

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES AND THE RESURGENCE OF MILITARY COUPS: CRITICISMS OF THE BLOC AND ITS THREAT TO WEST AFRICAN REGIONALISM

Charles Nnamdi Olise¹; *Christopher Onyemaechi Ugwuibe²; Bartholomew Uchenna Nwokoma³; Eze, Ifeyinwa Jennifer⁴; Vitus Sunday Nnamani⁵; Marcellinus Chigozie Nwachukwu⁶; Nwaedu, Friday Nwaedu⁷ & Achi Vincent Achi⁸

^{1,3,5,6,7&8}Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

^{2*}Department of Public Administration and Local Government & World Bank Africa Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Power and Energy Development (ACE-SPED), University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

⁴Social Sciences Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

Authors email: Charles.olise@unn.edu.ng; onyemaechi.ugwuibe@unn.edu.ng; uchenna.nwokoma@unn.edu.ng; eze.ifeyinwa@unn.edu.ng; sunday.nnamani@unn.edu.ng; marcellinus.nwachukwu@unn.edu.ng; nfnwaedu@gmail.com & achi.vincent.achi@unn.edu.ng

***Corresponding author's email: onyemaechi.ugwuibe@unn.edu.ng**

Abstract

In the last few years, several regions around the world have experienced some form of democratic backsliding, including West Africa as a notable hotspot. Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are all currently led by military juntas, following a series of coups across Africa's Sahel region since 2020. While there are studies on regional development concerns bordering on unconstitutional change of government, little is said about the trajectories, causative factors and threats it poses to democracy. The broad objective of this study was to interrogate the resurgence of coups, despite West African countries' commitment to promoting democratic governance with the 1993 revision of the Economic Community of West African States founding treaty, which also emphasised peace, security and stability. The institutional theory was used to interrogate factors influencing military coups within the bloc. The paper was based on observations and narratives on military coups found in extant literature. It advocates for a dire need for member states to uphold democratic tenets to avoid truncating ECOWAS' Vision 2050 which stressed more on regional organisation rule of law, freedoms and political rights. This will help to caution resurgence of coups in West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS, democratic backsliding, military coup, sanction, institutional theory, West Africa

Introduction

Incidences of coup d'état within the West African sub-region have yet again brought a new dimension to the question of democratic stability on the African continent (Egbuchiwe, 2023). Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional economic community and political union of fifteen member states located in West Africa with headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria. Of Africa's eight regional economic communities, ECOWAS is the most active on governance, promoting and sometimes enforcing democratic norms in the region. The community also tries to be inclusive by inviting civil society to take part in its processes (Martin, et. al, 2023).

As its name reveals, at its onset in 1975, ECOWAS was first envisioned as an economic integration project (with some social and cultural impact) rather than a political project. When it came to politics, its main role was to amplify the voice of its member states on the international stage to face post-independence challenges jointly. ECOWAS has evolved over decades to become the most active regional economic community in the area of democratic governance (Khadiagala, 2018). Recently, the organisation's management of the military coup in West Africa resulted in a more delicate situation as the military leadership of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso threatened to resist any forceful intervention jointly. This development exposed the first significant challenge to the cohesion of ECOWAS as it enters its fiftieth year. The three countries repudiated ECOWAS intervention, exited the union and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (Njoku and Nwokolo, 2025).

Sodiq (2025) asserts that while ECOWAS has been instrumental in deepening democracy in the West African region, the emergence of unconstitutional regimes threatens the unity and progress that have been achieved. ECOWAS faces significant challenges to its democratic ideals, including political instability, recent coups and withdrawal of member states. These issues, coupled with economic disparities and the threat of terrorism, undermine the bloc's goals of regional integration and democratic governance. Insecurity and bad governance by public leaders continue to plague ECOWAS's political landscape, eroding public trust in democratic institutions. The military in fragile countries may view coups as the shortest route to power, highlighting the need for a more balanced approach to governance (Nwachukwu and Onje, 2024).

While previous studies have focused on ECOWAS and the resurgence of military coups in West Africa, bad governance and insecurity, very little research exists from the view point of democratic backsliding in ECOWAS and resurgence of military coups in the region. This raises questions on how insecurity threatened regional integration in West Africa; and how sanctions affect regional integration in West Africa. The study shall make a modest attempt to provide answers to the above questions with a view to developing insights to reduce the vices in the ECOWAS democratic institutions.

The article commences with explicating democratic backsliding as the framework of analysis and ties this with the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. This is followed by the methodology. The next section is the review of related literature. The subsequent parts highlight the resurgence of coup d'etat in the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the theoretical framework. The final part provides the discussion and findings through the analysis of

insecurity and ECOWAS response, through sanction to other military-governed member states. Some recommendations about the future of ECOWAS role in the sub-region are provided in the conclusion.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative content analysis. The documentary sources reviewed include peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, government publications, blogs, newspapers, media reports, and internet-based materials. Additional data were sourced from the websites of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and ECOWAS. To identify relevant scholarly contributions, the study utilised platforms such as Google Scholar, CORE, Science.gov, Semantic Scholar, and RefSeek. The Web of Science database was particularly employed for its breadth and reputation in curating academic literature. Retrieved sources were carefully searched, skimmed, and screened based on their relevance to democratic backsliding and political developments in West Africa. The study adopts secondary data for methodological coherence, using a search strategy that combined key terms such as “coup d’état,” “democratic backsliding,” “insecurity,” and “sanctions” in the ECOWAS context.

Review of Related Literature

Coup d’état

The term *coup d’état*, originally French, means a sudden or swift strike, and was first used to describe Napoleon’s seizure of power in France on November 9, 1799 (Ornela, 2022). It refers to the sudden, illegal, and often violent overthrow of a government, typically carried out by a faction of the armed forces (Robert, 2021). Literally translated, it means “a sudden takeover of the state” and usually involves an unconstitutional seizure of power, whether from a civilian or military-led regime (Fatola, 2022). At its core, a coup bypasses constitutional processes to forcibly remove an existing government.

Femi (2023) defines a coup as the unlawful, often immediate, and sometimes violent or non-violent supplantation of an established constitutional order by military or paramilitary forces. In the past 73 years, Africa has witnessed over 213 coup attempts—about 50% of the 486 recorded globally—with a high concentration in West Africa. Notable examples include Burkina Faso (January 23, 2022), Chad (April 21, 2021), Mali (August 18, 2020, and May 24, 2021), Guinea (September 5, 2021), and Niger (July 26, 2023). Regardless of whether they are termed plotters or renegades, once successful, coup leaders assume de facto power as presidents or vice-presidents through military decrees (Femi, 2023; Jonathan and Clayton, 2011). Achebe (1983) identified governance failures, corruption, and selfish leadership as recurring conditions enabling unconstitutional power seizures. In essence, a military coup is an abrupt and unlawful overthrow of government, executed without warning and in defiance of constitutional authority.

Democratic Backsliding

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). Democratic backsliding is the undoing of liberal democracy, a “deliberate” (Sitter and Bakke, 2019), “state-led debilitation or elimination of any of the political institutions that sustain an existing democracy” (Bermeo, 2016, p.5). Backsliding includes a number of state, political and social elements, from political rhetoric and social media to electoral fraud and judicial independence. It also involves a wide variety of methods and tactics. 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 (Michael & 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). For example, electoral fraud could consist of hacking by foreign patrons, jailing of opposition leaders, bribing voters or undue interference in election management to ensure a vote count friendly to the incumbent. Alternatively, it may entail more subtle methods such as skewing the amount and tone of the media coverage devoted to political opponents. Similarly, attacks on judicial independence may involve replacing judges, altering the judiciary’s powers and jurisdiction or affecting court administration to manipulate the court docket. Democratic backsliding has been defined by Waldner and Lust (2018, p. 95) as ‘a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime. Despite the conceptual quandaries, for this article, democratic backsliding is defined as a retreat by an incumbent government from democratic values and practices with the intention of curtailing criticism and inhibiting democratic opposition (Bellamy and Kröger, 2021). It is a loss in the quality of liberal democracy and its key elements of freely and fairly elected governments that help the electorate hold governments accountable (Berlucchi and Kellam, 2023).

ECOWAS and Resurgence of Coup d’etat in West Africa: Case Examples

ECOWAS is a sub-regional body which was officially established on 28th May 1975 with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos to promote economic growth and development in the region (Kolade and Iyanu-Oluwa, 2024). Before 1975, the area now known as ECOWAS was comprised of 15 independent countries. These countries, established after colonial rule, included Benin, Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta), Cote d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (Mevlut, 2025).

On May 28, 2025, ECOWAS turned fifty. In its fifty odd years of existence, a union that initially targeted economic integration of West Africa inevitably expanded its mandates to security and democracy because these are essential conditions for economic development and integration. The recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger officially withdrew from ECOWAS on January 29, 2025 leaving the West African bloc with 12 member states (See table 1 below).

Table 1: Military Coup d’Etat in West Africa,2020-2023

S/N	Country	Population	Date of Coup d'état	Causes of Coup d'état	Military Leader
1.	Mali	25,233,188	May 24, 2021	Government corruption, floundering economy, insurgency, etc.	Colonel Assimi Goita
2.	Niger	25,917,831	July 26, 2023	Blamed on rising insecurity, lack of economic growth, etc	General Abdourahamane Tchiani
3.	Burkina Faso	24,098,336	January 24, 2022	Worsening armed uprising in the country, economic decline, etc	Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba
4.	Burkina Faso	24,098,336	September 30, 2022	Islamist Insurgency, Hunger crisis, security crisis, etc	Captain Ibrahim Traore

Source: Nextier (2025) & Compilation by authors

According to Onyekwere *et.al* (2025), the West African regional bloc, ECOWAS, for the first time since its existence, witnessed an abrupt pull out of three countries as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger announced their exit. It is noteworthy that the Sahel was of the view that after 49 years as at the time of existence, the valiant people of Burkina, Mali and Niger note with much regret, bitterness and great disappointment that their organisation has moved away from the ideals of its founding fathers and Pan-Africanism.

Mali Dual Coups

Mali has experienced two military takeovers in quick succession, first in August 2020 and again in May 2021. This was the fourth coup since Mali gained her independence in 1960. Mali's fourth coup which was led by Colonel Assimi Goita came in August 2020 after three months of sustained protests by Malians calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (Taylor, 2020). The protests were largely about election promises that President Keita had made before being voted to power but failed to successfully implement – doing away with corruption, terrorism, insurgency, and instability in Northern Mali. Thus, President Keita's government had been plagued by the same unresolved challenges that led to the downfall of the previous administrations (Ross, 2020).

Unlike her previous coup of between 1968 and 2012 respectively, that of August 2020 was cheered by the populace which had largely lost confidence in President Keita's government. The celebration that greeted the overthrow of Keita's government and his resignation was an indication that the embattled President had become unpopular and lost public support (Ahmed, 2020). According to Annie (2021) the current coup d'état in Mali has raised several questions on the assurance, sincerity and genuineness of the military to commit to a peaceful transitional process and to return the country speedily to democratic rule. The bloc's efforts to ensure a return to civilian rule has put its credibility on the line as it seeks to

uphold fundamental principles of good governance and contain regional instability (*The Punch*, 2022).

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has seen two coups within a year, in January and September 2022, both justified by the military's promise to restore security. Notwithstanding the strides and commendable achievements regarding the consolidation of the democratic process in the democratic trajectory has stalled and in some has not advanced in many West African countries including Burkina Faso. Instead, we are currently seeing concerns as epitomised by manipulations in electoral processes and military interventions that are negatively impacting the democratic processes in some West Africa countries (Arthur, 2025). *The Guardian* (2020) notes that election in Burkina Faso, which President Roch Marc Christian was expected to win re-election in the context with the veteran opposition leader Zephirin Diabre and Eddie Komboigo was reported to have huge operation orchestrated by those in power to carry out a massive fraud so as to give Kabore a first-round victory. The presidential election in Burkina Faso, was marred by irregularities and security crisis where suspected jihadists killed thousands of the citizens and displaced more than one million people (Aljazeera, 2020). Because of the unrest, the election was not held across at least one-fifth of the country. Burkina Faso has equally suffered through decades of corrupt and oppressive military rule, and yet it witnessed one of the strongest popular movements demanding democracy in the Sahel region (United States Institute of Peace, 2017; Atalayar, 2022).

The Niger Republic

Following the July 2023 coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, Niger's military government cited rising insecurity as justification. The recent coup d'état in Niger, along with other recent coups in the bloc, signals a worrying trend of democratic backsliding in the region. On July 26, 2021, Niger's government was overthrown, and President Bazoum was taken hostage. The coups directly challenge the legitimacy of democratically elected governments and undermine the rule of law, weakening public trust in institutions.

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world and relies heavily on foreign aid to support the 25 million population that has dwindled since soldiers ousted President Mohamed Bazoum from office. For example, it is evident from her 2023 annual budget which was slashed by 40 percent to 1.98 trillion CFA Franc (\$3.2 billion) from 3.3 trillion francs initially (News Agency of Nigeria, 2023). Niger's per capita income was \$533 in 2022. Living conditions for many remain dire (Yabi, 2023). The global outcry that the coup d'état in Niger generated was unprecedented such that ECOWAS chaired by Nigeria's president Bola Tinubu, imposed a raft of sanctions against the regime (*The Guardian*, 2024). The point, here is that, the region's democracy is in danger, and its peace and stability are at risk.

Selected Existing Theories on Democratic Backsliding

Theories of democratic backsliding refer to the frameworks and explanations that describe the gradual decline in the quality and robustness of democratic institutions, practices, and norms within a political system. These theories highlight how factors like electoral manipulation,

erosion of civil liberties, and weakening of checks and balances contribute to a shift away from democracy towards authoritarianism. Understanding these theories is essential for recognizing the subtle processes that can undermine electoral integrity and democratic governance. Ellen and David (2015) examined the main theories that explain the democratic backsliding globally. These include Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), political marketplace theory, political leadership and political institutions.

Political Marketplace Theory

The theory of a political marketplace provides a useful analytic window through which to consider West African politics. de Waal (2015) conceptualized a theory underlain by the premise that the African political systems are “marketplaces”, in which political power is bought, sold, and negotiated. Political actors are not bound by formal rules or normative commitments to democracy but work within the logic of transactional politics. In the process, competition among leaders for political authority is performed through the distribution of material resources to key constituencies, with political loyalty becoming a commodity.

In this theory, the political actor does not hang onto any ideologies or norms of governance; they are rather “entrepreneurs” trying to maximize their political survival through the strategic allocation of resources. Elite-driven politics not only impedes the enforcement of ECOWAS mandates, but also weakens its legitimacy. The coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) epitomize the vulnerability of ECOWAS to political fragmentation. Recently, such coups have emerged as consequences of serious governance crises, corruption, insecurity, the erosion of state capacity, and the mismanagement of state affairs by elites (Gad, Oke & Aduloju, 2025). Applying political marketplace theory to West Africa politics shows just how regional integration processes are compromised by elite-driven decision making.

Regional Security Complex Theory

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) by Buzan and Wæver (2003) portrays the framework through which regional security dynamics are influenced and affect state interactions and security concerns. RSCT argues that regional security comes to life due to the interaction bonding between states and their security policy in a relationship affected by internal and external factors. The theory helps interpret the security motivations behind the formation of Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) and any implications on regional stability. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), regional security complexes are defined by patterns of amity and enmity among states that have been founded politically and strategically over time. In the case of West Africa, one views the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to form CASS as a reaction to perceived threats and security challenges either from within the region or outside of other external actors. The coming into being of CASS reflects strategic readjustments that may transform the regional security landscape regarding these security concerns. By applying RSCT, the study highlight how the withdrawal from ECOWAS and the establishment of CASS influence security dynamics in the Sahel. According to the theory, regional stability is derived from the internal security concerns of those states and their interaction with neighbouring countries. In this context,

the establishment of CASS could change these existing security arrangements and create new regional security challenges or opportunities for cooperation.

Political Leadership Theory

Political leadership theory emphasizes how democratic breakdown can result from political leaders making poor tactical decisions that fail to sideline extremists who then take advantage of electoral competition to gain strength but remain committed to overthrowing democracy. It is reasonable to expect that this can be applied to backsliding particularly the common situation of anti-democratic parties using the electoral process to gain sufficient political power to erode democratic quality, once elected (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). However, the central argument of the political view is the existence of corruption and self-interest: A primary failure is the prevalence of corruption, where leaders prioritize personal wealth accumulation over national development. According to Orije (2025) ECOWAS, loses an estimated \$ 88.6 billion annually to corruption and illicit financial flows, staggering figure representing 3.7 % of the continent's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This portrays that the threats the bloc face are not confined within national borders. They are sophisticated tech-enabled, and deeply embedded within political and economic structures. Leaders frequently focus on immediate political gains and short-term objectives rather than long-term, sustainable development. For example, leaders who focus on data-driven decision-making can develop policies that target key issues and improve service delivery. On the other hand, leaders who make decisions based on personal or political interests may create policies that are ineffective or that do not address the real needs of the public (Madekwe, 2025).

Political Institutions Theory

Political institutions assumes that institutions in plural societies that promote power sharing (grand coalition, proportionality, mutual veto powers, and federalism) can help improve the chances of democratic survival. In the case of ECOWAS, political institutions such as Authority of Heads of State and Government, ECOWAS Commission, ECOWAS Parliament, Community Court of Justice and Mediation and Security Council are critical mechanisms focused on regional conflict prevention, peacekeeping and security. Backsliding is thus more likely to occur in plural societies if the institutional design is nonconsociational—that is, disproportional and unitary, allowing some ethnic, religious, or other societal groups to win over others (Lijphart, 1977). Conversely, others argue that democracy has not failed; rather, weak, immature institutions (judiciary, electoral commissions) and corruption allowed elites to abuse power, prompting coups. Democratic backsliding in Africa, characterized by the weakening of democratic institutions and a resurgence of authoritarian practices, is largely driven by weak institutional checks and balances, enabling incumbent leaders to consolidate power. This institutional weakness is characterized by a deficit of public trust, pervasive corruption and propensity for *budget padding*. The institutions suffer from weak legislative-executive oversight, high turnover of members resulting in low capacity, and a tendency to act as a *rubber stamp* rather than an independent check. Citizens largely perceive the institution as secretive, non-transparent and ineffective in promoting good governance. Key factors include the manipulations of electoral processes, and the erosion of judicial independence, which transform formal democracies into competitive authoritarian regimes. Democratic backsliding

is understood to comprise, among other things, the gradual erosion of democratic political institutions by elected governments (Stephan and Robert,2021).

Empirical Studies on Regionalism and Democracy in West Africa States

The regional integration in West Africa, under the auspices of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), represents a strong effort toward unity, economic cooperation, and political stability among its 15 member states (Gideon et. al, 2025). Regionalism is a political ideology focusing on increasing the power and autonomy of subnational regions based on shared culture, language, or geography, often challenging central state authority. While fostering local participation, it can impact democracy by either promoting decentralization or representation or, if taken to extremes, undermining national cohesion. Regional organizations also promote democratic governance, though they face challenges regarding legitimacy and accountability. Obi (2009) 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.

Buchan & Tsagourias (2023) in their research titled "The Niger Coup and The Prospect of ECOWAS Military Intervention: An International Law Appraisal" utilising secondary data, provide a compelling analysis of the legal basis for ECOWAS's intervention in Niger. They argue that ECOWAS treaties, particularly Article 25 of the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, empower the organisation to intervene in cases of unconstitutional overthrow of governments. However, interpretations of these treaties and the specific circumstances surrounding a coup might lead to legal arguments against intervention. Additionally, some member states might have reservations about the extent of ECOWAS' authority (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023). While the legal debate is important, this study delves deeper to examine both the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS' overall response to the 2023 Niger coup. This comprehensive approach will explore weaknesses such as the potential limitations of sanctions or the challenges of forging regional unity in the face of a coup. By examining both strengths and weaknesses, this study sheds light on the effectiveness of ECOWAS' actions and areas for potential improvement in deterring future coups and fostering democratic stability in the region.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the institutional theory of North (1990) to explore the intricate dynamics of democratic backsliding in ECOWAS and the resurgence of military coups. For North (1990, p.3), "institutions are the rules of the game of a society, or more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. The key word in the definition of North is constraints - institutions include any form of constraint that human beings devise to shape human interaction. Institutions are made up of formal rules, informal constraints and their enforcement characteristics. Formal rules of course, are very straightforward. They are rules put into place; they are laws, constitutions, regulations, whatever, that have the character of

being specific and being defined precisely. Informal norms of behaviour provide us with more problems because informal constraints do not show up in formal terms. The kinds of formal rules that we have in fact occupy a very small proportion of the guides to everyday behavior and actions (North, 2003).

In relating the institutional theory to the study, it becomes clear that there is discernible trajectory in the mutation of weak democratic system. The significance of international institutions in influencing state conduct is emphasised by neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane and Martin, 1995). The institutional framework focuses on the organisational capabilities, decision-making procedures, and institutional architecture of ECOWAS institutions, including the ECOWAS Parliament and Commission. Interrogating how ECOWAS' institutional structures including the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, and the ECOWAS Commission, help or hinder the organisation's capacity to avert, arbitrate, and end political crises in West Africa is necessary to determine how effective ECOWAS has been in managing coups. Hence, the predominant presence of weak institutions is connected with democratic backsliding in Africa (Akinyetun, 2022). Douglass North's institutional theory explains West African coups/backsliding by viewing institutions (rules) as weak or manipulated by powerful organizations (elites, military) who exploit informal rules (patronage, corruption) and economic control for power, leading to instability when formal democracy fails to deliver, thus inviting military intervention as the ultimate institutional power grab. The rule of law and citizen engagement in government is unquestionably important democratic ideals that may be protected by a strong institution, promoting good governance (Mbaku, 2020). The study argues that the institutional framework within the larger regional framework offered by ECOWAS impacts the decision-making of important players involved in coup attempts, thereby explaining why coups occur in West Africa. Therefore, this theoretical perspective is quite apt and apposite in our analysis of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Weak Institutions and Insecurity threat to regional integration in West Africa

The word insecurity is not alien to any nation, as it has existed even in the pre-colonial societies of the world. However, to delve a bit deeper into understanding all-encompassing definition of insecurity, it is of necessity we have a brief understanding of what security is. Everyday people everywhere want security. Nnoli (2006) sees security as a cherished value associated with physical safety of individuals, groups and nation states at large. Ukpere (2012) and Elekwa (2016) notes that security is the protection of human and physical resources from hidden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life in homes, offices or communities. Adejumo (2011) defined security as the act of keeping peace within the governing territories, which is usually done by upholding national laws and defending the internal security threats of the nation.

The antithesis of security is insecurity, which can be understood as the absence of security as discussed above. Insecurity is a state of fear or anxiety due to absence or lack of protection (Beland, 2005). Chris (2021) defines insecurity as the state of fear or anxiety, stemming from a concrete or alleged lack of protection. This definition reflects physical

insecurity which is the most visible form of insecurity, and it feeds into many other forms of insecurity such as economic security, social security and political security. From the above definitions, insecurity is the feeling or conditions that threaten the social survival of people, and the consequence of which affect human resources. However, in the context of this study, and because of the very many ways in which insecurity affects human life and existence, it connotes hazard, danger, want of safety, want of confidence, state of doubt, inadequately guarded, lack of protection and being unsafe among others (Ugwuibe *et. al*, 2022).

Democratic backsliding unfolds through both gradual erosion and sudden disruption, systematically weakening institutions and dismantling accountability. This institutional erosion typically begins gradually, through mechanisms like judicial capture and the delegitimization of opposition, which allow leaders to slowly reshape institutions in their favor (Bodnar, 2021; Dănilă et al. 2023). Over time, these gradual changes weaken democratic safeguards, creating conditions where sudden authoritarian actions, such as suppressing civil society or seizing media control, can occur with little resistance, especially during crises (Hinfelaar et al. 2022; Huq, 2022; Kneuer, 2021). In this way, gradual and sudden mechanisms operate not in isolation, but in sequence and parallel, systematically dismantling democratic institutions and accountability.

In this environment, political polarization deepens societal divisions, enabling populist rhetoric to leverage these divisions to appeal to the public and justify exclusionary or undemocratic measures (Bessen, 2024). As institutional safeguards weaken, populist rhetoric accelerates this process by framing opposition as illegitimate and justifying undemocratic actions as necessary for the “will of the people” (Bessen, 2024; Kneuer, 2021).

Weak institutions and pervasive insecurity, including terrorism, coups, and governance deficits, significantly threaten West African regional integration (like ECOWAS) by causing policy paralysis, eroding citizen trust, hindering economic development, and creating instability that undermines cooperation, requiring deeper reforms beyond military fixes to address root causes like poverty and weak governance. These intertwined issues foster political instability, divert resources, and make collective action difficult, as seen with Sahelian states' departures and ECOWAS's slow response to crises, challenging the vision of a unified, prosperous region. The coups have adversely affected many African countries, such as Mali, with many citizens experiencing worsening living conditions and hindered economic development. It also contributes to Africa's displaced population, which already holds one-third of the world's displaced population, forcing millions to seek refuge in more stable countries (Brookings Institution, 2021). This has resulted in a refugee crisis, high poverty rates and a significant economic burden. Additionally, the insecurity created through military coups in Africa has hindered the flow of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), making it difficult for countries to develop economically (Brookings Institution, 2021).

The resurgence of military coups (e.g., in the Sahel) signals a loss of faith in governance and fractures regional unity, exemplified by the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) exit. Insecurity

functions as a primary catalyst for both democratic backsliding and military interventions by systematically eroding the legitimacy of civilian governments, creating security vacuums, and fostering public demand for "strongman" leadership. When democratic institutions fail to provide safety, they lose their social contract with the citizenry, making them vulnerable to both gradual authoritarian creep and sudden military takeovers. Insecurity triggers a feedback loop that weakens democratic checks and balances, often initiated by elected leaders themselves in the name of safety. Leaders often respond to insecurity by declaring states of emergency, bypassing legislatures, and expanding the surveillance powers of security agencies. These "temporary" measures frequently become permanent, resulting in the gradual erosion of civil liberties, media freedom, and the rule of law.

From the Sahel region through the Lake Chad Basin, attacks from terrorists and violent extremists have morphed with banditry, kidnapping, farmer-herder dynamics and transnational organised crime to leave a trail of death, destruction, despair and fear among the populace. Instability and insecurity remains a significant barrier to progress. Kingsley (2024) notes that threats to the West African Gas Pipeline, which runs from Nigeria through several countries, as an example of how regional energy projects are increasingly vulnerable to security threats. In effect, ECOWAS inability enforce its own rules, and guarantee the safety of its citizens is therefore, glaring that ECOWAS lacks the capacity to enforce its mandate of democracy and good governance on the member-states. In 2024 alone, the region recorded over 4,794 conflict-related deaths, more than half of global terrorism fatalities, with Burkina Faso and Mali ranking among the world's deadliest countries, surpassing even Syria and Afghanistan. These figures are accompanied by the displacement of over 4 million people across the central Sahel (Nextier, 2025).

Insecurity has caused the closure of at least 37% of health centres across the country, depriving more than 4 million people of health care. Burkina Faso has been at the forefront of the most neglected crises for two years (Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 2025). Ironically, the months following the coup saw a surge in cross-border violence, particularly in the Tillabéri and Tahoua regions. In late 2023 and early 2024, attacks by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) increased, resulting in over 1,000 civilian deaths (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024). The junta's severed ties with ECOWAS and Western allies diminished regional coordination and international support. Despite aggressive offensives launched under the leadership of Captain Ibrahim Traoré, militant groups affiliated with ISGS and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) continue to exert influence over border regions with Mali and Niger. These case studies underscore a clear pattern: military coups have not translated into improved security. Instead, they have often disrupted existing counterterrorism frameworks, undermined civilian trust, and allowed extremist groups to deepen their presence. Hence, the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to leave ECOWAS reflects the bloc's failure to address security and humanitarian issues in the sub-region. The coups and other issues discussed above are clear demonstrations of not only the detrimental consequences of democratic backsliding but also that the West Africa sub-region is currently devoid of the optimism that greeted the transition to democratic rule from the early 1990s.

ECOWAS Sanction and regional integration in West Africa: A Slap on the Wrist

This section of the article is focused on answering the question of the impact of ECOWAS response to the coup, particularly within the cohort of military-governed member-states. Sanctions are a key tool used to address military coups and promote democratic governance within member states. These sanctions can take the form of economic blockades, travel restrictions and suspension of diplomatic relations, are intended to pressure coup leaders to restore constitutional order. ECOWAS sanctions aimed at promoting democracy in West Africa often suffer from weak enforcement, selective application, and significant economic hardship on citizens, which can undermine their legitimacy. Key limitations include the resilience of military juntas, lack of cohesion among member states, and the emergence of alternative alliances that diminish ECOWAS's leverage. In notable cases such as in Mali despite sanctions following the 2020 and 2021 coups, the military government consolidated power and delayed the transition to civilian governance (Boukhars, 2020). Sanctions often have unintended consequences, disproportionately affecting ordinary citizens rather than the political elites responsible for crises. Economic restrictions, such as trade bans and financial isolation, frequently exacerbate poverty, unemployment, and inflation, as seen in sanctioned countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These measures disrupted economic activities, creating widespread hardship among civilians and further destabilizing fragile economies (World Bank, 2021). This raises ethical concerns about the use of broad sanctions, as their socio-economic costs fall primarily on vulnerable populations. Such outcomes suggest the need for more targeted approaches to avoid unintended harm while maintaining pressure on political elites (Kohnert, 2013). Conversely, in Mali and Guinea, where international coordination was weaker, sanctions had limited impact in achieving political change. This underscores the necessity for ECOWAS to strengthen partnerships with global organizations to enhance the legitimacy and efficacy of its sanctions (Emejulu & Kallon, 2023). However, enforcement remains a significant challenge, as loopholes and informal networks often undermine these sanctions' intended effects (Kuwonu, 2011). Strengthening enforcement mechanisms and adopting a more strategic approach could improve the outcomes of ECOWAS sanctions while reducing harm to civilian populations. The impact of the ECOWAS sanctions on Mali in 2020 and 2021 further highlights these concerns. Amidou (2021) argues that the sanctions significantly negatively affected the humanitarian situation in Mali, particularly regarding access to health and education. The suspension of air borders hindered the ability of international aid organisations to assist vulnerable populations. In contrast, the suspension of commercial activities disrupted the flow of food, fuel, and medical supplies, exacerbating the economic situation and causing inflation in the prices of essential goods. These effects are especially worrisome in Mali, which is already facing severe poverty and food insecurity, with an estimated 3.5 million people needing humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA, 2021). These findings highlight the complexities and challenges of using sanctions as a tool for fostering democratic governance and political stability in West Africa.

However, the effectiveness and consequences of these sanctions have been debated, particularly in the light of the recent coups in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. *The Guardian Editorial* (2024) stated that the unsavoury experiences of the people of Niger Republic, alongside that of many Nigerians on the borderline, are a clear testimony of the impropriety of the sanctions imposed by the bloc on Niger in particular, and on Mali and Burkina Faso in general. Reports of the hardship, and the relief to the people following the lifting of sanctions further cemented the fact that countries in the region must flock together in their common interest.

The sanctions have implications on the power outages are further damaging Niger's brittle economy. In normal times, the country imports more than two thirds of its electricity from its much wealthier neighbour, Nigeria, but sanctions have severely curtailed supply. Unlike in 2021, following the coup in Mali – when ECOWAS excluded food, electricity and petroleum products from the punitive economic and financial restrictions it imposed – the bloc has carved out no such exemptions for Niger. Major cities like Niamey, Maradi and Zinder are suffering prolonged blackouts and serious power rationing, and many businesses have turned to using generators. With fuel in short supply, those that are unable to procure diesel or to bear the cost of a generator have shut down altogether. Okafor (2024) notes that the sanctions were meant to, among others, serve as a deterrent to soldiers in other countries in the sub-region but failed to do so. From Mali to Guinea to Burkina Faso and Niger, soldiers carried out their coup despite the sanctions imposed on previous coup plotters. The bloc faced a difficult decision and went on to take a tough line with sanctions that were not achieving the desired goal. ECOWAS tried to use the Niger situation to salvage its image but failed. It only succeeded in pushing junta-led states towards alternatives that are now providing them with a sense of belonging which they alleged is lacking within the ECOWAS.

As a result of the sanction, air borders between ECOWAS countries and Niger were closed and a no-fly zone on all commercial flights to and from Niger (now partially lifted) was imposed. All commercial and financial transactions between member states and Niger were suspended, halting trade including electricity supply (Emelike and Ailemen, 2024). Invariably the sanction has disrupted regional supplies and markets within the junta-states. In all, it becomes clear that the social discontent between the government and the governed is widespread in these countries, and the military class capitalizes on it to overthrow its civilian counterpart. While there is a steady decline in coup attempts globally, its resurgence in sub-Saharan Africa points to the failure of democracy to deliver on development, given that “coups often occur amid public resentment against the regime” and “coups are most likely to overthrow authoritarian leaders” (Thyne and Powell, 2019). States have failed to create functioning democracies capable of delivering basic public services to their citizens or meeting people's fundamental security and means of subsistence (Carson, 2023).

Conclusion

The rising frequency of coups d'état in West Africa and across Africa highlights the urgent need for collective action by states to safeguard civilian rule as a foundation for sustainable democracy. While recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger were justified as attempts to restore order, persistent insurgencies, escalating terrorism, and worsening humanitarian crises underscore the ineffectiveness, and often counter-productivity, of authoritarian governance. In response, ECOWAS member states have advanced binding legislation to protect emerging democracies in the region. The revised ECOWAS Treaty (1993) reflects a shared commitment to economic stability, regional cooperation, and continental development. This paper argues that the implementation of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance is fundamentally undermined by institutional weaknesses and the fragile nature of many member states. Despite limited progress in intra-regional trade over five decades, ECOWAS is still viewed as a model of regional integration on the continent.

To curb democratic backsliding, political will and consistent commitment must be demonstrated at all levels. ECOWAS must maintain a visible presence in the political affairs of member states to curb executive overreach and electoral manipulation. ECOWAS can strengthen Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in Africa by fostering peer-review mechanisms through ECOWAS Network of Electoral Commissions (ECONEC), to share best practices, providing technical capacity building, and facilitating joint, credible election observations. Key interventions include strengthening EMB independence, ensuring sustainable funding, promoting digital literacy to counter misinformation, and fostering inclusive, transparent electoral environments. The bloc must adopt Peer Review Mechanism by Utilizing ECOWAS delegations to facilitate peer review, allowing Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) to discuss challenges and share best practices. It should equally provide consistent, long-term technical and logistical support to member state EMBs to strengthen their operations. ECOWAS should Promote Electoral Security and Integrity. ECOWAS should facilitate the development of comprehensive security plans for elections to prevent, manage, and mitigate electoral violence. This includes strengthening collaborative efforts for credible, transparent, and inclusive election observations.

On the judicial organ of government, ECOWAS can facilitate judicial reforms to curb democratic backsliding by strengthening the authority of the ECOWAS Court of Justice to ensure its rulings are binding, enforcing the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, and requiring member states to align national laws with regional democratic standards. Key actions include bolstering judicial independence, enhancing early warning systems for constitutional violations, and supporting, rather than just sanctioning, states in transition. The Community Court of Justice, ECOWAS must reaffirmed its commitment to safeguard human rights and advance development in the region and across West Africa. The bloc must provide technical support and training to national judiciaries to protect them from political executive interference, ensuring they act as a check on democratic erosion. Anti-Corruption strategies should be given top priority. ECOWAS can curb democratic backsliding

in Africa by enforcing strict anti-corruption measures, specifically by empowering the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice to prosecute officials, sanctioning leaders who manipulate constitutions, and strengthening regional surveillance. By linking economic stability to democratic governance, ECOWAS can address the root causes of coups and improve public confidence.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this research.

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ORCID

Charles Nnamdi Olise: Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3100-7734>

Christopher Onyemaechi Ugwuibe: Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8247-2292>

Bartholomew Uchenna Nwokoma: Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5934-1029>

Eze, Ifeyinwa Jennifer: Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3306-3976>

Vitus Sunday Nnamani : Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7595-9302>

Marcellinus Chigozie Nwachukwu: Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2111-0756>

Nwaedu, Friday Nwaedu :Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1752-8090>

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