

PUBLICATION | NOV 2025

ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series

A Critical Assessment of ECOWAS' Role in Safeguarding Democracy in West Africa

By Christopher O. Ogunmodede

RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

This work is available under the Creative Commons Attribution license 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>. This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.

DISCLAIMER

This publication was produced with the support of the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project, commissioned by the BMZ and implemented by GIZ. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of GIZ or the German government. GIZ assumes no responsibility for the content of external websites referenced in this publication.

This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1990s, ECOWAS took several steps to shore up its ability to respond to conflict and political instability in West Africa. It revised its founding treaty in 1993 and adopted the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace Keeping and Security as well as the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. At different points between 1990 and 2017, ECOWAS deployed military forces to Liberia and Sierra Leone, and authorised interventions in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia, with the Gambia mission winning praise from the international community for facilitating a peaceful transfer of power after the country's disputed 2016 presidential election.

By the end of the 2010s, when several opposition candidates across West Africa won presidential elections and all 15 countries in the ECOWAS region were governed by civilian leaders, a consensus emerged that ECOWAS had become a powerful promoter and facilitator of democracy and good governance within the subregion. This paper argues that the perception of ECOWAS' 'success' during the 2000s and 2010s was based on a narrow definition of democracy that focused on elections at the expense of other measures of governance, such as human rights, state capacity, institutional quality and the rule of law.

THE INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN WEST AFRICA

The spate of coups that has erupted in West Africa since 2020 has called into question the premise that the region had consolidated democracy in the 2010s. Amid sharpening geopolitical competition among global powers for influence in West Africa, many have claimed that the entrenchment of military rule in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger is part of an anti-democratic wave that is sweeping across the continent. In this view, ECOWAS — which counts on the support of Western powers — is often cast as the region's democratic bulwark against what some argue is a Russia-backed authoritarian axis in the Sahel.

This self-serving narrative absolves ECOWAS of responsibility for the role it has frequently played in undermining democracy and good governance in the region. It frames 'democracy' too narrowly by using elections as its main yardstick

"ECOWAS' 'success' focused on elections, neglecting broader governance measures"

and minimises the damage done by civilian leaders who came to power via deeply flawed elections and held onto it by repressing dissent, coopting state institutions and weakening guardrails. ECOWAS was often perceived by citizens, - who do not distinguish between the Commission and the Authority of Heads of State - as complicit in these developments by endorsing the outcome of flawed elections or turning a blind eye when regional leaders weakened democratic norms and institutions.

If the charge by West African citizens in the Community is that ECOWAS is a 'club of dictators', it is arguably one whose seeds were sown at the organisation's conception. When ECOWAS was founded in May 1975, seven of the 15 heads of state who signed the Treaty of Lagos that formally established the union were rulers of military regimes which had overthrown civilian governments. The other eight were civilian leaders of one-party states, including two who were elected by parliaments in which their political parties had a super majority. Since the organisation's founding, ECOWAS has regularly deferred to the interests of these member states and their leaders, as opposed to the region's people, despite the bloc's frequent exhortation that it desires to be a people-centred institution. One clear example is ECOWAS's endorsement of the 2020 elections in Guinea, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire, despite widespread concerns about electoral flaws and irregularities.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that it was the outbreak of war in Liberia and Sierra Leone which compelled West Africa's leaders to broaden ECOWAS' mandate to include a peacekeeping framework, security was always at the forefront of the bloc's agenda. In 1978, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on Non-Aggression, followed by the Protocol on Mutual Assistance Defense three years later. The two protocols were created to forestall intra-ECOWAS aggression as well as belligerence supported and perpetrated against the bloc's members by non-ECOWAS entities.

At the same time, it is impossible to divorce the creation of the two protocols from the context of the Cold War, which regularly pitted West African states against one another depending on what side of the ideological divide they fell. In the 1970s, West African countries experienced multiple coup attempts that featured the speculated and actual involvement of neighbouring states.

The two non-aggression pacts can be viewed as attempts by West African Heads of State to curb the influence and intervention of neighbouring States in their domestic affairs. They failed to prevent the breakout of conflict, as exhibited by the Mauritania-Senegal Border War as well as the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. However, they did shore up the dominance of West African states and contributed significantly toward

the bloc's institutional tendency toward deferring to the preferences of government leaders.

ECOWAS IN A CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The departure of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS in January 2025 marked the biggest challenge to ECOWAS' cohesion. It was also indicative of new and existing geopolitical developments in the region and the wider global order.

Since 2000, China has replaced France as the main economic partner across West Africa, while Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have also emerged as influential actors in the region. The Trump administration's overhaul of the United States Agency for International Development, withdrawal from the World Health Organization and imposition of tariffs on the US' trading partners are emblematic of Washington's diminished desire to sustain the global leadership role it has espoused since the end of WWII. The drastic reduction of international peacekeeping and Western counter-terrorism operations in West Africa has coincided with a decline in French influence in the region, while Russian influence in the Sahel is on the upswing and there are fledgling efforts to develop a regional security architecture.

In many parts of West Africa, the period since the late 2000s has been defined by conflict and the rise of jihadist groups like Boko Haram and Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, whose violent attacks have killed tens of thousands, contributed to the displacement of more than 4 million people and created several humanitarian crises across the region. A range of international interventions were authorised in response to these developments, including missions by the UN, US, France and the EU. By and large, they failed to improve the security situation in the region or help to establish credible state institutions that could engender good governance and economic development. Public anger against the worsening security landscape in the Sahel paved the way for the overthrow of civilian leaders by military juntas, which terminated Western-led counter-terrorism missions in favour of partnerships with Russia.

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) — a confederation of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger — in July 2024, ahead of the withdrawal of its members from ECOWAS in January 2025, was a setback for Nigeria, the region's hegemon which stakes a broader claim of continental and global significance on the leadership role it has historically played in West Africa. Nigeria aspires to middle-power status, as underscored by its push for membership of global clubs like the G20, BRICS and the United Nations Security Council. However, Nigeria's domestic challenges have converged with a decline of its influence as a geopolitical actor, to the extent that foreign powers like France, China, the US and Russia arguably now wield more influence in West Africa than Nigeria does.

The economic and security challenges Nigeria has faced since the late 2000s have led it to an inward drift that in turn has weakened ECOWAS' capacity to respond effectively to threats to stability in the region. This development has created a leadership vacuum in the region that external actors have filled in pursuit of their own objectives. Nigeria's inability to leverage ECOWAS — an organisation it played an important role in founding and which is headquartered in Abuja, its capital city — to anchor the West Africa region raises important questions about its continued claim to regional leadership. The emergence of the AES encapsulates the decline of Nigeria's regional influence and underscores the reshuffling of the geopolitical order in ways that could threaten regional integration and stability.

HOW ECOWAS' MEMBER STATES UNDERMINE DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND STILL RETAIN THEIR LEGITIMACY

Togo is an example of how West African states can simultaneously undermine ECOWAS while legitimising themselves in other ways. Having played an important role in the founding of ECOWAS, Togo has often been at the forefront of key developments in the organisation. While Togo's president, Faure Gnassingbé, has entrenched himself in power by holding deeply flawed elections and launching brutal crackdowns on demands for reform, he has regularly positioned Togo as a bridge between West Africa's divides. In 2022, Gnassingbé helped settle a months-long dispute between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire that was triggered by Mali's detention of Ivorian soldiers providing support for the UN's peacekeeping mission in the country. He reportedly brokered an agreement for Burkina Faso's former military ruler, Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, to exit power peacefully following his overthrow in a coup in September 2022. Damiba was later offered exile in Togo. More recently, Gnassingbé was appointed by ECOWAS as a mediator between ECOWAS and the AES.

As a close partner of France and the US, Togo has frequently pitched itself as a valuable emissary that can engage AES members in dialogue at a time when their diplomatic relations with the West are fraught. As a result of Togo's good relations with the AES and Western powers, it is unlikely that ECOWAS and its partners will condemn Gnassingbé's repressive record on human rights and effort to remain in power indefinitely in the same way they have condemned Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

2020: ECOWAS' ANNUS HORRIBILIS

Since 2020, the West Africa region has experienced six successful coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (Jan 2022 and Sept 2022) and Niger (2023). The cause of these coups continues to be debated, but a common theme has been dissatisfaction with the performance of civilian leaders amid the myriad difficulties affecting the region.

The first of these coups, when former Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was

overthrown in August 2020, was triggered by public anger over the government's mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and allegations of vote-rigging in the 2020 parliamentary election. The June 5 movement, an umbrella group of civil society organisations in Mali, called for the resignation of Keita and the legislature's leaders. The movement was sharply critical of ECOWAS's mediation in the crisis, which it saw as biased toward Mali's political leaders including Keita. The bloc's lack of credibility with either the demonstrators or the political class obstructed its ability to broker a settlement to the dispute and exposed its inability to influence events before and after the coup.

Elsewhere, Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and former Guinean President Alpha Condé were reelected to third terms in controversial elections that sparked civil unrest in the two countries. Again, ECOWAS not only failed to enforce its stated norms against extraconstitutional term extensions but also congratulated Ouattara and Condé after their wins were ratified by the constitutional court in their respective countries. Other West African heads of state joined ECOWAS in felicitating the two leaders even while security forces in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire launched violent crackdowns on post-election demonstrations.

The contrast between ECOWAS's outrage against military coups and its leniency toward tenure extensions, human rights abuses and other instances of poor governance draws frequent criticism from many West Africans who regard the latter category as no less egregious than the former. This disconnect between ECOWAS and the people it ostensibly serves is one of the bloc's weaknesses that it must rectify if it is to remain relevant in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **ECOWAS should create a Citizens Consultation Forum.** This forum would hold every two years in the bloc's 12 countries to bring citizens into the decision-making process and inform discussions among West African leaders about the future of ECOWAS. The consultations would be carried out by independent organisations and would gather a diverse and balanced group of West African citizens, including entrepreneurs, organized civil society, trade unions and religious and cultural organisations. The discussions must have a clear objective and ECOWAS leaders must commit to a follow-up of the outcome of the consultations.
- **Strategic task force on governance.** The ECOWAS Peace Fund's five-year strategic plan should be supported by a task force on governance that would be domiciled in the Commission and led by experienced, credible figures who are widely respected in the region. Some suggestions would be former Beninese President Thomas Boni Yayi, Professor Chidi Odinkalu, the peace activist Leymah Gbowee and Fatou Bensouda, a former prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

This task force would work closely with the ECOWAS Early Warning Directorate, and advise and make recommendations to the Commission and Authority of Heads of State and Government on a range of governance-related issues like elections, constitutional reform, human rights and unconstitutional changes of government.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christopher O. Ogunmodede is an editor, consultant and analyst of African politics, security and international relations with a specialized focus on West Africa. He has worked with governments, multilateral organizations, private sector organisations, think tanks, non-profit organisations and media organizations on three continents. Chris is the author of [Penkelemesi](#), a newsletter about African politics, foreign relations, security and culture.

He has appeared in a range of media outlets including the BBC, CNN, NPR, Al Jazeera, CGTN, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, TRT World, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America, Reuters, Politico, GZERO Media, Arab News, Tagesspiegel, La Repubblica and France 24. He has made presentations at the Economic Community of West African States, African Union, German Federal Foreign Office, U.S. Department of the Army and U.S. Naval War College.



Africa Policy Research Institute is an independent and nonpartisan African think tank. It researches key policy issues affecting African countries and the African continent. APRI provides insights to the German and European Union policy-making processes on Africa. In addition, APRI provides policy options to African policymakers and civil society actors.

Imprint

APRI - Africa Policy Research
Institute gGmbH
Prinzenstrasse 85D
10969 Berlin
Germany

Executive Director:

Dr. Olumide Abimbola
Contact: Dr. Amandine Gnanguénon
Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics
& Geoeconomics Program
Email: agnanguenon@afripoli.org

License:

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>