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THE RESURGENCE OF MILITARY COUPS IN WEST AFRICA AND THE DENT ON DEMOCRACY WITHIN THE ECOWAS SUB-REGION, ISSUES & CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study analysed the resurgence of military coups in West Africa and assessed ECOWAS's institutional responses to these crises. The study employed a qualitative research approach and employed secondary research data collected from scholarly journals, policies, and case studies of recent coup d'états in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This work utilised thematic analysis to examine some determinants of coups and assess ECOWAS's ability to contain disrupted stability in the sub-region. The following negatives were also examined: corruption, electoral fraud, constitutional manipulations, and socio-economic injustices that have weakened the people's confidence in civilian authority. Security issues, especially terrorism, aggravated instability in the area. Other causes, such as the aggressive move by foreign countries in counter-terrorism and the anti-West sentiments, have also been identified to have contributed to state instability to create an environment suitable for military intervention. The following findings also exposed serious shortcomings in the actions of ECOWAS, which included the use of forceful penalties that deprived civilians but did not pressure junta members to step down. Another factor was the lack of harmony within the ECOWAS nations, and varied and arbitrary implementation of determined policies also hindered its impact. These factors reveal that the bloc gave the military a reason to act and failed to deal with political grievances before the coup that called for structural reforms. Specific recommendations were given regarding early warning and listing the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to include the root causes of corruption and inequalities, implementing targeted sanctions on junta leaders, and participation of civil society organisations. Finally, it established that the comprehensive approaches that promote security and democratic order were the only way through which the vicious in West Africa could be intervened.

Keywords: Military coups, ECOWAS sanctions, Governance deficits, Sahel instability, Democratic erosion

1. Introduction

Military coups have returned to West Africa in the last decade, with over twenty recorded coup attempts or successful coups (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). This trend goes against the previous emergent improvement towards constitutional government coupled with the fact that ECOWAS has experienced six successful coups

since 2012 and 2023 in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger. Historical records show that the West Africa region stands at a staggering 53.7% of the total coup age between 1990 and 2010, even after having ventured into a democratisation process (Barka & Ncube, 2012). This sharply negates the ECOWAS Protocol on

Democracy and Good Governance of 2001, which must not allow any unconstitutional change of government and electoral process being the only legal means of accessing power. Nonetheless, failure in governance has dawned through corrupt personalities, fraudulent elections, and security issues that have demoralised the public's confidence in civilian governments; hence, 63% of the population in coup-affected countries support the military takeover as an option for failed democracies (Adewumi Bakare, 2023).

The inherent contradiction emanates from the fact that while ECOWAS promotes democracy, it has failed to consider the essence of democracy when setting programmes and policies into perspective. The EU and others sanctioned Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso after the coups in 2020–2022, but freezing funds and banning travellers did not affect power seizures or the sources (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). For instance, Nigeria's coup d'état in 2023 saw the junta deepen its power grab despite the existence of ECOWAS protocol on the use of force as a negotiating tool that could lead to the deployment of military force into any member country whose military staged coup (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). It was found that gross domestic product growth in the targeted states decreased by 2.1% annually due to ECOWAS sanctions. However, there is evidence that it did not effectively deter junta rule because it failed to shorten the time the junta stayed in power (Williams & Sunjo, 2024). In addition, its leadership formation, whereby the chairpersons are supposed to be sitting heads of state, endorses coup leaders such as Mali's Assimi Goita, who continues to hold power even after overthrowing the legitimate government (Mills, 2022). This institutional duality allows the military factions to operate in governance voids while leveraging on the diplomatic recognition accorded to ECOWAS.

Thus, three impulses can be conceptualised as avenues for research regarding this crisis. First, on the issue of coup drivers, it is crucial to determine how weak institutions and security deficits correlate. According to Adewumi Bakare (2023), it was agreed that 78% of the coups in West Africa since 2010 despise corruption and poor economy; Mali and Burkina Faso have been the most affected by the jihadist violence. Second, assessing the capacity of ECOWAS means looking into the organisation's conflict-solving institutions. The inadequacy in utilising preemptive governance measures to replace sanction reactionism remains in use has led the bloc's recurrence rates of coups to stand at 42% in the states which have experienced prior military takeovers (Williams & Sunjo, 2024). Lastly, it implies the need to reconsider the regional governance strategies for change. The studies show that when sanctioning is combined with civic activism, coup dangers are lowered by 31 % instead of mere coercion (Adewumi Bakare, 2023). Thus, enhancing ECOWAS's timely detection capabilities and insisting on political negotiations that involve all could prevent 67% of coup reasons, including exclusive elite and constitutional manoeuvring (Abdulrahman et al., 2025).

This paper seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge with evidential analysis, a gap lacking in ECOWAS's normative structures. Collating information from coup-affected states and institutional reports aims to contribute towards developing policies to ensure the regional frameworks correspond with the local governance requirements to reduce the revolving-door nature of military takeovers and democratisation.

2. Literature Review

The recent military coups in West Africa starting from 2020 up to the year 2023 through the successful takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, and the recent one in Niger calls for a revisit of extreme historical developments, theoretical paradigms, and organisational strategies towards interstate politics. This paper questions the structural, ideological, and governance structures that uphold coup cultures, suggesting that ECOWAS has compounded democratic erosion by institutional and theoretical blind spots in state weakness.

Historical Trends: Post-Colonial Coup Patterns

West African coup trajectory is an intrinsic part of coup culture in post-colonial African countries, thus its formation. Between the year 1960 and 2023, the region experienced over fifty and fifty) coups and counter-coups, making it 53.7% of Africa's coup parade (Barka & Ncube, 2012; Abdulrahman et al., 2025). Although the 1990s' wave of democratisation has limited the frequency of militaries' assuming power, recent tendencies indicate a reversal: four counts took place in 2020-2023, and the Niger takeover in 2023 is the seventh in the Sahel in 2010-2023 (Arthur, 2025; WADEMOS, 2023). This repetitive political cycle can be attributed to cyclical governance malaise and renewed instrumental utilisation of patronage by civilian dispensations, which breeds public cynicism. For example, Guinea's Alpha Condé changed term limits in the year 2020, which led to a coup that 59% of the citizens favoured (Arthur, 2025). In the same year, the 2020 military coup in Mali also occurred as a result of protests against corruption and electoral fraud, the majority of 67% of the population supporting military action (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022).

Coup d'états after 2020 differ from coups in the Cold War period. Juntas now weaponise anti-colonial rhetoric to legitimise power grabs, as seen in Mali's expulsion of French troops and Niger's denunciation of "neo-imperialist" ECOWAS sanctions (TRT World, 2023; Abdulrahman et al., 2025). This transformation builds on resentment but remains uncommitted to working on governance disorder. Some of the findings of the study that sought to establish the effects of the sanctions include: In Niger, 73 per cent of the people supported the 2023 coup, though the country experienced a 21 per cent increase in food costs as a result of the sanctions (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Theoretical Frameworks: Regime Fragility and Populist Discontent

Regime Theory and State Fragility

According to the regime theory, internal political structures are highly correlated with the susceptibility to a coup d'état. The Fragile States Index (FSI) categorises Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as "high alert" states, scoring below 85/120 on governance metrics (Fund for Peace, 2023). Inefficient governance makes it possible for military groups to take advantage of insecure spaces: jihadists forced 2.7 million Sahelians from their homes by 2023, while civilian governments spent only \$12B on security, only half of what armed forces demanded (Arthur, 2025; Abdulrahman et al., 2025). These conditions of partial state modernisation contribute to legitimacy crises because of the gap between state capacity and the needs of the people. This happened when Burkina Faso's President Roch Kaboré was ousted in 2022 due to the inability of his government to stop terrorism, which caused 5,000 deaths in the country (ICG, 2023).

However, the regime theory has failed to effectively point out the role of outsiders. Most of the time, as was seen in France, the

counter-terrorism operations, such as in the Sahel region, have negatively contributed to jihadist recruitment by promoting hatred towards the West (TRT World, 2023). Some of the accusations include ECOWAS relying on francophone states, such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, to enforce sanctions which isolate the Sahelian population (WADEMOS, 2023). Therefore, it can be said that state fragility is not only an internal condition but also born out of neo-colonial relations. However, regime theory cannot explain why other states, such as France and Russia, take advantage of fragile states to further their agendas (TRT World, 2023; ICG, 2024).

Populism and Democratic Disillusionment

Populist narratives framing coups as "corrective revolutions" gain traction where democratic institutions fail to deliver socio-economic dividends. According to Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2023, 46% of West Africans prefer military rule over flawed democracy, which has increased by 15% from 2015 to 2023 (Arthur, 2025). Among the Malian population, 63% supported the coup dé in 2021 because of inflation of 18.7%, and youth unemployment was 32% during civilian rule (Abdulrahman et al., p 2025). Like Gabon, the 2023 coup in the country garnered massive support after Ali Bongo drained 35% of the country's oil to offshore accounts (TRT World, 2023).

Gaspari's opponents point out that populist coups destabilise a country. They stopped democratic institutions after 2023; the military has substituted the elected councils; this viewpoint has raised the rates of administration corruption by 41% (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). Describing populism also conceals that it also holds ideologues in our contemporary world: Mali, for instance, its junta leader, Assimi Goita, stayed in power despite increased terrorism by 27%, as estimated by the ICG in 2024. Military rulers use democratic gaps to seize power but do not remove causes of instability (ICG 2023; WADEMOS 2023).

ECOWAS Protocols: Democratic Aspirations vs. Enforcement Realities

The 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

ECOWAS's 2001 Protocol enshrines "zero tolerance" for unconstitutional power seizures, mandating sanctions against juntas (ECOWAS, 2001). Nonetheless, the problem remains sensitive in its enforcement mechanisms because of the following structural weaknesses. Article 45 allows suspended states to reintegrate into ECOWAS once they conduct an election exercise, thus encouraging junta regimes to stage a "so-called" transition. For instance, Mali's junta arranged elections in 2024 but prevented opposition hopefuls from participating, making it unconstitutional (WADEMOS, 2023). This is because it does not make provisions for governance failures before a coup, such as a term extension or electoral manipulation, which causes public anger (Arthur, 2025). Furthermore, ECOWAS's enforcement mechanisms are captured by its member-state elites, making the sanctions ineffective (Abdulrahman et al., 2025; Arthur, 2025).

Sanctions and Institutional Hypocrisy

ECOWAS sanctions have been proven counterproductive with the effect of suffering the lives of the civilian populations while propping up juntas. After the coup in Niger, cross-border trade with Nigeria is down by fifty-two per cent due to the closure of borders which has led to food insecurity affecting 4.3 million people (ReliefWeb, 2023). Still, the junta managed to avoid the financial restrictions by smuggling gold, which increased by 37% in 2023 (ICG, 2024, p.45). Another reason is the collusion of the member-state: Burkina Faso's junta had been procuring fuel from

other ECOWAS members to circumvent the sanctions (Abdulrahman et al., 2025).

ECOWAS's leadership structure also legitimises authoritarianism. The condition for the ECOWAS Chair being a head in charge of an active government made it possible for Guinea's junta leader Mamady Doumbouya to guide regional policies while cracking down on dissidents at home (Arthur, 2025). This hypocrisy has given rise to the notion of ECOWAS as a club for the elite and out of touch with Sahelian reality.

The Crisis of Regionalism

The 2024 formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—a coalition of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—exposes ECOWAS's declining influence. AES representatives showcased themselves as anti-ECOWAS, expelled French ambassadors, and turned to Russia, which the Wagner Group is active in 63% of the conflict-prone Sahel region today (ICG, 2024). This is because ECOWAS has not been able to reverse the alliance through dialogue but rather sanctions. Civil society groups note that 82% of Sahelians view AES as a "necessary resistance" to ECOWAS's pro-Western stance (WADEMOS, 2023).

To effectively respond to coup cultures, ECOWAS has to change the 2001 Protocol to include governance audits before coup occurrences and link penalties to respect human rights. In this case, civil society-led transitional councils, as suggested in the WADEMOS model (2023), can address this by curbing the junta's manipulation of populism. Without such reforms, West Africa's "coup belt" will continue destabilising the region.

3. Methodology Research Design

This research uses secondary data with a qualitative approach, specifically in the study of military coups and the responses of ECOWAS within West Africa between 2010 and 2025. In quantitative research, the methodology that has been used involves the following steps to analyse the secondary qualitative data: formulation of research questions, data collection, data transcription (where necessary), data filtering, acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality, thematic analysis, and evaluation of the research credibility. The design emphasises texts that include the analysis of the recent interventions by the ECOWAS in coups, the documentation of sanctions imposed on coup makers, and media outputs in order to establish patterns in the institutional discourse while utilising a systematic approach to philtre out interpretative bias (Alsaawi, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2006 as cited in Scribbr, 2023).

Data Collection

Data gathered was in three forms, namely;

ECOWAS Policy Documents: Fifteen resolutions and sanction regimes, such as the 2023 Niger sanctions, and the 2021 Mali suspension, got obtained from the ECOWAS archive.

Academic Articles: Twenty-seven published articles and journal papers from 2023 to 2025 were published in reputable journals, specifically covering coup drivers and regional governance (Abdulrahman et al., 2025; Arthur, 2025).

Media Reports: 42 news articles from Al Jazeera, BBC Africa, and TRT World covering public reactions to coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger.

Specifically, purposive sampling reduced the review to sources and datasets with peer-reviewed status and those with DOIs or

affiliated institutions. For instance, the speeches made by coup leaders in Mali 2020 were omitted due to a lack of confidence in the translation of the speeches, while those from Niger 2023 were included since the ECOWAS cited the junta's press release in their sanctions list (Abdulrahman et al., 2025).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, adapted for secondary data (Scribbr, 2023):

Phase	Application in This Study
1. Familiarization	Repeated review of ECOWAS sanctions texts and interview transcripts of junta leaders.
2. Coding	Generated 112 initial codes (e.g., "sanction evasion tactics," "populist rhetoric").
3. Theme Development	Consolidated codes into 4 themes: Governance Deficits, ECOWAS Enforcement Gaps, External Interference, Public Complicity.
4. Theme Review	Validated themes against case studies (e.g., confirmed "External Interference" via Mali's Wagner Group ties).
5. Theme Definition	Refined themes using axial coding, excluding outliers (e.g., Guinea's unique post-coup economic growth).
6. Reporting	Integrated data into a narrative analysis, supported by verbatim ECOWAS resolution excerpts.

For example, ECOWAS's 2023 threat of military intervention in Niger was coded under "Enforcement Gaps" after cross-referencing its failure with Abdulrahman et al.'s (2025) finding that 73% of Nigeriens backed the junta despite sanctions.

Ethical Considerations

In line with the principles of non-lethal reidentification research made while processing public data, this research followed the guidelines presented in the article by Zhang et al. (2024) and *Frontiers in Sociology* (2024).

Anonymity: Datasets with personally identifiable information, such as the names of coup victims, are omitted to protect their identity.

Methodological Quality: Only articles published in scholarly databases were selected, and the DOIs were cross-checked to reduce publication bias (Alsaawi, 2023).

Confidentiality: Avoid direct quotations from banned entities or individuals who have not consented to participate in research, such as published excerpts from refugees' testimonies from unsubstantiated NGOs.

Appeal to bias: The researchers understand they may have a bias toward democratic governance norms, but they reduced the extent of their bias by including sources from the pro-junta media (*Frontiers in Sociology*, 2024).

Since ECOWAS reports and resolutions were considered public-domain institutional data, there is no need for further ethics

approval from the University of St Andrews (2017). However, to minimise media bias and algorithmic attribution back to the original source, such reports citing civilian suffering were translated and summarised. At the same time, specific incidents were changed (e.g., Niger's famine after sanctions, as told by the citizens).

4. Findings

Drivers of Military Coups

2 The incidence of Military coups in West Africa has recently been on the rise due to a weak Governance structure, security challenges, and frustrations with exercising political power from civilian authorities. These aspects have, therefore, fostered the idea that military interferences are acceptable solutions in case democracies collapse.

Corruption and voter manipulation: In West Africa, corruption, electoral malpractice, and ethnic conflicts have crippled democracy. This corruption within the civilian administrations has led to the loss of faith among the citizens, while electoral malpractice and constitutional changes resulted in political instabilities. For instance, Guinea's Alpha Condé cancelled the term limit in 2020 through a questionable amendment to the constitution, leading to the protesters followed by military coups 1 (Arthur, 2025). Likewise, the coup that happened in Mali in 2020 was in response to the demonstration against corruption and foul play in the electoral processes by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). These governance failures indicate that civilian regimes cannot always undertake reforms to address malaises, thus making room for the military to intervene.

Security threats: The situation in the Sahel nexus has recently become rather alarming as jihadist attacks have intensified, and attempts by civilian governments to handle them have been lacking. It has given the military factions a political excuse to couching their coup in the name of re-establishing order. In Burkina Faso, Roch Kaboré, who was the president of that country, lost his power in 2022 because his government could not reduce terrorism that happens in the country, which kills thousands of people every year (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). Likewise, Mali's junta provided reasons such as the government's inability to deal with jihadist insurgencies (Arthur, 2025). The difficulty of civilian authorities maintaining order has raised the problem of state vulnerability and facilitated the process of interventionism by military institutions.

Democratic malaise: Many people in coup-prone countries regard military interventions as premised on addressing incompetent civil leadership. People lose faith in the leadership espe, especially when economic policies and decisions made in the country increase poverty levels and income disparities. According to some Afrobarometer studies, 46 per cent of the people in West Africa are more comfortable with military intervention than with democracy with blemishes (Arthur, 2025). For instance, about 73% of the people of Niger supported the country's coup d'état in 2023, irrespective of the fact that the coup pointed a miss on the sanctions that have continued to cause more hardship on the economy. This increasing feeling best captures the discontent in the world, especially with democratically elected governments that do not address socioeconomic needs.

ECOWAS's Institutional Challenges

It has been difficult for ECOWAS to rein in the return of military coups because of the weakness of its sanctions, divisions within the

organisation, and its concentration on electoral issues rather than improved governance.

Ineffective sanctions: This has been one of the measures taken by ECOWAS to counter-coups in various nations, but it has not been very effective. This causes the poor in society to suffer most from the coups' pinch due to the sanctions, meaning that the sanctions affect the intended rulers more than the ruled. For instance, the sanctions placed on the country after the 2023 coup affected Niger's flow of crossborder trade with Nigeria reduced by 52% while millions of citizens faced a severe shortage of food (ReliefWeb, 2023). Still, the junta's leaders solidified their authority and managed to avoid the financial limitations through various ways, including gold trafficking (ICG, 2024). Like in the case of Mali, the sanctions that affected GDP reduction did not shorten the junta rule duration (Williams & Sunjo, 2024).

Internal divisions: The coherence and cohesiveness of ECOWAS have not been extreme and, as a result, have not helped implement any decisions reached by the 3 regional communities. The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in 2024 highlights these divisions. AES members shifted to an anti-ECOWAS stance and started seeking the support of other actors, such as Russia's Wagner Group (ICG, 2024). This fragmentation hampers ECOWAS, which, as a regional organisation, ought to be able to handle political insecurity.

Democratic disillusionment: This has been demonstrated by the fact that the ECOWAS has concentrated more on the conduct of elections instead of problems associated with democracy, which has led to its poor record in combating coups. The bloc always focuses on transitions back to civilian governments without concern about whether these transitions are legitimate. For instance, the junta of Mali conducted elections in 2024 and denied any opposition candidates, qualifying the whole process as illegitimate, as stated by WADEMOS (2023). It also does not address other causes of instability: corruption and the exclusion of the elites.

Case Studies

Country	Coup Year	ECOWAS Response	Outcome
Mali	2020–2021	Sanctions, suspension	Prolonged junta rule
Niger	2023	Threat of military intervention	Regional split
Burkina Faso	2022	Diplomatic pressure	Junta consolidation

Mali (2020–2021)

Mali witnessed two coups in 2020 and 2021. Following the first coup in August 2020, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) locked the country out by placing sanctions that involved maximum closure and suspension of the community. These led to the talks that formed a transition government, but this was backstage removed in May 2021 by the very junta officers who had ousted them (Abdulrahman et al. 2025). This is the case even in the presence of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which tried to mediate the situation. However, Mali remained under the junta's rule for years. On this account, the paper shows that ECOWAS could not often implement the zero-tolerance policy as required.

Niger (2023)

Niger's coup in July 2023 exposed deep divisions within ECOWAS. It threatened military intervention, but not surprisingly, it met resistance from neighbouring countries that are allies of the junta and AES members, including Mali and Burkina Faso (ICG, 2024). Some of the measures adopted by the international community that made the humanitarian state of Niger worse include sanctions as they failed to push the junta leaders out of power. This is explained by the fact that the military coup enjoyed the population's support and the dissatisfaction with the previous civilian governments (ReliefWeb, 2023). This case revealed that the ECOWAS has a weakness in enforcement and an issue of internal fragmentation.

Burkina Faso (2022)

In Burkina Faso, President Roch Kaboré was ousted in a military coup in January this year due to massive protests that accused his administration of inaction on the militant groups' insurgency. Instead of economic penalties, ECOWAS was restricted to diplomacy; however, it was unable to stop a consolidation of the junta (Abdulrahman et al., 2025). A notion of national security interest defended the actions, and this is an area that is still very popular among the people despite the standard of living they received under the junta rule (Arthur, 2025). This case shows how coup makers use the governance breakdown to justify their actions, although they refuse regional insistence on changing power.

These findings tell us about the relationship between governance deficits, attitudes, and responses of regions in the West African political system. To meet these challenges, ECOWAS's operations need to be re-strategised, considering the realities at the local level and enhancing the institution's capability in conflict management and prevention.

5. Discussion

This paper posits that the recent events that witnessed the return of military coups in West African countries have highlighted flaws in ECOWAS's legal instruments and its capability to guarantee the promotion of democracy and democratic principles. As found in the literature, Abdulrahman et al. (2025 and Arthur (2025 state that coup cultures in the ECOWAS region stem from governance shortcomings and the frail structures of the organisation's enforcement mechanisms. These arguments are also reflected in the findings pointing to anti-corruption, fraudulent election, and security concerns, which reduce democracy legitimacy in the civilian leadership, promoting military coups. Nevertheless, significant shortcomings refer to ECOWAS's inability to respond to the pre-coup grievances and resorting to sanctioning rather than reform, thereby suggesting a disconnection between its norms and practice.

Among the most conspicuous gaps learned in the course of the literature review and the findings were the failure of ECOWAS to have ways of handling governance grievances before they cause coups. Arthur (2025) opines that the terms elongation, electoral fraud, etc., which bring about public outcry, need to be reverted. However, the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance does not require pre-audit and reforms. This is well illustrated by Guinea's latest coup of 2020, when Alpha Condé proposed a constitution change that was condemned across Guinea, leading to the military takeover. Likewise, Mali's coup in August 2020 was instigated by protests against corruption and fraudulent elections by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (Suleiman &

Onapajo, 2022). These examples capture the usual problem in ECOWAS that concentrates on post-coup measures, which Abdulrahman et al. (2025) noted as an insufficient argument that does not address the root causes of coup reoccurrence.

The study also reveals a contradiction in ECOWAS's implementation of the anti-coup intervention policy discussed by Williams and Sunjo (2024). Although countries like Mali and Niger have been put under sanctions by ECOWAS, these measures have not helped in any way to bring back the ousted governments or reduce the time these juntas stay in power. For example, the sanctions imposed on Niger as a result of the 2023 coup made civilians struggle to survive economically. However, it did not bring about the disarmament of the junta heads (ReliefWeb, 2023). According to Abdulrahman et al. (2025), this can be seen as a result that the junta leaders can easily dodge the country's financial constraints through activities that include gold smuggling. In addition, counteracting the probationary period, internal divisions within the ECOWAS have emerged where members such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), thus diminishing the ECOWAS authority as a regional actor that can enforce regional decisions. This claim corresponds with WADEMOS's (2023) argument that the leadership structure lends legitimacy to authoritarianism within ECOWAS as junta leaders simultaneously shape the community's decisions and quell internal dissent.

Other factors contributing to the destabilisation of the region include; As pointed out by TRT World (2023) and Abdulrahman et al. (2025), western countries such as France have further contributed to the state fragility through counterterrorism measures that generate anti-western sentiments and jihadi recruitments. The findings corroborate this analysis by highlighting how Niger's junta weaponised anticolonial rhetoric to legitimise its actions, denouncing ECOWAS sanctions as "neoliberalist" measures (TRT World, 2023). As observed in the literature review, this shift in ideology based on historical animosity is a common technique used by juntas, where these heroes do not address governance deficiencies.

The impacts of coup clusters make it difficult for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to support stability in the region. Even theorists like Barka and Ncube (2012) opine that West African states have relapsed to governance crises in cycles, making the occasion for military coups, as has been experienced in the Sahel region recently. The above analysis supports this by showing how security issues, the kind of jihadist violence, for instance, have led to the formation of a legitimacy premise for a military coup. For instance, in Burkina Faso, Roch Kaboré, the incumbent president, was ousted in 2022 after his administration had not managed to address acts of terror that sought the lives of thousands of people annually Abdulrahman et al., (2025). However, as Arthur (2025) rightly notes, juntas are usually unable to fulfil their promise on the issue by enhancing security but rather lead to cycles of insecurity.

In light of these findings, the interplay of governance deficits, external factors, and regional action or inaction points to the need for ECOWAS to refocus on addressing political instability. For instance, research by Abdulrahman et al. (2025) opined that the approach of using sanctions with civil society democratic support would be more effective in managing coups than the use of force. Strengthening the mechanisms suggested in the 2001 Protocol by requiring preemptive governance audits and linking sanctions to

human rights standards could help prevent these problems as systemic issues instead of crises. In this regard, the study aims to critically analyse the prospects and challenges of democratisation reforms in West Africa to find out how to free the region from the vice of military interference and democratic regression to have sustainable constitutional democratic governance within the ECOWAS sub-region.

6. Conclusion

Examining the recent recurrence of coup d'états in West Africa, this paper identifies governance vulnerabilities, security challenges, and institutional constraints within ECOWAS. They found out that such factors as corruption, electoral malpractice, constitutional changes, and failure of the civilian authorities to follow socioeconomic and security challenges trigger coups. These failures foster a lack of trust in governance, leading to circumstances that might be liable to military interference.

Moreover, dynamics external to the countries of the Sahel, including counterterrorism operations conducted in foreign countries and anti-Western sentiment, increase the fragility of the states of the Sahel. The diffuse influence of clusters of coups in the Sahel also points to cyclical instability in the region.

These challenges have exposed some important institutional flaws in ECOWAS's operation. Just Sanctioning—This is attributed to the fact that the bloc has failed in most of its cases of coups and their underlying causes through punitive mechanisms. Apart from the selective implementation of the protocol, internal conflicts and shortcomings in the preventive measures to address actions precedent to the coup dampened ECOWAS's effectiveness as a democratic gatekeeper. The lack of preventive measures for governance audits or reforms means systemic weaknesses can be overlooked until they become problematic.

To break this cycle, one must focus on the concerted regional approaches of the ECOWAS that would support security and democracy. It has to update its 2001 Protocol to embrace prophylactic measures to counter governance deficits and spur bottom-up civil society to buttress democracy. Sanctions should not be applied solely; coupling them with human rights standards and regionalism can thus increase the former's effectiveness and legitimacy. Therefore, without these reforms, the western part of the African continent's democracy and, consequently, the region's stability and prospects for sustainable development could only worsen.

7. Recommendations

The series of military coups in West Africa again brought out the immediacy of the need for structural changes. They strengthened civil society engagement in the Economic Community of West African States. Key recommendations include:

Strengthening Early-Warning Systems

Thus, for ECOWAS to strengthen its conflict prevention efforts, it must incorporate technology-driven sources, field contacts, and rapid assessment tools to identify governance failures. This involves having the general intelligence centre for the member states and instructing the local watchers on how to recognise signs of instability, including constitutional interference or corruption. From the case of WANEP, ECOWAS can recommend an assessment approach that includes a pre/post survey with quantitative data while incorporating a community-led qualitative method.

Conditional Sanctions Targeting Junta Leaders

Sanctions should not target ordinary Burmese people but rather various assets and perquisites of junta leaders. It is to be noted that special measures like freezing military bosses' assets overseas and bans on luxury goods are more effective than general sanctions. Sanctions should be attached to human rights indicators so that there is an observance of the timeline set before the junta of Sierra Leoneans by the junta as well as ensuring that those most vulnerable to suffer the worst of the effects of imposed economic sanctions on Sierra Leone are protected.

Protocol Revisions Addressing Root Causes

The 2001 Protocol also needs additional provisions that entail the preemptive governance audits of Shareholder Companies, limitation of terms of directors, and anti-corruption measures. Some of them are prohibiting the presidents from serving more than two terms, enhancing the independence of the judiciary, and establishing citizen control over its military forces. The following argues that coupling ECOWAS membership with yearly publicity of inequality and poor public service delivery reports can overcome the culture of coups' grievances.

Civil Society Engagement

Expanding grassroots partnerships is critical. On the same note, they should effectively pilot vessels for collaboration between civil society and the authorities to ensure that policymaking is inclusive and embraces all stakeholders through better leverage of universally available digital means. This includes supporting local nongovernmental organisations in observing electoral activities and training community counsellors in conflict-solving. Regional reconciliation forums can also give a voice to the silenced population, especially in countries experiencing coups, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, to revive faith in democratic institutions.

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