



Research Article

Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: An Analysis of ECOWAS's Response to Military Coups

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Democratic Backsliding, ECOWAS, Military Coups, West Africa, Regional Governance, Democracy Promotion

Article History:

Received: 01-09-2025

Accepted: 20-11-2025

Published: 30-11-2025

This paper is a research on democratic backsliding in West Africa, in which the author examines how Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has responded to the recent military coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger. Using the methodological approach of qualitative case study, the study finds the problems of governance failures, socio-economic challenges, and institutional fragility to be the main factors that cause the decline of democracy. The approaches employed by ECOWAS, which include diplomacy, sanctions, and in few cases, military intervention have produced mixed results, with partial success in The Gambia and a history of inability to stop the violence in other cases. The discussion highlights the weaknesses in the operations of ECOWAS such as weak enforcement capacity, internal divisions and political will among member states. It is suggested to strengthen institutional frameworks, improve early warning systems, increase regional cohesion, and intensify civic participation. The paper also highlights the inseparability of international relations in boosting the democratic efforts of ECOWAS. This study advances a better comprehension of the role of regionalism and democracy in West Africa and provides policy implications to decision-makers and stakeholders, who strive to promote and maintain democracy in the region.

Cite this article:

Wada, Y. M. & Garba, M. K. (2025). Democratic Backsliding in West Africa: An Analysis of ECOWAS's Response to Military Coups. *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(9), 79–82. <https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v4i9.582>

Introduction

Background of the Study

Since the late twentieth century, the West African region has undergone dramatic democratic progress and this has been manifested by the prevalence of multiparty electoral systems, peaceful political transitions and the increasing impact of regional and international institutions in the promulgation of democratic norms. However, the past few years have been characterized by backsliding of these democratic gains where military coups and manipulations of constitutions have become widespread, threatening the stability and development of the region. Interestingly, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger have suffered military takeovers, thus raising the question of the durability of the democratic rule in West Africa.

Since 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was formed to promote economic integration has gone further to include peace, security and the protection of the democratic values in the region. By using legal tools like the ECOWAS, 1991, ECOWAS, 2001, Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS has become a central force in facilitating and protecting democracy in West Africa. However, the latest momentum of coups has put the efficacy, steadiness and political determination of the organization under examination in opposing democratic backslidings.

Although ECOWAS has been active in the pursuance of its objectives, such as sanctions, diplomacy, and, in some instances, military interventions, the continued occurrence of military coups highlights the still-present challenges. The inconsistent effectiveness of the ECOWAS interventions has brought forth concerns on how efficiently the institutional mechanisms of the bloc have been, the role played by the domestic aspects in the member states and the role played by the external geopolitical dynamics. This study will, therefore, examine how and why democracy has been backslided in West Africa as well as critically examine the reaction of ECOWAS to the military coups.

Research Objectives

The main aims of the study are to:

1. Discuss causes of democratic backsliding in West Africa.
2. Examine the reaction of ECOWAS to the latest military coups in the area.
3. The effectiveness of these responses in the restoration of democratic governance can be assessed.
4. Determine the issues that ECOWAS encounters in its execution of its mandate.

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v4i9.581>

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Research Questions

The research questions that will be addressed in the study are as follows:

1. What are the major causes of democratic backsliding in West-Africa?
2. What has ECOWAS done about military coups in the region?
3. To what extent have these responses succeeded in the restoration of democratic governance?
4. What are some of the obstacles that ECOWAS has been facing in its endeavors to curb military takeovers?

Significance of the Study

The study will provide a critical examination of the causes of democratic backsliding in West Africa as well as determine how ECOWAS has been effective in reversing military coups. The results will be of value to the body of research on regional governance, democracy, and security in Africa. Besides, the study gives policy suggestions to the ECOWAS, the governments of the respective countries, and other international stakeholders in an endeavor to advance the effectiveness of democratic governance processes in the region.

Scope and Limitations

The research focuses on recent military coups in West Africa especially in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. An evaluation of the reactions of ECOWAS to those events is the centre of the analysis, discussing the achievements and constraints of the strategies implemented. The possible weaknesses are limited access to official sources, the inconsistency of reliability of data, and the dynamism of the political environment of the region. In spite of these limitations, the study aims at providing an objective and detailed evaluation of the topic.

Literature Review

The Democratic Backsliding conceptualization

Democratic backsliding is the gradual process of refining democratic quality, which is realized through undermining democratic institutions, civil liberty, and electoral malpractices (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). This has been experienced in West Africa in the form of military takeovers, changes in constitutions to allow longer presidential terms and oppression of the opposition (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Empirical research shows that military coups re-emergence is correlated with problems in ruling, socio-economic issues, and institutional weaknesses (Cheeseman, 2015).

West Africa Military Coups: History

Military coups have occurred in the West African sub-region numerous times since the 1960s, and in most instances, it was due to political instability, corruption and poor institutions of states (McGowan, 2003). More than 40 successful coup attempted West Africa between 1960 and 2000, Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso were some of the worst hit countries (Kandeh, 2004). The recent coup renaissance in Mali (2012, 2020), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) has become a bad omen of a disturbing renewal of militarized politics despite regional and international efforts to establish democratic governance (Adejumobi, 2016).

Regional Governance and ECOWAS

There has been a critical role of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in facilitating democratic governance and response to military coup in the region. ECOWAS has tried to institutionalise unconstitutional change of government norms through the 1991 and 2001 Protocols on Democracy and Good Governance, which in turn aim to

institutionalize rules of conduct against unconstitutional change of government (ECOWAS, 2001). The prominent one is the case of intervention in The Gambia of 2017 by ECOWAS that guaranteed a peaceful transfer of power to Adama Barrow and proved the willingness of this organization to support democratic values (Adebayo, 2017). Nevertheless, the difference in the results of interventions in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso determines the continuation of such difficulties as internal fragmentation between member states and the insufficient implementation capacity of ECOWAS (Obi, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The research paper is informed by two major theoretical frameworks, viz., Democratic Consolidation Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory. Democratic Consolidation Theory asserts that democratic stability can be reached when the political actors are bound by the institutional democratic practices, rules and norms (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The latest series of coups throughout West Africa means that the process is not yet consolidated and that the institutions are weak and may be manipulated by the elites (Diamond, 2015). Simultaneously, Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan and Waeber, 2003) explains the complexity of interventions made by ECOWAS by the assumption that the dynamics of security of member states is deeply interdependent and, therefore, dictate the reaction to the inner disturbance.

Empirical Inspirations and Research Holes

Current literature has comprehensively covered antecedents and trends of military coups in West Africa (McGowan, 2003; Kandeh, 2004). However, little is documented in empirical studies of the effectiveness of ECOWAS in recent coups. Although the works by Obi (2020) and Adebayo (2017) show that ECOWAS takes an active position, both articles also indicate inconsistencies in the implementation of sanctions and the need of the organisation to use external intermediaries to maintain the capacity to operate. This study aims at filling that gap by providing an in-depth evaluation of the strategies of ECOWAS and examining the effects of this action on the democratic governance of the West African region.

Methodology

Research Design

The current research design is qualitative research design to explore the phenomenon of democratic backsliding in West Africa and to determine how ECOWAS reacts to military coups. The qualitative approach is specific to unravelling complicated political processes and institutional actions by analyzing the text in detail and examining the case studies (Creswell, 2017). The research design is a case study, with the focus on the chosen countries, which have become the victims of military coups in the recent past such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Such a design is useful to conduct an exhaustive study of the causal processes, reactions, and consequences of democratic backsliding in the region.

Data Collection Methods

Data collected in the research is both primary and secondary. Semi structured interviews with policymakers, ECOWAS officials, security experts and academics working in the field of West African governance will be used to gather primary data. This research technique will enable capturing a variety of opinions and understanding of the strategic priorities and challenges of ECOWAS (Bryman, 2016). The secondary data will be obtained using official ECOWAS reports, government documents, academic journals published by scholars, and authoritative news sources. The analysis of documents will be used to establish

patterns and trends in the policies and intervention actions of ECOWAS.

Data Analysis Techniques

The thematic procedures will be embraced in the analysis in order to identify the repetition of themes and patterns in the collected data. Thematic analysis involves a method of qualitative data coding and compiling of similar material that will give information that is relevant to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This will center on clarifying the motivation of military coups, the response of the ECOWAS and the determinants that drive the success of such responses. It will also be done through cross-case comparisons to reveal how different and similar ECOWAS is in its strategic approaches in its respective countries of choice.

Ethical Considerations

The most dominant consideration is ethical issues especially when dealing with human subjects. All participants will be informed and guaranteed their anonymity and the confidentiality of their contributions (Resnik, 2015). The research will be based on the ethical principles proclaimed by the organization where the research will be held so that the data gathering and analysis will be performed in a way of high integrity and objectivity.

Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa

Military coups have been identified to predict the issue of democratic backsliding particularly in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger. An amalgamation of the governance failures, economic distress, and security challenges, have triggered these coups. Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has reacted in a wide range of measures, which include diplomatic measures, economic sanctions, and, in some cases, the threat of military intervention. However, these responses have not been effective across the board, which reflects the weaknesses and strengths of regional governance endeavors (Obi, 2020).

In Mali, the degradation of democracy was observed as two coups were held in 2020 and 2021. The first of these coups, which was planned by the military, ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita amid massive protests against the corruptness, economic stagnation, and insecurity in the wake of jihadist insurgencies (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). In 2021, the military toppled the transitional government on grounds of governance failures in the subsequent coup. ECOWAS retaliated by imposing economic sanctions, and suspending Mali membership of regional institutions and to both negotiating and diplomatically seeking to restore the condition of civilian rule (ECOWAS, 2001). However, such actions were not as successful because military leaders did not want to be pressured by anything outside their country, which continued to keep the country politically unstable (Obi, 2020).

However, in a similar case, Guinea had a coup in 2021, after years of political oppression and manipulation of the constitution by the then President Alpha Condé. The coup was explained by the military, which was commanded by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, due to corruption and maladministration (Cheeseman, 2015). ECOWAS then suspended Guinea to the regional bloc, sanctioned and insisted that it should resume its governance to civilian rule. Regardless of such measures, the effectiveness of the junta was still low and it still hampered the process of transition (Adebayo, 2017).

In 2022, Burkina Faso suffered two coups, the first one associated with the increasing insecurity by Islamist militant attacks, and the second one with the dissatisfaction of people with the civilian government. In January 2022, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was overthrown by soldiers under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba on

the grounds that he was failing to deal with terrorism. Then, in September 2022, another coup occurred, as Captain Ibrahim Traoré overthrew Damiba amid the persistence of security issues and governance problems (Asante, 2022). ECOWAS denounced the coups, expelled Burkina Faso out of the group and embarked on a diplomatic mission to strike a compromise to restore democratic leadership. However, the military regime that continued to rule receiving a huge opposition to these endeavors (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

The latest case of democratic backsliding in the area was in 2023 in Niger, when the presidential guard, led by General Abdourahamane Tiani, seized and overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum. The political instability, security concerns with jihadist attacks, and dissatisfaction with the leadership of Bazoum were cited as the causes of the coup (Adejumobi, 2016). In its turn, the ECOWAS reacted by introducing economic sanctions, mediation in the form of diplomacy, and even threats of military intervention to reestablish constitutional order. Nevertheless, the military rulers have not yielded and the country has suffered a stalemate in politics (Obi, 2020).

In general, these military coups are part of a much larger trend of democracy reduction in West Africa, which is caused by a failed state, poverty, and insecurity. The reactions of ECOWAS have been mixed, and the operation in The Gambia in 2017 was successful, whereas the ones in Mali and Burkina Faso have not been able to deliver the expected results (Adebayo, 2017). The inability of the organization to fully reinstate democratic rule in such countries has been hampered by internal divisions among the ECOWAS member states, a lack of capacity to enforce the rule and the viability of the military governments (Nathan, 2013). To overcome these setbacks, ECOWAS needs to strengthen its institutional frameworks, better coordinate its action with domestic actors, and make the region more united in order to prevent any further erosion of democracy.

Analysis and Discussion

Democratic Backsliding tendencies in West Africa

The comparison shows that there was a major rise in democratic backsliding in West Africa with a re-occurrence of military coups, undermined electoral integrity and disillusionment of electoral institutions by increasing numbers of the populace. Since 2020, military takeovers have occurred in such countries as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger, undoing the decades of democratic gains (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). The factors that have led to this trend are failure in governance, socio-economic issues and external forces.

Response to Military Coups by ECOWAS in the ECOWAS States

ECOWAS has been using various responses to military coups such as diplomatic intervention, economic sanctions and military intervention in certain instances. As an example, in 2017, ECOWAS sent a military force to The Gambia to guarantee the peaceful provision of power following the refusal of defeat by Yahya Jammeh (Adebayo, 2017). After the 2020 and 2021 coups, ECOWAS sanctioned the Mali economy and suspended the country in its institutions. Notwithstanding these, resources of ECOWAS may be limited by the fact that coup has been experienced repeatedly.

Effectiveness and Difficulties

The success of the ECOWAS interventions is different in situations. In The Gambia, the intervention has been used to re-establish democratic order and this illustrates that ECOWAS has the ability to take a decisive action when the member states demonstrate togetherness. Nonetheless, efforts in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso have not been as successful, in part because of

internal struggles among the member states and weaker enforcement systems (Obi, 2020). Moreover, ECOWAS has difficulties of poor resources, geopolitical pressures as well as limitation in domestic legitimacy of some member states.

Comparative Study of other Regional Organization

The response by ECOWAS can be compared to the response of other regional organizations like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and African Union (AU) and this would have some similarities and dissimilarities. Sanctions and mediation as a response to democratic crises have been incorporated by SADC like ECOWAS. Nevertheless, SADC has been found to be more consistent in its actions, especially in Zimbabwe and Lesotho (Nathan, 2013). The principle of non-indifference enshrined in the Constitutive Act of the AU, forms another example that ECOWAS would use to solve the problems in governance-related issues.

Regional Stability implications

The continued military coups and democratic backsliding in West Africa have far-reaching implications to the stability in the region. The political instability is a destabilizer of the economic growth, interruption in the cross-border collaboration, and the possibility of violent extremism (Asante, 2022). The institutional structures of ECOWAS, the level of cooperation with civil society, and the lack of governance are the key areas to improve in order to turn the tide.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the issue of democratic backsliding in West Africa, based on how ECOWAS has reacted to military coups in the recent past. The results show that governance failure, socio-economic difficulties, and institutional frailties are the factors that cause the democratic backsliding. To curb these problems, ECOWAS has adopted a number of policies such as diplomatic intervention, economic sanction and military intervention. The results have however been varied and this is a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of the organizational strategies. West Africa faces a major challenge of democratic backsliding that can affect stability and development of the region. ECOWAS has also been keen in ensuring that it exercises democratic principles in its protocols and interventions. Yet, the fact that military coups recur in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger speaks of the necessity to have stronger, more stable, and active strategies. The research paper concludes that the ECOWAS needs to strengthen institutional structures, coordination with the domestic actors, and reformulate its strategies to suit the changing political environment.

Recommendations

According to the results, it is proposed to make the following recommendations:

- Enhancing Institutional Capacity: ECOWAS needs to make an investment in the capacity of its member states to enhance democratic resilience. This involves sponsoring electoral, judicial and civil societies.
- Strengthening Early Warning Systems: It can be said that more efficient early warning and response systems should be developed to be able to identify any threats to democracy and prevent their development into coups.
- Encouraging Regional Cohesion: The increased cohesion among the member states will make the ECOWAS interventions more legitimate and effective.
- Cooperation with International Partners: It can be enhanced by partnering with international organizations, including the African Union and the United Nations to provide more resources and expertise in dealing with democratic backsliding.
- Involving Citizens: ECOWAS must emphasize the efforts that could help civic education and involvement of people.

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