

ECOWAS RESPONSES TO MILITARY COUPS IN WEST AFRICA, 2020--2025: AN ANALYSIS

BY

Okorochoa Matthew Chidiebere

Department of Political Science

Abia State University, Uturu

okorochamattthew@gmail.com +2348061110788

Abstract

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 has posed one of the greatest threats to democratic governance and regional stability since the wave of democratization in the 1990s. During this period, Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and the attempted coup in Sierra Leone (2023) challenged the commitment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to constitutional governance. As the principal regional organization responsible for promoting democracy, peace, and security, ECOWAS responded through diplomatic engagements, economic sanctions, suspension of affected states, mediation initiatives, and, in the case of Niger, threats of military intervention. However, these responses generated significant debates regarding their effectiveness, consistency, legitimacy, and long-term implications for regional integration. This article examines ECOWAS'

responses to military coups in West Africa from 2020 to 2025. The study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on documentary analysis of official ECOWAS communiqués, African Union reports, United Nations documents, scholarly publications, policy papers, and media reports. The article is anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory, which explains how security challenges within a geographical region are interconnected and require collective responses. Findings indicate that although ECOWAS has demonstrated a strong normative commitment to constitutional order, its interventions have achieved mixed outcomes due to inconsistent enforcement, divergent interests among member states, declining public confidence, geopolitical competition, increasing anti-French sentiments, expanding terrorist insurgencies, and the growing influence of external actors such as Russia. The study concludes that ECOWAS must reform its conflict prevention mechanisms, strengthen democratic institutions, address governance deficits, and prioritize preventive diplomacy alongside sanctions. Sustainable peace in West Africa depends not only on condemning military coups but also on addressing the structural conditions that encourage unconstitutional changes of government.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Military Coups, Democracy, West Africa, Regional Security, Constitutional Order, Governance.

Introduction

The return of military coups to West Africa between 2020 and 2025 represents one of the most significant political developments on the African continent in recent decades. After nearly two decades of relative democratic consolidation, the region experienced an alarming resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government, reversing many democratic gains achieved since the early 1990s. The military takeovers in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021), Guinea (September 2021), Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), and Niger (July 2023), together with the attempted coup in Sierra Leone in November 2023, exposed serious weaknesses in democratic governance, constitutionalism, and regional security (Bah, 2022; Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023).

Military coups have historically constituted a defining feature of post-colonial African politics. Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, numerous African states experienced repeated military interventions arising from weak political institutions, ethnic tensions, economic crises, corruption, and ineffective civilian leadership (Decalo, 1990). West Africa was particularly vulnerable, with countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Sierra Leone witnessing successive military regimes before the democratic transitions of the 1990s. The end of the Cold War ushered in renewed commitments to constitutional governance, multiparty democracy, and civilian rule across the region (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997).

Recognizing the destructive effects of military rule, ECOWAS progressively transformed itself from an organization primarily concerned with economic

integration into one actively engaged in regional peace, security, and democratic governance. This transformation was institutionalized through the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, followed by the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, both of which prohibit unconstitutional changes of government and provide mechanisms for collective responses (ECOWAS, 1999; ECOWAS, 2001).

The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance explicitly declares that every accession to political power must occur through free, fair, and transparent elections. Military coups are therefore regarded as unacceptable violations of constitutional order and regional norms. These legal instruments empowered ECOWAS to impose sanctions, suspend member states, undertake mediation efforts, and, where necessary, authorize collective military intervention to restore constitutional governance (Hartmann, 2017).

Despite these normative commitments, the resurgence of military coups after 2020 has tested ECOWAS more severely than at any period since the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The coup in Mali in August 2020 marked the beginning of a new cycle of military interventions. President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was removed from office following months of mass protests over corruption, electoral irregularities, insecurity, and deteriorating governance (International Crisis Group, 2020). ECOWAS responded by suspending Mali's membership, imposing economic sanctions, closing

borders, and dispatching mediators led by former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan. Although these measures facilitated a transition agreement, another military takeover occurred in May 2021, demonstrating the limitations of ECOWAS' initial intervention.

The political instability spread rapidly across the region. Guinea experienced a military coup in September 2021 when Colonel Mamady Doumbouya overthrew President Alpha Condé following widespread dissatisfaction over constitutional amendments that enabled Condé to seek a controversial third presidential term (Souaré, 2022). ECOWAS condemned the coup, suspended Guinea, and demanded a rapid return to civilian rule. However, implementation of the transition timetable encountered repeated delays.

Burkina Faso witnessed two military coups in 2022 amid escalating jihadist violence and declining public confidence in civilian leadership. Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in January 2022, only to be removed by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September of the same year. ECOWAS adopted diplomatic engagement rather than imposing extensive economic sanctions, partly due to the country's fragile security situation (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023).

Perhaps the most significant challenge emerged in July 2023 when members of the Presidential Guard removed President Mohamed Bazoum from office in Niger. Unlike previous responses, ECOWAS adopted an unusually robust position by imposing severe economic

sanctions, suspending commercial transactions, freezing financial assets, and threatening military intervention if constitutional order was not restored. This unprecedented stance generated divisions among member states while attracting strong opposition from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, whose military governments pledged collective resistance against any external military action (BBC, 2023).

The Niger crisis fundamentally altered regional security dynamics. Public demonstrations in several West African countries increasingly criticized ECOWAS for perceived selective enforcement of democratic principles while accusing the organization of serving external geopolitical interests. The crisis further intensified anti-French sentiments and coincided with expanding Russian diplomatic and security influence across the Sahel. Consequently, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2024 and subsequently established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), thereby posing unprecedented challenges to regional integration and collective security.

The repeated occurrence of military coups raises fundamental questions regarding the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional security organization. While the organization has consistently condemned unconstitutional changes of government, critics argue that sanctions have disproportionately affected ordinary citizens without compelling military governments to relinquish power. Others contend that ECOWAS has failed to address the deeper structural drivers of coups, including poor governance, electoral manipulation,

corruption, youth unemployment, insecurity, constitutional amendments designed to prolong presidential tenure, and declining public trust in democratic institutions (Gyimah-Boadi, 2022).

Scholars have also questioned the consistency of ECOWAS interventions. In several instances, civilian leaders who undermined constitutional principles through controversial constitutional amendments or disputed elections received relatively limited criticism compared to military juntas. This perceived inconsistency has weakened ECOWAS' normative authority and contributed to growing public sympathy for military governments in some countries (Souaré, 2022).

Beyond governance concerns, the resurgence of coups reflects broader regional security challenges. The Sahel has become one of the world's most volatile regions due to expanding terrorist activities by groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Persistent insecurity has overwhelmed civilian governments, weakened state institutions, displaced millions of people, and undermined economic development. Military officers have frequently justified their interventions by citing the inability of elected governments to protect citizens from terrorism and violent extremism.

These developments underscore the complexity of balancing democratic governance with national security imperatives. While military interventions violate constitutional norms, public dissatisfaction with ineffective civilian governments has created conditions

under which segments of the population initially welcomed military takeovers. Consequently, ECOWAS faces the difficult challenge of defending constitutional order while simultaneously addressing governance failures that contribute to political instability.

The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of ECOWAS' responses to military coups between 2020 and 2025. Unlike earlier studies focusing on isolated cases, this article comparatively analyzes regional responses across multiple countries to identify patterns, strengths, weaknesses, and emerging challenges. The study contributes to the literature on regional organizations, democratic governance, conflict prevention, and African security by evaluating the effectiveness of ECOWAS' institutional mechanisms in responding to unconstitutional changes of government.

Specifically, the objectives of this article are to examine the causes of the resurgence of military coups in West Africa; analyze ECOWAS' diplomatic, political, economic, and security responses between 2020 and 2025; assess the effectiveness of these responses in restoring constitutional governance; identify the challenges confronting ECOWAS; and propose policy recommendations for strengthening regional democracy and conflict prevention mechanisms.

Literature Review

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 has generated renewed scholarly interest in democratic governance, regional security, constitutionalism, and the effectiveness of regional organizations in conflict management. This section reviews existing literature on military coups, ECOWAS, democratic governance, and regional security. It also examines empirical studies relating to ECOWAS' responses to recent coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger while identifying the research gap that this study seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

This study is anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003). The theory argues that security threats are often regionally clustered because neighbouring states are more likely to affect one another's security than distant countries. Consequently, states within a particular geographical region become interdependent in matters relating to peace, conflict, governance, and stability.

According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), a regional security complex exists where the national security of individual states cannot be realistically considered in isolation from that of neighbouring states. Political instability, terrorism, civil wars, refugee movements, organized crime, and military coups in one country

frequently produce spill-over effects that threaten the stability of surrounding countries.

West Africa represents a typical regional security complex because its member states share common historical, political, economic, and security challenges. Colonial legacies, porous borders, ethnic affiliations, transnational criminal networks, violent extremism, and economic interdependence mean that instability in one member state often has consequences for the entire region.

The resurgence of military coups between 2020 and 2025 illustrates this interconnectedness. The coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger were not isolated national events but part of a wider regional pattern that challenged democratic governance across West Africa. Their cumulative effect weakened regional integration, disrupted economic cooperation, complicated counter-terrorism operations, and undermined ECOWAS' credibility as the custodian of constitutional order.

RSCT explains why ECOWAS has consistently regarded military coups as regional rather than purely domestic issues. The organization recognizes that unconstitutional changes of government can encourage similar actions elsewhere through what scholars describe as the "demonstration effect" or "coup contagion." Following the successful coups in Mali, similar military interventions occurred in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, suggesting that unconstitutional seizures of power may spread across neighbouring states when not effectively addressed.

The theory also explains ECOWAS' reliance on collective security mechanisms. Rather than allowing individual member states to respond independently, ECOWAS employs regional institutions such as the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Mediation and Security Council, and the Council of the Wise to coordinate collective responses to threats against constitutional governance.

Furthermore, RSCT emphasizes that security extends beyond military threats. Political instability, weak governance, economic crises, corruption, terrorism, and social exclusion collectively influence regional peace and security. Therefore, military coups should be understood not merely as unconstitutional political events but as symptoms of broader governance and security failures.

Despite its relevance, the theory has limitations. It tends to emphasize regional dynamics while paying relatively less attention to domestic political actors, leadership failures, constitutional manipulation, economic inequality, and external geopolitical competition. The increasing influence of Russia, France, the United States, China, and other external actors in the Sahel demonstrates that regional security cannot always be explained solely through regional interactions.

Nevertheless, Regional Security Complex Theory remains appropriate for this study because it provides a comprehensive framework for understanding why ECOWAS considers military coups collective security threats requiring coordinated regional responses.

Conceptual Review

Military Coup

A military coup, commonly referred to as a coup d'état, is the sudden and unconstitutional seizure of political power by members of the armed forces or other state security institutions (Powell &Thyne, 2011). Unlike popular revolutions or civil wars, coups are typically executed by a relatively small group within the military or political elite and involve the forceful removal of an incumbent government without following constitutional procedures.

Luttwak (1969) describes a coup as the illegal replacement of a government through the manipulation of state institutions, especially the military, police, and intelligence agencies. Huntington (1968) argues that military intervention in politics often results from weak political institutions, poor governance, and the inability of civilian governments to maintain legitimacy and public order.

African military coups have historically been associated with several factors, including corruption, electoral fraud, ethnic divisions, economic crises, constitutional manipulation, poor civil-military relations, and declining public confidence in democratic institutions (Decalo, 1990). Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, military governments became a dominant feature of political life across many African countries.

Although democratization in the 1990s significantly reduced military interventions, the resurgence of coups

after 2020 demonstrates that many of the structural causes remain unresolved. Scholars argue that persistent insecurity, youth unemployment, poverty, constitutional amendments extending presidential tenure, and declining trust in civilian governments have contributed to renewed military interventions (Bah, 2022).

Democracy and Constitutional Governance

Democracy refers to a political system in which governmental authority is derived from the consent of the people through periodic, free, fair, and competitive elections (Dahl, 1971). Democratic governance extends beyond elections to include accountability, transparency, and respect for human rights, the rule of law, judicial independence, and effective public participation.

According to Diamond (1999), constitutional governance requires that political authority be exercised within established constitutional rules rather than through arbitrary or military means. Constitutions define the powers of government institutions, regulate political competition, and protect citizens' fundamental rights.

The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) emphasizes constitutional rule, separation of powers, electoral integrity, and zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government. Consequently, military coups are viewed as direct violations of democratic principles and regional legal commitments.

However, several scholars argue that democratic legitimacy depends not only on constitutional procedures

but also on government performance. Gyimah-Boadi (2022) notes that ineffective governance; corruption, insecurity, and economic hardship often reduce public confidence in elected governments, creating conditions that military actors exploit to justify unconstitutional interventions.

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 through the Treaty of Lagos primarily to promote regional economic integration among West African countries (ECOWAS, 1975). Over time, the organization expanded its mandate to include peacekeeping, conflict prevention, democratic governance, election observation, mediation, and regional security.

The adoption of the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security represented a major institutional transformation. The mechanism established institutions such as the Mediation and Security Council, Defence and Security Commission, and the Council of Elders to facilitate regional conflict management (ECOWAS, 1999).

Similarly, the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance strengthened ECOWAS' normative commitment to constitutional rule by prohibiting military coups, unconstitutional changes of government, and electoral malpractice.

According to Hartmann (2017), ECOWAS has become one of Africa's most active regional organizations in promoting democracy and responding to political crises. Its interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, and more recently Mali and Niger demonstrate an expanding regional security role.

Nevertheless, scholars argue that ECOWAS faces significant operational constraints, including limited financial resources, political divisions among member states, inconsistent enforcement of democratic norms, and dependence on Nigeria for leadership and funding (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2023).

Regional Security

Regional security refers to cooperative arrangements through which neighboring states collectively address security threats affecting the region. Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that states located within the same geographical region often experience interconnected security challenges that require collective solutions.

West Africa faces multiple transnational security threats including terrorism, violent extremism, organized crime, arms trafficking, human trafficking, piracy, and unconstitutional changes of government. These challenges frequently transcend national borders and therefore require coordinated regional responses.

The resurgence of military coups has significantly complicated regional security by weakening democratic institutions, disrupting regional cooperation, and diverting resources from counterterrorism efforts.

Consequently, ECOWAS increasingly views military coups as both political and security threats to regional stability.

Review of Empirical Literature

Several empirical studies have examined the resurgence of military coups and ECOWAS' responses during the period under review.

Bah (2022) argues that the coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso represent symptoms of broader governance failures rather than isolated military conspiracies. Using qualitative analysis, the author concludes that corruption, insecurity, youth unemployment, and constitutional manipulation significantly contributed to public support for military interventions.

Similarly, Aning and Edu-Afful (2023) examine ECOWAS' response to recent military coups and observe that while the organization consistently condemned unconstitutional changes of government, its enforcement mechanisms produced mixed outcomes. They argue that sanctions often imposed severe economic hardship on civilians without necessarily compelling military juntas to relinquish power.

International Crisis Group (2020), in its assessment of Mali's political crisis, notes that ECOWAS played an important mediatory role during negotiations following the August 2020 coup. However, the study criticizes the organization for focusing primarily on restoring constitutional order without sufficiently addressing

governance failures that initially generated public dissatisfaction.

Souaré (2022) examines Guinea's 2021 military takeover and argues that ECOWAS' response lacked credibility because the organization had earlier shown limited resistance to President Alpha Condé's controversial constitutional amendment that enabled his third-term bid. According to the author, such inconsistencies weakened ECOWAS' normative legitimacy.

Yabi (2023) analyzes the Niger coup and argues that ECOWAS adopted its strongest anti-coup measures in decades by imposing comprehensive sanctions and threatening military intervention. While these measures demonstrated institutional resolve, they also generated political divisions within the region and strengthened nationalist support for the military junta.

According to the African Union Peace and Security Council (2023), repeated military coups threaten continental democratic gains and undermine Agenda 2063's aspirations for peace, security, and sustainable development. The AU consequently supported ECOWAS sanctions while encouraging dialogue and negotiated transitions.

The United Nations Development Programme (2022) links military coups in the Sahel to multidimensional insecurity, including climate change, food insecurity, unemployment, weak governance, and violent extremism. The report argues that sustainable democratic

governance requires addressing these underlying structural conditions.

Williams (2021) observes that terrorist insurgencies have fundamentally altered civil-military relations across the Sahel. As civilian governments struggled to contain extremist violence, sections of the military increasingly perceived themselves as alternative political leaders capable of restoring national security.

Powell and Thyne (2011), through a global statistical analysis of coups, conclude that countries experiencing weak democratic institutions, political instability, and economic decline are significantly more vulnerable to military interventions. Their findings remain relevant in explaining the resurgence of coups across West Africa.

ECOWAS Responses to Specific Military Coups

Mali (2020–2021)

Several scholars consider Mali the beginning of West Africa's recent wave of military coups. Following President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's overthrow in August 2020, ECOWAS imposed border closures, financial sanctions, suspension from regional institutions, and initiated mediation efforts.

International Crisis Group (2020) argues that ECOWAS succeeded in facilitating a transitional arrangement but underestimated divisions within Mali's military leadership. Consequently, Colonel Assimi Goïta staged a second coup in May 2021, exposing limitations in ECOWAS' conflict management strategy.

Guinea (2021)

Research on Guinea largely focuses on ECOWAS' perceived inconsistency. Souaré (2022) argues that although ECOWAS condemned the military coup, the organization had previously remained relatively silent regarding President Condé's constitutional amendment for a controversial third presidential term.

This inconsistency reduced public confidence in ECOWAS and enabled military leaders to portray themselves as defenders of constitutional justice.

Burkina Faso (2022)

The Burkina Faso coups occurred amid escalating terrorist violence. Aning and Edu-Afful (2023) observe that ECOWAS adopted relatively moderate responses because harsh sanctions could have further weakened counterterrorism operations.

Consequently, ECOWAS prioritized diplomatic engagement and negotiated transition timelines instead of imposing severe economic restrictions similar to those implemented against Mali and Niger.

Niger (2023)

Most recent scholarship identifies Niger as ECOWAS' greatest institutional test. Following President Mohamed Bazoum's removal in July 2023, ECOWAS imposed comprehensive sanctions, suspended commercial transactions, froze state assets, and threatened military intervention.

Yabi (2023) argues that while these actions demonstrated unprecedented commitment to constitutional order, they also generated strong nationalist resistance, deepened regional polarization, and accelerated the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Challenges Identified in Existing Literature

1. Existing scholarship identifies several constraints affecting ECOWAS' anti-coup efforts:
2. Inconsistent enforcement of democratic norms.
3. Weak implementation of sanctions.
4. Dependence on Nigeria for political and financial leadership.
5. Rising anti-Western and anti-French sentiments.
6. Expansion of terrorism across the Sahel.
7. Constitutional manipulations by elected civilian leaders.
8. Public distrust of democratic institutions.
9. Increasing geopolitical competition involving Russia, China, France, the United States, and other external actors.

These factors collectively reduce ECOWAS' ability to restore constitutional governance effectively.

Gap in the Literature

Although substantial literature exists on military coups and ECOWAS interventions, most studies examine individual country cases such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, or Niger separately. Few studies provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of ECOWAS' responses across all major military coups occurring between 2020 and 2025.

Furthermore, recent geopolitical developments including the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and the increasing influence of external powers have not been sufficiently integrated into earlier analyses.

This study fills this gap by providing a comparative assessment of ECOWAS' responses to military coups between 2020 and 2025, evaluating their effectiveness, identifying emerging challenges, and proposing policy options for strengthening regional democracy and security.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate because it enables an in-depth examination of political events, institutional responses, policy decisions, and governance processes that cannot easily be measured using quantitative techniques.

The study employs a descriptive and analytical approach, examining ECOWAS' responses to military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 while evaluating their effectiveness in restoring constitutional governance.

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources of data.

These include:

- Official ECOWAS communiqués and protocols.
- African Union reports.
- United Nations reports.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Academic books.
- Policy papers.
- Reports from research institutions.
- Newspaper publications.
- Government publications.
- Publications from international organizations.

Secondary data are appropriate because they provide comprehensive information on political developments, regional diplomacy, sanctions, mediation initiatives, and security responses during the period under review.

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through documentary research.

Documentary analysis involved reviewing official policy documents, conference communiqués, peace agreements, scholarly publications, and institutional reports relating to ECOWAS interventions following the military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the attempted coup in Sierra Leone.

The documentary approach enables systematic examination of historical events while ensuring consistency in data collection.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis.

Content analysis involves organizing, interpreting, and comparing documentary evidence to identify recurring themes, patterns, similarities, and differences in ECOWAS responses across different countries.

Themes examined include:

- Diplomatic interventions.

- Economic sanctions.
- Political mediation.
- Suspension from ECOWAS institutions.
- Military intervention threats.
- Transition arrangements.
- Regional cooperation.
- Democratic governance.
- Security implications.

This analytical method enables a comparative evaluation of ECOWAS' institutional effectiveness.

Scope of the Study

The study covers the period 2020–2025.

It specifically examines ECOWAS' responses to:

- Mali (August 2020 coup).
- Mali (May 2021 coup).
- Guinea (September 2021 coup).
- Burkina Faso (January 2022 coup).
- Burkina Faso (September 2022 coup).
- Niger (July 2023 coup).

- Attempted coup in Sierra Leone (November 2023).

The study also considers broader regional implications, including the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and its implications for ECOWAS.

Justification of the Methodology

A qualitative documentary approach is particularly suitable because:

Military coups involve complex political processes that require contextual interpretation.

ECOWAS responses consist largely of diplomatic negotiations, sanctions, and institutional decisions that are best examined qualitatively.

Documentary evidence provides reliable historical records of regional interventions.

Comparative qualitative analysis facilitates assessment of similarities and differences across multiple case studies.

Reliability and Validity

To ensure reliability and validity, the study draws information from multiple credible sources, including ECOWAS, the African Union, the United Nations, peer-reviewed journals, and recognized research institutions.

Triangulation of sources reduces bias and enhances the credibility of findings.

Transition to Analysis

Having reviewed the relevant literature and established the theoretical and methodological foundations, the next section presents a comprehensive analysis of ECOWAS' responses to military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025. The analysis evaluates the organization's diplomatic initiatives, economic sanctions, mediation efforts, political negotiations, military options, achievements, limitations, and the broader implications for democratic governance and regional security.

Analysis and Discussion

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 represents one of the most significant challenges to democratic governance since the wave of democratization that swept across Africa in the 1990s. During this period, ECOWAS was compelled to invoke various provisions of its 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in response to unconstitutional changes of government. This section critically examines ECOWAS' responses to the coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the attempted coup in Sierra Leone, while assessing the effectiveness of its interventions.

ECOWAS Response to the Mali Coup (2020)

On 18 August 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown by members of the Malian Armed Forces led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The coup followed months of political protests, allegations of electoral

fraud, worsening insecurity caused by jihadist insurgencies, corruption, and declining public confidence in the government.

ECOWAS responded swiftly by:

- Suspending Mali from all ECOWAS decision-making bodies.
- Closing land and air borders with Mali.
- Imposing financial and economic sanctions.
- Freezing Mali's access to regional financial institutions.
- Appointing former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan as Special Envoy and Chief Mediator.
- Demanding the immediate restoration of constitutional order.

The sanctions were intended to pressure the military authorities into restoring civilian rule. Following negotiations, the military accepted an 18-month transitional arrangement headed by a civilian interim president.

Assessment

Initially, ECOWAS appeared successful because the military accepted a transitional government. However, the transition collapsed when Colonel AssimiGoïta removed the civilian transitional leaders in May 2021, resulting in another military coup.

The second coup exposed weaknesses in ECOWAS' conflict management strategy. Critics argue that the organization focused more on restoring constitutional procedures than addressing governance failures, insecurity, and public dissatisfaction that had contributed to the coup.

ECOWAS Response to the Second Mali Coup (2021)

The May 2021 coup represented a direct violation of the transition agreement brokered by ECOWAS.

The organization responded by:

- Re-suspending Mali.
- Condemning the military takeover.
- Imposing targeted sanctions on military leaders.
- Demanding a shorter transition period.
- Continuing diplomatic engagement.

However, Mali's military authorities resisted ECOWAS pressure and later proposed extending the transition for several years.

Consequently, ECOWAS imposed additional sanctions in January 2022, including border closures and trade restrictions.

Evaluation

Although the sanctions demonstrated ECOWAS' commitment to democratic norms, they generated considerable economic hardship for ordinary Malians while failing to compel the military government to surrender power.

Instead, the sanctions increased anti-ECOWAS sentiment within Mali and strengthened domestic support for the military government.

ECOWAS Response to the Guinea Coup (2021)

On 5 September 2021, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya overthrew President Alpha Condé.

The coup followed widespread public dissatisfaction after Condé amended Guinea's constitution to secure a controversial third presidential term.

ECOWAS immediately:

- a. Suspended Guinea from the organization.
- b. Demanded the unconditional release of President Condé.
- c. Rejected the legitimacy of the military government.
- d. Called for a rapid transition to civilian rule.
- e. Sent diplomatic missions to Conakry.

Unlike Mali, however, ECOWAS did not impose severe economic sanctions on Guinea.

Evaluation

The relatively softer response generated criticism.

Several analysts argued that ECOWAS had previously failed to strongly oppose President Condé's constitutional amendment, which many regarded as unconstitutional in spirit despite being legally approved.

Consequently, many Guineans viewed the military intervention as correcting democratic abuses.

This perception weakened ECOWAS' credibility because citizens believed the organization tolerated constitutional manipulation by elected leaders while strongly condemning military coups.

ECOWAS Response to Burkina Faso (2022)

Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022.

The first occurred in January when Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.

The military justified its intervention by citing:

- Rising terrorist attacks.
- Government failure to protect citizens.
- Poor military leadership.
- National insecurity.

ECOWAS condemned the coup but adopted a more cautious strategy than in Mali.

Measures included:

- Suspension from ECOWAS institutions.
- Diplomatic dialogue.
- Mediation.
- Agreement on a transition timetable.

When Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Damiba in September 2022, ECOWAS again condemned the coup while maintaining diplomatic engagement.

Evaluation

ECOWAS deliberately avoided imposing harsh sanctions because Burkina Faso was confronting severe terrorist violence.

Many observers argued that economic sanctions might have weakened national security operations against extremist groups.

Nevertheless, repeated military takeovers illustrated the limited deterrent effect of ECOWAS responses.

ECOWAS Response to the Niger Coup (2023)

The military coup in Niger marked the greatest challenge to ECOWAS since its intervention in The Gambia in 2017.

On 26 July 2023, members of the Presidential Guard led by General Abdourahamane Tiani removed President Mohamed Bazoum from office.

Unlike previous cases, ECOWAS adopted an exceptionally firm response.

The organization:

- Condemned the coup immediately.
- Suspended Niger.
- Closed regional borders.
- Froze state assets.
- Suspended commercial and financial transactions.
- Imposed travel bans on coup leaders.
- Issued a one-week ultimatum demanding Bazoum's reinstatement.
- Threatened military intervention through the ECOWAS Standby Force.

The threat of military intervention represented one of the strongest responses ever adopted by ECOWAS.

Evaluation

The response generated mixed reactions.

Supporters argued that ECOWAS needed to demonstrate zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government.

Critics, however, contended that military intervention risked escalating regional conflict.

Mali and Burkina Faso declared that any attack on Niger would be regarded as a declaration of war against them.

Guinea also opposed military intervention.

Public demonstrations across several West African countries expressed support for Niger's military government while criticizing ECOWAS.

Eventually, military intervention was not implemented.

This outcome exposed divisions within ECOWAS regarding the use of force.

Response to the Attempted Coup in Sierra Leone (2023)

In November 2023, armed individuals attempted to overthrow the government of President Julius Maada Bio.

Unlike previous successful coups, Sierra Leone's security forces quickly suppressed the attempt.

ECOWAS:

- i. Condemned the attempted coup.

- ii. Expressed solidarity with Sierra Leone.
- iii. Reaffirmed support for constitutional governance.
- iv. Encouraged investigations and accountability.

The rapid response demonstrated improved cooperation between national authorities and ECOWAS in preventing unconstitutional changes of government before they succeeded.

Comparative Assessment of ECOWAS Responses

Analysis of ECOWAS interventions reveals several common strategies.

Diplomatic Engagement

Diplomacy remained ECOWAS' primary instrument.

The organization consistently dispatched mediation teams headed by respected African statesmen.

Diplomatic negotiations helped secure transitional agreements in several countries.

However, implementation often proved difficult because military governments delayed agreed transition timelines.

Economic Sanctions

Economic sanctions represented ECOWAS' most frequently used coercive instrument.

Sanctions included:

- Border closures.
- Asset freezes.
- Travel restrictions.
- Financial embargoes.
- Suspension from regional institutions.

Although sanctions demonstrated institutional commitment, their effectiveness remained limited.

Military governments generally retained political power despite economic pressure.

Meanwhile, ordinary citizens frequently bore the greatest economic costs.

Suspension from ECOWAS

All coup-affected countries were suspended from ECOWAS decision-making bodies.

Suspension signaled regional disapproval and denied military government's political legitimacy.

However, suspension alone did not restore civilian rule.

Major Challenges Facing ECOWAS

The analysis identifies several factors limiting ECOWAS effectiveness.

Inconsistency

Many scholars argue that ECOWAS has inconsistently enforced democratic principles.

While military coups receive immediate condemnation, constitutional manipulations by elected leaders often receive weaker responses.

This inconsistency undermines institutional credibility.

Governance Deficits

Military coups often arise from governance failures.

These include:

- Corruption.
- Electoral fraud.
- Poverty.
- Youth unemployment.
- Weak institutions.
- Human rights violations.

Unless these structural problems are addressed, military interventions may continue.

Terrorism

The rapid expansion of terrorism across the Sahel has transformed civil-military relations.

Governments struggling against insurgency often lose public confidence.

Military officers exploit these security failures to justify political intervention.

External Geopolitical Competition

The growing influence of Russia, France, the United States, China, and other external actors has complicated regional diplomacy.

Geopolitical rivalry increasingly shapes domestic political developments.

Public Perception

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronting ECOWAS is declining public trust.

Many citizens increasingly perceive military governments as more capable of addressing insecurity than elected politicians.

This changing public attitude reduces the deterrent effect of ECOWAS sanctions.

Implications for Regional Integration

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel

States (AES) represent one of the greatest institutional crises in ECOWAS history.

Potential consequences include:

- Reduced regional economic integration.
- Weakening of collective security arrangements.
- Declining political cooperation.
- Fragmentation of West African diplomacy.
- Reduced effectiveness of regional counter-terrorism operations.

These developments suggest that ECOWAS must reconsider its strategies for promoting democratic governance while simultaneously addressing citizens' security and socio-economic concerns.

Overall Findings

The analysis demonstrates that ECOWAS has consistently defended the principle of constitutional governance through sanctions, mediation, diplomatic engagement, and political pressure. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these measures has been constrained by weak implementation, inconsistent application of democratic norms, governance failures within member states, expanding terrorist threats, geopolitical competition, and declining public confidence in democratic institutions. Consequently, while ECOWAS has remained normatively committed to opposing

military coups, its practical capacity to restore civilian rule has produced mixed results across the region.

Conclusion

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2025 represents one of the most significant setbacks to democratic governance and regional integration since the democratic transitions of the 1990s. The military takeover in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and the attempted coup in Sierra Leone, tested ECOWAS' institutional capacity to enforce constitutional order and preserve regional peace and security.

This study examined ECOWAS' responses to these military coups through the lens of the Regional Security Complex Theory. It found that ECOWAS consistently invoked its legal instruments, particularly the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, to condemn unconstitutional changes of government. The organization employed a combination of diplomatic mediation, economic sanctions, suspension of member states, political negotiations, and, in the case of Niger, the threat of military intervention.

Despite these efforts, the findings indicate that ECOWAS achieved only limited success in restoring constitutional governance. While sanctions and diplomatic engagements demonstrated the organization's commitment to democratic norms, they often failed to

compel military juntas to relinquish power. In several instances, sanctions imposed considerable economic hardship on ordinary citizens without significantly altering the political calculations of military governments.

The study further reveals that the resurgence of military coups cannot be explained solely by military ambition. Rather, it reflects deeper structural problems, including weak democratic institutions, corruption, constitutional manipulation by civilian leaders, electoral irregularities, poor governance, insecurity, terrorism, youth unemployment, poverty, and declining public confidence in elected governments. These conditions created an environment in which sections of the population initially welcomed military interventions as alternatives to ineffective civilian administrations.

Another important finding is that ECOWAS' credibility has been weakened by perceptions of inconsistency. While the organization has firmly opposed military coups, critics argue that it has sometimes responded less decisively to constitutional amendments and electoral practices that undermine democratic principles. Such inconsistencies have reduced public trust in ECOWAS and complicated its efforts to promote constitutional governance.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that regional security has become increasingly complex due to the expansion of violent extremism across the Sahel and the growing influence of external powers. These developments have affected the political environment in

which ECOWAS operates and have made the restoration of democratic governance more challenging. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represent significant challenges to regional unity and collective security.

Overall, the study concludes that while ECOWAS remains an indispensable regional institution for promoting democracy and peace, its long-term effectiveness depends on moving beyond reactive measures. Sustainable democratic governance in West Africa requires stronger institutions, accountable leadership, inclusive economic development, respect for constitutionalism, and preventive strategies that address the underlying causes of political instability.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Strengthen Preventive Diplomacy:** ECOWAS should intensify early warning mechanisms and engage proactively with member states showing signs of political instability before crises escalate into military coups.
2. **Promote Good Governance:** Member states should strengthen democratic institutions by improving transparency, accountability, judicial independence, and the rule of law to reduce public dissatisfaction with civilian governments.

3. **Ensure Consistent Enforcement of Democratic Norms:** ECOWAS should respond firmly not only to military coups but also to unconstitutional constitutional amendments, electoral manipulation, and other practices that undermine democracy.
4. **Review the Sanctions Regime:** Economic sanctions should be carefully designed to target coup leaders and their supporters while minimizing adverse effects on ordinary citizens.
5. **Strengthen Counter-Terrorism Cooperation:** ECOWAS should deepen intelligence sharing, joint military operations, and regional security cooperation to address the growing threat of terrorism, which often creates conditions for military intervention.
6. **Enhance Civic Education:** Governments and civil society organizations should promote democratic values, constitutionalism, and public participation through sustained civic education programmes.
7. **Address Socio-Economic Challenges:** West African governments should implement policies that reduce poverty, unemployment, inequality, and social exclusion, particularly among young people, to address the structural drivers of political instability.
8. **Strengthen ECOWAS Institutions:** The financial and operational capacities of ECOWAS institutions, including the Early Warning Directorate, the Mediation and Security Council, and the ECOWAS Standby Force, should be enhanced to improve rapid response capabilities.

9. Promote Inclusive Political Dialogue: During political crises, ECOWAS should facilitate inclusive dialogue involving governments, opposition parties, civil society organizations, traditional leaders, religious leaders, women, and youth groups to achieve sustainable political settlements.

10. Deepen Collaboration with International Partners: ECOWAS should continue to cooperate with the African Union, the United Nations, and other international partners while maintaining its independence in pursuing solutions that reflect the interests and priorities of West African states.

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