeline for elections. The transitional government has initiated a dialogue process to

discuss political reforms, yet there remains scepticism about the junta's commitment to relinquishing power.

Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the military government has faced internal and external pressure to outline a clear path toward democratic elections. The regime's primary focus has been on stabilizing the security situation in the country, which has been severely affected by jihadist insurgency, often using this priority as justification for delaying political transition.

Niger's coup in 2023 exacerbated existing tensions within the region. Following the takeover, the military government suspended the constitution and dissolved democratic institutions, leading to international condemnation and calls for a rapid return to constitutional order.

Despite efforts by ECOWAS to mediate and the imposition of sanctions, the political situation remains volatile, with the military junta resisting external pressure. These developments highlight the difficulties faced by ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) in enforcing democratic norms when confronted with complex national security and governance crises.[11]

The security situation in West Africa has deteriorated in the aftermath of the coups, particularly in the Sahel region. The political instability resulting from these coups has diverted attention and resources away from critical security operations, allowing terrorist groups to expand their influence. In Burkina Faso and Mali, jihadist groups have capitalized on the political uncertainty and the reduced effectiveness of state security apparatuses, carrying out attacks on both military and

6. International Crisis Group, *Mali: Avoiding Escalation*, Report No. 286 (2020).
7. Ebenezer Obadare and Rina Patel, "ECOWAS Split Spells Trouble for Democracy in West Africa," *Council on Foreign Relations* (2024), <https://www.cfr.org/>.
8. Ebenezer Obadare and Rina Patel, "ECOWAS Split Spells Trouble for Democracy in West Africa,"

- Council on Foreign Relations* (2024), <https://www.cfr.org/>.
9. Paul Stronski and Natasha Ng, "Russia's Growing Influence in Africa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.



civilian targets. [12] This has resulted in significant civilian casualties, displacement, and a worsening humanitarian crisis.<sup>6</sup>

The political fragility of these states has also had a ripple effect on neighbouring countries, raising concerns about the potential spillover of violence and further destabilization. For instance, the instability in Mali has complicated regional efforts to combat terrorism, with the G5 Sahel Joint Force facing operational challenges due to a lack of coordination and limited resources. The withdrawal of French troops from Mali in 2022, following disagreements between the Malian government and its international partners, has created a security vacuum that extremist groups are exploiting.

## Economic Downturn and Humanitarian Crisis

The economic impact of the coups and the resulting political instability has been profound. ECOWAS's imposition of economic sanctions on Mali, and more recently on Burkina Faso and Niger, has further strained these countries' already fragile economies. [13] The sanctions, aimed at pressuring the military governments to commit to democratic transitions, have included border closures, trade restrictions, and asset freezes. While these measures are intended to target the ruling elites, they have also had broader economic consequences, affecting the livelihoods of ordinary citizens.

In Mali, the sanctions have led to shortages of essential goods, increased inflation, and

disrupted trade flows. Similarly, in Burkina Faso and Niger, the economic downturn has exacerbated poverty and food insecurity, compounding the humanitarian crisis already fuelled by conflict and displacement.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that millions of people in the Sahel region are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance, including food, water, shelter, and healthcare. [14] The combination of conflict, political instability, and economic hardship has placed immense strain on the resilience of communities across the region.

## ECOWAS response to the coup in Niger

In response to the Niger's military coup led by General Abdourrahmane Tchiani on 26 July 2023, ECOWAS took decisive action in line with its zero-tolerance policy on unconstitutional changes of government. The coup in Niger represented the sixth such event in West Africa since 2020, following earlier coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, sparking concerns about a dangerous trend toward military rule in the region.

ECOWAS swiftly convened an extraordinary summit on 30 July 2023, where member states unanimously condemned the coup and adopted stringent economic and financial sanctions against Niger. [15] These sanctions included:

- Border closures with neighbouring ECOWAS countries.

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10. Paul Stronski and Natasha Ng, "Russia's Growing Influence in Africa," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

11. Ebenezer Obadare and Rina Patel, "ECOWAS Split Spells Trouble for Democracy in West Africa," *Council on Foreign Relations* (2024), <https://www.cfr.org/>.

12. Niger Coup: What Led to the Military Takeover? *Reuters* (2023), <https://www.reuters.com/>.

13. ECOWAS Sanctions Hit Mali's Economy Hard, *Financial Times* (2022), <https://www.ft.com/>.

14. UN OCHA, "Humanitarian Situation in the Sahel: Growing Needs Amid Rising Insecurity," *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs* (2023), <https://www.unocha.org/>.

15. International Crisis Group, "Niger at the Brink: Can ECOWAS Sanctions and Diplomacy Prevent Conflict?" *Crisis Group* (2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/>.

- Freezing of Niger's assets.
- Suspension of financial transactions, including trade and aid support.
- Electricity cuts, impacting Niger's power supply, as Nigeria (Niger's primary electricity supplier) participated in the embargo.

ECOWAS also issued a one-week ultimatum demanding the unconditional release of President Bazoum, the reinstatement of his government, and the restoration of constitutional order. Failure to comply, the bloc warned, would result in additional measures, including the potential use of force to restore democracy, which was notably authorized under the ECOWAS Protocol. This 2001 protocol prohibits unconstitutional power seizures and empowers ECOWAS to impose diplomatic, economic, and military measures to uphold democratic principles. [16]



Mohamed Toumba (second from the left), one of the leading figures of the National Council for the Protection of the Fatherland, greets coup supporters at a stadium in Niamey, the capital of Niger.

Source: Jayson Casper, "‘We are not in heaven’: Niger analyst explains Christians’ concern after coup", *Christianity Today*, 11 August 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/08/coup-niger-christians-persecution-sahel-jihadism-ecowas-war/>

ECOWAS, with support from AU and the UN, sought to resolve the crisis through diplomatic engagement. However, these efforts encountered significant obstacles. On 2 August, a high-level West African delegation

was sent to Niamey, Niger's capital, to negotiate with the coup leaders, but General Tchiani refused to meet them. [17] Following this, on 7 August, the CNSP postponed a scheduled tripartite mission by the AU, UN, and ECOWAS, citing safety concerns amid public unrest over the economic sanctions.

Despite these setbacks, ECOWAS maintained diplomatic pressure on the CNSP, working to build a consensus among member states and regional actors. Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, as the ECOWAS Chair, played a key role in leading these efforts, while emphasizing that military intervention remained on the table if diplomatic solutions failed. At the same time, Niger's neighbors Algeria and Chad voiced opposition to military intervention, stressing that such action could destabilize the entire Sahel region, further complicating ECOWAS's strategy. [18]

ECOWAS's firm stance on the coup in Niger was partly influenced by the bloc's experience with previous coups in Burkina Faso and Mali, where military juntas took control and shifted their alliances toward non-Western powers, such as Russia and China. The spread of anti-French sentiment and pro-Russian demonstrations in Niger added a layer of complexity to the crisis.

Niger, under President Bazoum, had been a key ally in the Western-led fight against jihadist terrorism in the Sahel. The country hosted several French and U.S. military bases, which were critical for counterterrorism operations against groups like Boko Haram and Islamic State affiliates. The CNSP's consolidation of power, alongside growing public support due to economic sanctions, raised concerns about a potential pivot in Niger's foreign policy, similar to developments in Burkina Faso and Mali. [19]

The situation also underscored ECOWAS's delicate balancing act. On one hand, the bloc sought to uphold its democratic principles by

16. *ISS Africa*, "Will ECOWAS Strategy Work in Niger?" *ISS Africa* (2023).  
17. *ISS Africa* 2023

18. *ISS Africa* 2023  
19. *ISS Africa* 2023



enforcing strict sanctions and warning of military action. On the other hand, ECOWAS faced mounting pressure to avoid exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Niger, where sanctions were worsening an already dire situation marked by poverty, insecurity, and displacement. Niger, one of the world's poorest nations, had long struggled with violent extremism, with insurgent groups exploiting the political vacuum created by the coup to expand their operations. [20]

As the CNSP continued to defy ECOWAS's demands, the organization considered invoking its standby military force, a measure used in the past to restore constitutional order, most notably during the 2017 incident in The Gambia. However, the potential military operation faced significant challenges. Within Nigeria, the Senate expressed reservations about leading a military intervention, urging President Tinubu and ECOWAS to prioritize diplomacy. Moreover, internal divisions within ECOWAS, as well as reluctance from major regional powers like Algeria, made it difficult to achieve consensus on the use of force. [21]

Despite these obstacles, ECOWAS remained determined to reverse the coup, arguing that failure to act decisively would embolden other military regimes in the region and further erode democratic norms. On 10 August 2023, ECOWAS leaders reconvened to assess the situation and explore alternative strategies for restoring democracy in Niger. The focus shifted toward ensuring that any action taken would prioritize stability, governance, and the ongoing fight against violent extremism in the Sahel. [22]

The coup marked a critical test for ECOWAS, whose ability to enforce democratic governance and prevent military takeovers was at risk. The organization's response to the coup, particularly its strict sanctions and threats of military action, demonstrated its commitment to upholding its zero-tolerance policy on coups.

However, the situation in Niger also exposed the limitations of ECOWAS's approach, particularly in contexts where public sentiment aligns with military rulers, and external powers like Russia gain influence. The crisis in Niger underscores the urgent need for ECOWAS to recalibrate its strategies for conflict resolution, governance support, and regional security, particularly as West Africa faces continued threats from terrorism, insurgency, and political instability.

## ECOWAS response to the coup in Burkina Faso

In response to the military coup in Burkina Faso on 24 January 2022, ECOWAS took immediate action by suspending Burkina Faso from its governing bodies. However, unlike its response to earlier coups in Guinea and Mali, ECOWAS stopped short of imposing sanctions at the time of suspension, opting to first send a delegation of defence chiefs to Ouagadougou for further assessment. This delegation was followed by a ministerial mission to explore options for resolving the political crisis. [23]

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20. ISS Africa 2023  
21. ISS Africa 2023

22. ISS Africa 2023  
23. ISS Africa 2023



Capt. Ibrahim Traore (center) at a press conference in Ouagadougou on 2 October 2022.

Source: 'Understanding Burkina Faso's latest coup', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 28 October 2022,

<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-burkina-faso-latest-coup/>

The ECOWAS heads of state reconvened on 3 February 2022 in Accra, Ghana, to review the findings from these missions and discuss next steps, including the potential for sanctions. ECOWAS expressed concern over the instability in Burkina Faso, especially given the ongoing Islamist insurgency in the Sahel region. As in Guinea and Mali, the coup in Burkina Faso was partly driven by public frustration with the government's inability to curb extremist violence, which had claimed thousands of lives and displaced millions across the Sahel. [24]

ECOWAS had taken a firm stance against coups in the region, as demonstrated by its imposition of severe sanctions against Mali in January 2022 after the junta there delayed elections. These sanctions included border closures and freezing financial assets, with the aim of pressuring the Malian junta to adhere to its commitment to democratic elections. However, these sanctions backfired, with the Malian junta gaining more popular support due

to growing resentment toward ECOWAS's measures. In Burkina Faso, ECOWAS faced similar challenges, needing to balance the urgency of restoring constitutional order with the risk of alienating the population or inadvertently strengthening the junta's position. [25]

Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, the leader of the coup in Burkina Faso, assured ECOWAS that the country would return to constitutional rule when conditions allowed, though no specific timeline was provided. This stance echoed similar statements made by military leaders in Mali and Guinea, complicating ECOWAS's efforts to push for a swift restoration of democracy.

The European Union (EU), which had aligned with ECOWAS in imposing sanctions on Mali, was also monitoring the situation in Burkina Faso. However, the EU refrained from immediately imposing sanctions on Burkina Faso, signalling that its actions would likely follow ECOWAS's lead. ECOWAS continues to face significant challenges in responding to the wave of military coups across West Africa. Pro-democracy activists have criticized the organization for its perceived inability to effectively address the root causes of these coups—namely poor governance, insecurity, and economic hardship—and for appearing disconnected from the grievances of ordinary West Africans. [26]

## ECOWAS response to the coup in Mali

Following the 2012 coup, ECOWAS took a leading role in restoring constitutional order in Mali, beginning with the Framework Agreement, and continued its involvement by facilitating the creation of the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission (DRC). This commission paved the way for the Preliminary

24. Ndiaga Thiery and Christian Akorlie, "West African Bloc Suspends Burkina Faso after Military Coup," *Reuters* (2022), [https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-bloc-suspends-burkina-faso-after-military-coup-2022-01-28/)

[bloc-suspends-burkina-faso-after-military-coup-2022-01-28/](https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-bloc-suspends-burkina-faso-after-military-coup-2022-01-28/).

25. Ndiaga, & Akorlie, 2022.

26. Ndiaga, & Akorlie, 2022.

Agreement, which was instrumental in organizing Mali's Presidential and Legislative elections. Furthermore, ECOWAS developed a Transitional Roadmap and implemented the Concept of Operations (CONOPS), both of which became the foundation for international military intervention in Mali. These measures highlighted the strategic and operational frameworks that ECOWAS created to stabilize Mali during its political transition. [27]



Colonel Assimi Goita at a ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of Mali's independence, Bamako, 22 September 2020.

Source: 'African Union suspends Mali after military coup and threatens sanctions', *Reuters*, 2 June 2021,

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/02/africa/african-union-suspends-mali-intl/index.html>

Despite these comprehensive measures, the UN did not fully endorse ECOWAS's request for support in the form of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA). The UN, along with some Western governments, was reluctant to back this military intervention, expressing concerns over ECOWAS's planning and a preference for exploring non-military solutions. Critics, however, argue that the UN's refusal to support ECOWAS—and the subsequent shift to the UN-backed MINUSMA mission—demonstrated a disregard for the ongoing regional counterterrorism efforts that were already in place. For instance, Susan Rice, the

U.S. Assistant Secretary for African Affairs at the time, pointed out that ECOWAS had handled similar challenges independently in the Mano River Basin region without deferring to the UN. [28]

Nonetheless, ECOWAS's interventions in other instances, such as Niger (2010) and Burkina Faso (2014), facilitated a quicker return to constitutional order under civilian-led transitional governments. These interventions highlight the organization's effectiveness in balancing diplomatic engagement with the need for political stability in member states experiencing turmoil. [29]

Focusing on Mali, ECOWAS's diplomatic, technical, and political engagements were crucial in guiding the country toward a democratic transition. At the diplomatic level, ECOWAS appointed Goodluck Jonathan, the former Nigerian president, as the Mediator for Mali. Jonathan facilitated negotiations between protest groups like the M5-RFP and President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's government. However, these mediation efforts failed to prevent the coup that occurred on 18 August 2020. Despite this setback, ECOWAS managed to establish an 18-month transitional government, which included a civilian prime minister, with the goal of restoring democratic governance by January 2022.

However, a *second* coup occurred in May 2021, further delaying the proposed election timeline. When the Malian authorities presented an extended timetable of six months to five years for elections, ECOWAS rejected this plan and imposed strict economic and financial sanctions, including border closures. International reactions to the evolving situation in Mali were mixed. While the African Union, France, the U.S., and the European Union (EU) supported ECOWAS's sanctions, Russia and China opposed these measures at the UN Security Council. Guinea, under its own transitional authority, chose not

27. Mubin Adewumi Bakare, "ECOWAS and the Management of Political Transitions in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso: Adopting a Three-Dimensional Approach for Stability and Sustainable

Democracy and Development," *ACCORD*, February 28, 2023

28. Bakare, 2023.

29. Bakare, 2023

to comply with ECOWAS's sanctions, maintaining open borders with Mali in alignment with its Pan-Africanist vision. Mauritania also distanced itself from ECOWAS's approach, signing a trade agreement with Mali in February 2022. [30]

Throughout the political crisis, the UN Secretary-General and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Mali remained engaged in dialogue with the Malian transitional authorities. They consistently encouraged the submission of a consensual electoral calendar, working closely with representatives from ECOWAS, the AU, and MINUSMA. The EU, in response to the deteriorating political situation and the growing influence of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali, imposed targeted sanctions on five Malian officials believed to be obstructing the democratic transition.

Despite setbacks, ECOWAS continues to play a critical role in shaping political transitions in West Africa, particularly in countries facing military takeovers or deep political crises. The organization's ability to blend diplomatic mediation with more assertive interventions has been essential in guiding several member states, including Mali, through turbulent transitions. However, the ongoing challenges in Mali illustrate the complexities ECOWAS faces in balancing regional leadership with the constraints imposed by international actors. [31]

## Role of the United Nations

**Security Council Resolution on Niger:** The United Nations strongly condemned the unconstitutional actions taken in Niger on 26 July 2023, which led to an attempt to

overthrow the legitimate government. The UN reiterated its firm commitment to upholding democratic governance and the rule of law, as enshrined in international and regional frameworks, including the United Nations Charter and the ECOWAS Protocol A/SP/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance. The UN called for the immediate and unconditional release of President Mohammed Bazoum, his family, and members of his government, who were unlawfully detained.

Niger has made considerable strides in recent years toward strengthening democratic institutions and fostering peace. However, this unconstitutional seizure of power risks reversing those gains. Moreover, the coup aggravated the security situation in a region already battling increasing terrorist activities, exacerbating socioeconomic challenges that have long plagued the country and its neighbours. [32]

The United Nations strongly supports the efforts ECOWAS, the African Union, and other regional bodies to restore constitutional order in Niger. The UN stands in full solidarity with these organizations, welcoming their decisive actions and statements opposing any form of unconstitutional governance. ECOWAS's call for the military to return to the barracks and relinquish power to a civilian authority is crucial, and the United Nations encourages all parties involved to engage in peaceful dialogue and mediation processes led by ECOWAS and the AU.

Furthermore, the UN recognized the critical need for strengthening existing governance frameworks in the region to prevent future unconstitutional changes of government. The trend of military coups in West Africa highlights the fragility of state institutions, and the UN reiterates its commitment to supporting reforms that enhance governance, security, and the rule of law. The international community

30. Bakare, 2023

31. Bakare, 2023

32. United Nations Security Council. "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Niger." *United*

*Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, 28 July 2023,

<https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15372.doc.htm>



must continue to back regional and continental efforts to uphold constitutional principles and foster sustainable peace. [33]

In solidarity with the people of Niger, the United Nations emphasized the importance of safeguarding civilians and ensuring continued humanitarian support during this period of instability. The UN, through its humanitarian agencies and partners, will work to ensure that critical assistance, including food, healthcare, and shelter, reaches those most in need, especially vulnerable populations impacted by the political unrest.

The United Nations, in close cooperation with ECOWAS, remains dedicated to fostering a peaceful resolution to the crisis in Niger and restoring stability to the country, in line with its commitments to peace, security, and democratic governance in West Africa.[34]

**United Nations response to the situation in Burkina Faso:** The UN expressed deep concern regarding the unconstitutional change of government in Burkina Faso, which took place on 30 September 2022. This development marks the second military coup in the country within an eight-month span, raising serious concerns about the potential for prolonged instability in the Sahel region. The Security Council acknowledged the significant challenges posed by this disruption, particularly given the fragile security context in the Sahel, where terrorism and violence continue to escalate. <sup>15</sup>

The UN stressed that this latest military takeover undermines previous agreements aimed at restoring constitutional order in Burkina Faso. The Security Council had previously noted the transitional authorities' commitment to returning to *civilian governance by July 2024*, and any deviation from this timeline would not only affect Burkina Faso's political future but also

regional stability. Therefore, the UN called on all parties within Burkina Faso to resolve their differences peacefully and through dialogue, urging them to adhere to the agreed timetable for democratic transition. [35]

In its statement, the Security Council echoed the calls made by ECOWAS for an immediate end to all forms of violence and looting. ECOWAS has taken a firm stance against unconstitutional power grabs in the region, and the UN fully supports its demand for the restoration of constitutional order in Burkina Faso, as outlined in the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Additionally, the Security Council highlighted the importance of regional and continental mediation efforts, commending the African Union (AU) for its prompt response in condemning the military takeover. [36] The UN also expressed concern that the continued political instability, compounded by a dire socioeconomic and humanitarian situation, could embolden terrorist groups operating in Burkina Faso. The instability provides opportunities for such groups to exploit the weakened state apparatus, leading to further loss of innocent lives.

This situation calls for increased international support to address both the political crisis and the security challenges posed by terrorism in the country. In line with its peacebuilding mission, the UN Peacebuilding Commission has been engaged with Burkina Faso's regional and international partners. The Security Council acknowledged the Commission's efforts and reaffirmed the need for continued coordination to address the country's peacebuilding challenges, especially during this critical transition period. [37]

**United Nations Security Council Resolution on Mali:** The Security Council on 5 July 2012 addressed the political and security crisis in

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33. Reuters, 2023

34. United Nations Security Council. "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Burkina Faso." United Nations, 7 October

2022. <https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc15057.doc.htm>.

35. UNSC, 2022



Mali following the military coup of 22 March 2012. This resolution reaffirmed the Security Council's commitment to Mali's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity while outlining a comprehensive response aimed at restoring constitutional order and addressing the regional security threats posed by terrorist groups and rebel factions. The resolution underscores the need for dialogue between transitional authorities and various political factions to ensure a peaceful return to civilian rule, calling for an inclusive political process that engages civil society and all key actors in Mali. [38]

A critical component of this is its rejection of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad's (MNLA) unilateral declaration of independence for Northern Mali, known as Azawad. The Council categorically denounces this claim, reaffirming the territorial integrity of Mali, and considers such secessionist actions as null and void. The resolution also condemns the humanitarian consequences of the crisis, including the displacement of civilians and worsening food insecurity, calling on all parties to ensure unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. [39].

## Country Positions

On 28 January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger made an unprecedented joint announcement, formally declaring their withdrawal from ECOWAS. This marked a significant shift in West African geopolitics, as it was the first time in ECOWAS's nearly 50-year history that member states had taken such coordinated action to leave the organization. [40]

The military governments strongly condemned the sanctions, labelling them illegal,

illegitimate, and inhumane. According to their joint statement, ECOWAS's decisions to cut off financial resources, freeze their access to regional banks, and impose economic penalties failed to respect the core principles of the bloc. Instead, the juntas argued that these sanctions exacerbated already dire humanitarian and security situations, especially in their collective fight against terrorist groups linked to ISIS and Al-Qaeda operating in the Sahel region.

ECOWAS had used these sanctions as a tool to pressure the junta-led governments to commit to transitional elections and return to civilian rule. However, the military leaders rejected this pressure, arguing that elections should only take place after the security situation is stabilized. The leaders of these nations criticized ECOWAS for insisting on quick elections while disregarding the terrorism threats that they face on a daily basis. [41]

**Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States:** In response to ECOWAS's stance, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger signed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a mutual defense pact in September 2023. This treaty emphasizes military cooperation and mutual support in case of any external threat or military intervention, signalling their preparedness to resist ECOWAS or any external actor that might attempt to force their hand through military means. Through this alliance, the three nations have sought to create a united front that prioritizes Pan-Africanism and their sovereignty over external pressures to transition to civilian rule. This alliance serves as a counterbalance to ECOWAS's economic and political influence in the region.

The leaders of these countries have voiced concerns that ECOWAS has drifted away from its foundational principles of regional

36. Bolarinwa, Shol, 2023.

37. VOA Africa. "ECOWAS Speaks Out Against Burkina Faso Coup 2.0." *Voice of America (VOA)*. 3 October 2022. <https://www.voaffrica.com/a/6777811.html>

38. Good Governance Africa. "Coups in West Africa: A Critical Analysis of AU and ECOWAS

Responses." *Good Governance Africa*, 25 August 2023. <https://gga.org/coups-in-west-africa-a-critical-analysis-of-au-and-ecowas-responses/>.

39. Good Governance Africa 2023

40. Good Governance Africa 2023

cooperation and mutual development. Colonel Amadou Abdramane, spokesperson for the Niger junta, accused ECOWAS of failing to support Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in their fight against terrorism and instead focusing on imposing external governance models. The juntas argue that ECOWAS, in its push for swift elections and civilian governance, has disregarded the complex realities on the ground, particularly the security challenges posed by Islamist insurgencies. [42]

Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso declared that “ECOWAS is over,” emphasizing that while they were leaving the organization, they remained committed to Pan-Africanism. He invited other African nations who share their vision of self-determination and anti-colonialism to collaborate, reiterating that Burkina Faso would welcome any African who wished to come. The junta leaders believe that ECOWAS, under pressure from Western countries like France, had lost its credibility and was no longer serving the interests of the people.[43]

**Concerns about freedom of movement and economic isolation:** One of the major concerns raised by critics of the withdrawal is the potential disruption to the free movement of people and goods. ECOWAS has long facilitated the ability of West Africans to travel and trade freely across member states, which has been crucial for economic integration and regional stability. Citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger fear that their withdrawal from ECOWAS could lead to economic isolation, making it harder to trade across borders, access regional markets, and secure their livelihoods.

This has raised questions about the future of the ECOWAS passport, which allows for visa-free travel among member states. Additionally, some residents of these countries worry about the possibility of deportations or restrictions

on movement to other West African nations, particularly those with strong ties to Western countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria. There are concerns that these governments could respond harshly to citizens from the AES countries, leading to further social and economic exclusion. [44]

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS represents a broader political statement about the rejection of Western influence in their domestic affairs. Some African scholars and members of the African diaspora have expressed support for these nations’ decision to distance themselves from former colonial powers like France and to assert greater control over their political futures. This sentiment aligns with growing anti-French sentiment across parts of West Africa, where France’s influence is increasingly seen as an extension of colonial-era exploitation. [45]

### **ECOWAS pro-democratic countries:**

Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal each played critical roles in shaping ECOWAS’s response to the military coups in West Africa, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. These nations have been instrumental in pushing for a combination of sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and the potential use of military force to restore democratic governance.

Nigeria, under the leadership of President Bola Tinubu, has been the driving force behind ECOWAS’s robust response to the coup in Niger. As the Chairman of ECOWAS, Tinubu has emphasized Nigeria’s leading role in upholding democratic governance in the region. After the Niger coup on 26 July 2023, Nigeria pushed for sanctions against the junta, including cutting off financial aid and suspending trade agreements with Niger. President Tinubu has made it clear that while

41. Good Governance Africa 2023

42. Good Governance Africa 2023

43. Good Governance Africa 2023

44. Good Governance Africa 2023

45. Good Governance Africa 2023

46. Good Governance Africa 2023

diplomacy remains the priority, military intervention remains an option if the junta does not restore the government of the ousted President.

Nigeria's role is significant not only because of its leadership within ECOWAS but also due to its status as the largest economy in West Africa and its military strength, which is vital if ECOWAS were to pursue any military option. Moreover, Nigeria has been actively seeking international support for ECOWAS's actions, working with the African Union and the United Nations to legitimize ECOWAS's moves against the junta in Niger. [46]

## Some Proposals for Action

**Direct military intervention:** In collaboration with a UN mandate, ECOWAS could potentially initiate a military intervention to forcibly restore civilian governments in the affected countries. This has been proposed as a possible solution to the growing coup trend in West Africa, notably by the Nigerian and Ghanaian governments. However, this approach carries significant risks, including regional instability, potential civilian casualties, and the prospect of a prolonged conflict, particularly as the military juntas in these nations are increasingly aligning with one another and may resist such actions.

**Complete nonrecognition, isolation and sanctions:** ECOWAS and the UN could impose severe economic sanctions and political isolation, including closing borders, cutting off trade, and restricting aid to strangle the economies of these nations. This could lead to mass suffering among the population, worsening humanitarian conditions, and creating more instability and resentment toward ECOWAS and the international community. On the other hand, this strategy could also trigger public discontent within these countries, potentially motivating the populace to pressure their governments to relinquish power and restore civilian rule.

As a key condition for engagement, the military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger must formally **dissolve their tripartite security alliance**. This alliance has the potential to further destabilize the region and escalate tensions between these countries and the international community. By ending this cooperation, the three nations would demonstrate a commitment to regional peace and stability and signal their willingness to reintegrate into the broader West African security framework.

In return, ECOWAS, with support from the United Nations, will facilitate security assistance and cooperation aimed at addressing common threats such as terrorism, organized crime, and insurgencies. The dissolution of this military pact must be accompanied by the adoption and adherence to ECOWAS and UN principles of governance, including respect for democracy, human rights, and rule of law. This step would also open the door to greater international support for their security challenges, while ensuring alignment with regional and international norms.

**Acknowledge the current military governments in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger as interim authorities**, provided that they commit to a roadmap for a peaceful transition back to civilian rule. This conditional recognition would be contingent upon the following key points:

- **United Nations Membership:** The three governments must continue to adhere to the core principles of the United Nations, including respect for human rights, political inclusiveness, and international cooperation.
- **Commitment to Democracy:** They must publicly commit to a firm timeline for free and fair elections to be conducted within an agreed-upon timeframe of 24 months. The process should be monitored by ECOWAS, the African



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Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN).

**Reestablish unconditional diplomatic recognition of coup governments and welcome them back to ECOWAS cooperation.** Acting on the principle of national self-determination and state sovereignty, ECOWAS could abandon its

demand for democratic rule and restore relations with all member states. All ECOWAS member states would be encouraged to rescind their sanctions and re-open their orders and encourage diplomatic recognition and bi-lateral activity. ECOWAS would readmit suspended Member States and offer invitations to withdrawn governments.

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