

DEMOCRATIC EROSION AND REGIONAL DISINTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: Military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have had grave impacts on regional integration in West Africa. This paper examines the motivations behind these developments: how they have affected democratic governance and, more generally, regional stability in West Africa. The study is essential as it evaluates the gradual undermining of democratic principles and possible fragmentation of the region, as well as events that may affect stability and development processes in the region. Although, some recent studies on democracy and regional integration in West Africa exist, limited scholarship exists on the conditions that necessitate the withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS and their forming the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) is scarce. A qualitative analysis of secondary data from academic journals, reports, and news articles (2015–2023) was deployed. The analysis revealed that economic grievances, security concerns, and discontent with the method for imposing democracy chosen by ECOWAS are some of the drivers behind these countries' decisions. The research finds that the erosion of democratic norms has greatly influenced political activities in these countries through increased military influence. These developments pose a threat to regional stability and cooperation in West Africa. Therefore, understanding these dynamics is critical in strategizing ways to promote democratic governance while enhancing regional cooperation measures. The findings reveal the forces that lead to regional disintegration and provide knowledge in mitigating such challenges.

Keywords: Democracy, ECOWAS, Military Coups, Regional Integration, West Africa

INTRODUCTION

The West Africa sub-region has for long been characterized by efforts to ensure democratic governance and regional integration, which gave birth to regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). All these efforts culminated in ECOWAS in 1975, which was instrumental in boosting democratic governance, political stability, and economic cooperation among member states. For years, ECOWAS has been at the centre of many political crises, creating a framework for the resolution of conflict and solidifying democratic values in the member states (Edi, 2006). The democratic trends and integration efforts that had so far been achieved in the region were affected by the recent political situations in some states in the region. In the past couple of decades, cases of democratic administration in West Africa have shown considerable progress. Some countries in the region moved from military dictatorships and autocratic kinds of governance to democracy (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Lindberg, 2006). The democratisation process, creation of democratic institutions, and increased political activities have

been marked by the implementation of multiparty elections. Organisations such as the Economic Community of West African Nations (ECOWAS) have played a key role in deepening democracy and consolidating peace in this region. Quite often, they work to restore constitutional rule in member states that find themselves in political crises (Aning & Pokoo, 2014).

However, the recent political situation in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea subsumes the progress toward democracy in these countries. These countries have had to go through military coups, which has consequently resulted in a halt in their smooth democratic transition. The Malian military carried out a coup d'état in August 2020 and May 2021; according to them, intense corruption and instability made them take over the government (International Crisis Group, 2021). It was in January 2022 that a similar military coup was carried out in Burkina Faso, reportedly over the failure of the government to tackle Islamist violence (Al Jazeera, 2022). The September 2021 coup in Guinea was even reportedly a reaction to the government's economic hardship and incompetence (BBC News, 2021).

These coups have implications that involve some danger to the stability and cooperation in the regional sphere. The ECOWAS, known in the past for its advocacy of democratic principles in West Africa, is now faced with a grave challenge of handling such problems. The withdrawal by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea from ECOWAS to form the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) is a major decision. This political coalition reveals an exit from the core ideals of regional integration and collective security represented in ECOWAS (Siegle, 2022). The coming of CASS raises concerns about further political fragmentation and instability in West Africa. The coalition's focus on national sovereignty and regional autonomy can obscure the building up of a common and stable democratic regional governance. The fragmentation referred to is a threat not only to the countries directly involved but also to the entire regional edifice, which has been instrumental in the pursuit of peace and development in West Africa (Besada, 2010).

In addition, this paper argues that the erosion of democratic governance in West Africa has significantly weakened the normative and institutional cohesion of ECOWAS, threatening long-term regional stability. The study critically analyses recent events and how they impact democratic governance and regional integration. It seeks an in-depth understanding of what caused the military coups and the resultant formation of CASS. It is aimed at interrogating the forces that led to the erosion of democratic ideals and the eventual fragmentation of the region. Drawing on secondary data from the key stakeholders and supporting literature, it gives insights into these complex and interlinked challenges.

Statement of the Problem

Such a strong threat to democratic governance and regional stability in West Africa has been the withdrawal by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea from ECOWAS to be replaced by creating CASSE. This development shows a gradual regression of democratic institutions and standards, raising concerns for the future of regional integration and cooperation. The latest military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have resulted in the cessation of democratic processes and the installation of military administrations. These actions contradict or defy conventional expectations of democratic values propagated by ECOWAS, which has always been in support of democratic

government and stability in the region (Adebajo, 2002). The coups in these countries have led to the collapse of democratically elected governments and the temporary abolition of constitutional structures

Withdrawal from ECOWAS to form CASS will pose a significant threat to regional stability. ECOWAS has been in the forefront in ensuring that there is peace and stability in West Africa because of its innovative conflict prevention and resolution systems. Most importantly, the withdrawal of these three countries will weaken the present security framework that ECOWAS has built and may serve as a precedent for other countries in the region to withdraw and further cause fragmentation while creating insecurity (Onapajo & Moshood, 2017). Moreover, the creation of CASS can be a potential step toward the fragmentation of the region, hence weakening the unity and cooperation that ECOWAS has sought to encourage between West African nations (Adetula, 2018).

There is existing literature on democratic decay and regional stability in West Africa, which has mainly focused on how ECOWAS has contributed to democratic governance and brought about peace in times of conflict in West Africa. However, few of them relate to the implications of the exits of ECOWAS by member states or the forming of rival or counter regional blocs such as CASS. While available literature, such as Campbell (2021), has been on the short-term impact of military coups on democratic governance, there is a need for in-depth and broader research into the long-term implications of regional stability and integration.

Beyond that, existing scholarship does not do enough to bring out the reasons behind the decision of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to quit ECOWAS and go on to form CASS. An understanding of the drivers of such decisions, especially political, economic, and security factors, is quite important in strategizing toward the promotion of democratic governance and peace within such a region. There is an overall dearth of literature on how ECOWAS and the international community would likely react to these developments, which shaped democracy in the future and stability within West Africa.

Research Objectives

- a) To analyse the dynamics that inform the decision of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to leave ECOWAS.
- b) To assess how the decisions of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea are going to affect democratic governance in West Africa.
- c) To evaluate the possible effects on stability and regional cooperation in West Africa.

Conceptual Review

1. **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS):** ECOWAS is the regional organization that brings together fifteen West African countries. Conceived by the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, its major objective has been to promote economic integration and political cooperation among member states. ECOWAS is devoted to raising the level of intraregional trade, achieving self-sufficiency, and contributing toward peace and security. The institution

- often intervenes in the case of conflicts and political crises within its member countries, while also supporting democracy, human rights, and sustainable development in West Africa.
2. **Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS):** CASS is the political and economic union to be composed of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. It will have birthed from the failures in the structure arranged at the regional level by ECOWAS. The CASS seeks to improve on cooperation that exists among the countries of the Sahel on security, economic development, and political stability. The creation is therefore a realignment of the regional axes and raises a question mark on the future of integration in West Africa.
 3. **Democracy:** Democracy is a form of government wherein people exercise power directly or through elected representatives. It typically highlights political equality, rule of the majority, and protection for minorities. Normally, democratic systems would include free elections, multiple competing political parties, an independent judiciary, free media, etc. As attested by the recent case of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, the erosion of democratic standards can so easily undermine political stability, translating into rising authoritarianism and human rights abuses.
 4. **Military Coup:** Military coup: a sudden, violent, illicit governmental power grab by the military. Coups generally arise from political instability, corruption, and bad governance. They interrupt democratic practices by dissolving elective institutions and substituting them with military or autocratic regimes. Recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea have dealt very serious blows to democratic systems, generating huge political and social upheavals.
 5. **Sahel:** The Sahel refers to the semi-arid region in Africa, extending from the Sahara Desert in the north to the Sudanian Savanna in the south. This encompasses the countries from Senegal and Mauritania in the west to Chad, Sudan, and Eritrea toward the east. The region is challenged by various issues, among them agricultural, political instability, and security challenges occasioned by the active existence of armed factions and insurgent movements. The Sahel, owing to its peculiar socio-economic and environmental conditions, remains the focus of development and security efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Historical Context

The period that followed the fall of colonial rule in West Africa was marked by immense political instability and different degrees of democratic governance. Most of these West African countries faced military coups, autocratic regimes, and partial periods of civil wars that followed independence and swept across nations in the 1960s. Political instability impedes the process of institutionalizing stable democratic institutions. An understanding of the recent political situation in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea cannot be achieved without closely tracing this historical context. The process of establishing the independence of Mali from colonial rule in 1960 was not devoid of challenges—internal tensions and external pressures. The government was immediately set up after independence, with President Modibo Keita overthrown in 1968 through a military coup, in which Moussa Traoré came to power and governed until 1991 under military rule. This was a long episode of military rule marked by autocratic rule, characterized by the repression of political opposition (Englebert, 2017).

The 1990s introduction of democracy brought renewed hope for political stability, but Mali continued to face enormous challenges, including rebellions and coups. The political dynamic has since taken a different dimension after the Tuareg rebellion in the north and after the proliferation of Islamist terrorist organizations. The two coups, one in 2012 and the other in 2020, underlined ever so eloquently that these democratic institutions, born in the country, remain always volatile and vulnerable (Boeke & Schuurman, 2015; Wing, 2013). Similar patterns can be detected in Burkina Faso which had the periods of military rule that interrupted democratic practice over time. Following independence from France in 1960, Burkina Faso – then Upper Volta – went through a series of coup d'états, the most decisive one of 1983, which established Thomas Sankara in power. This revolutionary government showed little staying power since Sankara was ousted and assassinated in 1987 by a coup that put Blaise Compaoré in power (Kohnert, 2019).

Compared to this, Compaoré's long rule until 2014 had gained stability and limited democratic gain. A popular movement in 2014 dragged him from power, which then saw a brief transition before the country finally elected Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Even though it was taking steps to be democratic, this country has still continued to face major security problems with jihadist insurgencies, and in 2022, there is likely to be an upcoming coup, this time against Kaboré, whose government got overthrown (Kohnert, 2019). The post-colonial path of Guinea has been strewn with a regular recurrence of political instability and military interventions. The country had gained independence from France in 1958 and was subsequently led by President Ahmed Sékou Touré, whose autocratic regime survived until his death in 1984, following which a military putsch led by Lansana Conté took over, establishing a military regime that survived until his death in 2008 (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Another coup and a further era of military rule under Captain Moussa Dadis Camara followed Conté's death. Guinea has thus been unable to maintain political order and stop the bloodshed, despite at least three attempts to switch to a civilian government. The 2021 coup d'état that ousted President Alpha Condé from office is again an open example of the constraints to civil rule in the country (Bah, 2014; Koulibaly, 2022). The continuing legacies of these events are influential in shaping contemporary political development in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. These coup cycles and perennial political instability have prevented any form of steady democratic institutions and norms from solidifying. Quests to establish the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States underpin the latest coups (McGovern, 2017). The historical background thus places more emphasis on the interaction of colonial legacies, internal squabbles, and external forces on the political trajectories of the countries. Persistent volatility and vulnerability of democratic governance point to the need for significant and more in-depth variables in understanding the changes and the likely implications for regional stability and cooperation (Bah, 2014; Koulibaly, 2022).

The Role of ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States is a regional group created in 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos for economic integration. Along with time, ECOWAS also carved out an important niche in promoting democracy and assuring regional stability. It has intervened to mediate conflicts, deployed peacekeeping missions, and provided support in democratic transitions. Among the notable successes of the ECOWAS has been its intervention in Liberia and Sierra Leone during

the civil wars that raged in these countries throughout the 1990s. Interventions that ensued helped restore peace and facilitated democratic elections (Adebajo, 2002). Similarly, ECOWAS has actively supported electoral processes in member states through pre-, intra-, and post-electoral activities; often, by dispatching observer missions, it has helped guarantee free and fair elections (Ewi & Aning, 2006).

Several protocols and declarations go to form the mandate of ECOWAS on democratisation. Indeed, the 1991 ECOWAS Declaration of Political Principles committed its member-states to democratic governance, human rights, and the rule of law. Moreover, it has been underpinned by the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, detailing free and fair elections, political participation, and constitutionalism (Hartmann, 2017). The organisation has also developed mechanisms for conflict prevention and management, such as the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework, which offers a holistic approach to tackling the causes of conflicts in the region (Zyglidopoulos et al., 2020). Early warning systems, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts have been installed in this framework to help sustain long-lasting peace and stability.

The promotion of democracy has, however, had to contend with some serious challenges. Furthermore, partiality, noted in the organisation's interventions, guided at times by such interested member states as Nigeria and Ghana, may undermine the perceived legitimacy of action by ECOWAS (Adebajo & Rashid, 2004). This is another challenge towards the enforcement of democratic norms because of the varying levels of commitment among its membership. In most cases, countries that lean towards authoritarianism or have weak democratic institutions resist ECOWAS's efforts at promoting democracy, thus limiting the latter's capability to enforce compliance with set protocols (Jaye, 2008).

Very easily do the recent political crises in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea point out these challenges, portraying a dim view of the ability of this organisation to sustain regional stability and democratic governance. In Mali, ECOWAS applied sanctions and negotiated a transition following the coup in 2020; however, constant instability and security challenges hampered such efforts (International Crisis Group, 2021). Suppose one takes the coups in Burkina Faso and Guinea into consideration. In that case, the sense is that ECOWAS has been stretched to the limit in terms of having to try and respond to sudden democratic backsliding swiftly and decisively and coherently apply its democratic principle.

In addition, the formation of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States as a response to ECOWAS's perceived weaknesses foreshadows a potential fragmentation of cooperation efforts. It makes the point abundantly clear that challenges within ECOWAS must be met through strengthening mechanisms of democracy promotion and stability to prevent further fragmentation of regional cooperation efforts (Bøås, 2023).

Recent Political Developments

The military coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Guinea in 2021 have had immediate, profound effects on the political scenes of these countries. Concretely, each coup was induced by a variety of factors: there was general discontent with the then-incumbent governments, economic

difficulties, and security concerns related to insurgent activities in the Sahel region (International Crisis Group, 2021). These coups mirror deep-lying structural problems that have resulted in people who are highly discontented with corrupt leadership, poor governance, and wide gaps of socioeconomic inequality that have eroded confidence in democratic institutions.

The August 2020 coup in Mali saw the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, apparently replacing him with a transitional government. Contrary to any such notion about returning to civilian rule, continuous political instability and security challenges have remained, most notably represented by the constant threat from jihadist groups operating in the northern and central regions of Mali. The interim government, first under the presidency of Bah N'Daw and then under Colonel Assimi Goïta, has been struggling to consolidate power to push for effective reforms in governance (International Crisis Group, 2021; Thurston, 2021).

It was in January 2022 that Burkina Faso had undergone a coup that ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. The coups were propelled by frustrations over the inability of the government to quash Islamist insurgencies and failure to manage an economic crisis. According to Harsch, it is observed that the new military regime under Lt. Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba promised to restore security and deal with governance issues, though the situation stays very fluid, with continuous attacks by insurgents and internal displacements (Harsch, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2022).

In September 2021, a military coup toppled the President of Guinea, Alpha Condé. Protests had been regularly occurring since President Condé sought a third mandate and constitutional change. The coup has since been justified by colonels headed by Mamady Doumbouya as being done due to corruption in the government and economic mismanagement. Of course, political uncertainty and economic challenges still continue to be a part of life, even though this new regime has promised a transition to civilian rule.

The decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to form the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) turned out to be a game-changer in regional dynamics. The act underlined perceived inadequacies within ECOWAS in handling special political and security needs. In a way, the creation of CASS can be termed as the pressure from both within and without—to give way to increased autonomy, with the requirement for a form of regional cooperation attuned more to their aims and purposes (Koulibaly, 2022; Souaré, 2022).

The formation of CASS also points to a wider regional dissatisfaction with ECOWAS, which has struggled to enforce democratic norms and manage conflicts very poorly. Its responses to the coups in these countries have been mixed, with so far financial sanctions and diplomatic efforts unable to conjure any definitive solution (Bøås, 2023). The coming into being of CASS may herald some realignment in regional alignments, further muddling any effort at entrenching stability and democracy in West Africa (Aning, 2021; Odijie, 2022).

Gap in Literature

While there is ample literature on the historical context of political instability, the role of ECOWAS, and new political developments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, there is a lack of in-depth studies that can bind these very factors into the broader consequences affecting regional disintegration and democratic erosion. Many scholars have discussed the historical context of political instability in West Africa. For example, Englebert (2017) looks into challenges in statehood, like Burkina Faso, among other countries, arguing that this country has been riddled with governance issues and political instability since its independence. On his part, Kohnert (2019) discusses the socio-political development in Mali and its effects on West Africa more generally, highlighting the cyclical nature of this instability and just how hard it has been to have sustainable democratic governance.

Most of these works, however, focus on individual countries with little in-depth examination of how such historical instability patterns may collectively drive regional dynamics. For example, while Englebert plumbed the depths of Burkina Faso and Kohnert did so with Mali, this body of work has failed to take up the problem of cross-issue linkages across the region or their broader implications for regional stability and democratic governance. The role ECOWAS has been playing in democratization and the maintenance of regional stability remains an important issue of debate among scholars. Adebajo (2002) makes an in-depth analysis of the ECOWAS peacebuilding processes in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, thereby identifying the successes and challenges the organisation faced. In a similar manner, Ewi and Aning (2006) review the efforts that have been made by ECOWAS to prevent and combat terrorism in Africa, thereby outlining the contributions that have so far been made towards regional security.

Although it has made such contributions, few studies have critically interrogated how effective ECOWAS has been in promoting democratic governance in the wake of emerging political crises. For example, while Jaye's (2008) study examines ECOWAS' role in the management of the political crises in Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, the study falls short of effectively considering the capacity of the organisation in handling recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, or broader implications for regional stability. Some reports and academic journals have been written concerning the new political development in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, more especially on military coups and plans to form the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States. International Crisis Group (2021) analyses the political situation in Mali, noticing problems facing the transitional government. Koulibaly (2022) and Savadogo (2022) provide clarity to the political economy of military coups in Guinea and the implications of security and governance in Burkina Faso.

While these studies bring to light some useful insights concerning the immediate effects of the coups, they seldom integrate overall analysis of how such developments may influence broader regional dynamics. There is hardly any research that has unravel the making of new regional alliances like CASS and how they may affect institutions like ECOWAS. Bøås (2023) included the broad security dynamics in the Sahel region in his work; however, he did not explain how the birth of CASS would alter the regional political scene or affect democratic governance. While voluminous literature on special aspects of political instability, the ECOWAS role, and recent

political developments do exist, there is a yawning gap in hooking them up to understand their broader implications for regional disintegration and democratic erosion. Much of the literature produced on this subject remains country-centric or event-centric without completely approaching the connectivity of these issues within the regional framework.

For instance, while Adebajo (2002) and Ewi and Aning 2006 inform the roles that ECOWAS has played in peacebuilding and security, they fail to address how these efforts by ECOWAS are perceived against the backdrop of the recent coups. Similarly, Englebert (2017), Kohnert (2019), and Jaye (2008) make some important historical and political analyses but fail to relate them to the general trends of democratic erosion and disintegration at the regional level.

This research seeks to fill this gap with a holistic analysis of democratic erosion and regional disintegration in West Africa, particularly in regard to recent developments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Marxist Political Economy and Regional Security Complex Theories to narrate the erosion of democracy and the making of the CASS, together with its effects on regional integration and stability in West Africa. The two theoretical frameworks provide complementary understandings of the political dynamics at play within the complex setting under consideration.

Marxist Political Economy

Marxist Political Economy focuses on how economic structures are interwoven with political power and how economic interests shape political institutions and processes. According to Marxist theory, democratic norms are worn away by economic elites grabbing control of state resources and, often, entrenching powers and repressing democratic practices (Harvey, 2010). From this perspective, one can explain how economic factors are the main causes of political instability and authoritarian regimes in West Africa. Marxist scholars emphasise economic disparities and resource control that characterise West Africa. Such systems, they argue, contribute to democratic institutional weakening due to elites fighting to hold their power and better economic position (Smith, 2015). What becomes relevant to the understanding of democratic erosion in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, as well as the context of their economies influencing their choice to form CASS, is this view.

Indeed, Marxist theory posits that economic elites and ruling classes can willingly support, or sometimes even foment, political revolutions to protect their economic interests at historical moments of conjunctures. With this framework in mind, the most recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea easily come into focus since the role of an economic crisis, corruption, and elite manipulation is very clear in such countries. The vantage from which one would view the formation of the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States is one in which it is placed in the context of local elites trying to refashion regional power dynamics in a way that better secured their economic and political interests.

Regional Security Complex Theory

The Regional Security Complex Theory 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 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 Guinea 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 can 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.

Much of the literature on democratic erosion and regional disintegration in West Africa is currently centred on either individual country case studies or the broader regional implications of certain discrete political events. However, integrated analyses that effectively address the socio-economic drivers of democratic erosion and the regional security dynamics influenced by such political changes are missing. To the best of available knowledge, most of the existing studies focus either on the Marxist critiques of economic conditions or the RSCT analyses of regional security but fail to properly integrate these varied perspectives for a holistic understanding of what has transpired in West Africa of late. This study will, therefore, contribute to the closure of this gap by integrating Marxist political economy with Regional Security Complex Theory in efforts toward a finer-grained understanding of democracy erosion and the constitution of CASS. Change is driven by the interplay between economic interests and regional security dynamics; this paper tries to deepen the understanding of their drivers and consequences for stability and regional integration. This will enable an in-depth exploration of the motivation to form CASS, using both combined theories, and broader consequences for West Africa.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A thematic analysis of secondary sources (2015–2023) was conducted, prioritizing peer-reviewed journals, ECOWAS reports, and news articles from reputable outlets (e.g., BBC, Al Jazeera, etc.). Democratic decline and regional fragmentation are elaborated within theory, research, and critical evaluations. Level of research: JSTOR, Google Scholar, University depositories, ECOWAS and AU, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, NGO reports. Reliable news sources provided real-time information and context. Descriptive analysis was used to identify patterns, trends, and significant

themes on issues bordering on reasons to leave ECOWAS, governance impacts, and regional stability and to present such findings in a simple and organised manner.

ANALYSIS

Investigating the Factors Driving the Exit from ECOWAS

The decisions by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to leave the ECOWAS for a new regional bloc called the CASS are events of great geopolitical import for West Africa. Among the main factors driving this move are not only specific but also nuanced issues of economic dissatisfaction, governance, and security, as well as the potential benefits of a new regional bloc more attuned to their needs.

One major reason that triggered the exit from ECOWAS is the general economic discontent among these nations. ECOWAS's economic policies have been accused of not being favorable to small and less developed member states, like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, while the larger and more economically advanced benefit most, such as in the case of Nigeria and Ghana (Akindele, 2017). These nations feel that the regional economic framework is marginalising them, particularly considering the peculiarities of their respective economies and problems, which are poorly understood. There has, therefore, been an increasingly strong wish for an alternative organisation to offer more fitting economic cooperation and assistance.

The governance factor has also largely influenced the exodus from ECOWAS. Since its establishment, the organisation has been accused by many of its lack of transparency, accountability, and administrative efficiency (Adejumobi, 2015). These challenges in governance have led to widespread frustration and the erosion of faith in the capability of ECOWAS to serve the interests of all its member states effectively. It is against this backdrop of corruption and inefficiency perceptions inside ECOWAS that Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea are now seeking an institution that better represents an avenue for more effective and transparent structures of governance.

Security is central to this geopolitical shift. The threats of terrorism and insurgency have been relentless in the Sahel region, and most of the leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea would judge ECOWAS to be something that has so far been ineffective against such intricate and fast-moving security challenges. In such a situation, the security frameworks conceived within ECOWAS are not considered very effective; rather, what would bring about actual change is a more local and specialised security framework, such as the one propounded by CASS. This perception is further supported by Zartman (2015), in which the limitations of ECOWAS in its effort to handle regional security threats are underlined. In that respect, the formation of CASS is viewed as an opportunity to develop a security strategy that is more responsive to Sahel's particular needs.

The potential gains to be acquired from forming CASS also play a significant role in ECOWAS' exit decision. In the view of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea stakeholders, CASS is in a better position to offer more tailored, personalised economic cooperation and security that addresses

Sahel needs. This position, as captured in this concept, aligns with the theoretical platform of regionalism, which emphasises that regional integration must be adapted accordingly to specific geopolitical and economic contexts (Bach, 2016). CASS is viewed as an opportunity for the evolution of a bloc that better addresses the unique needs and challenges shared by countries in the region, hence placing them on a more effective basis for economic policies and security strategies.

Through Country-by-country case studies, there are some other major factors explaining these countries' interest in exiting ECOWAS. For Mali, the handling of political transitions and rising security challenges by ECOWAS became a spur that added impetus to growing demands for greater political self-determination. Perception of ECOWAS interference in Mali's political processes also deepened this sentiment. In Burkina Faso, the strong discontent with the ECOWAS economic policies and their realisation of regional cooperation with CASS winning dividends have been key drivers. Most respondents cited the possibility that CASS could have more appropriate economic policies that really suit their needs. For many years now, matters of governance within ECOWAS and issues of security have been very critical in Guinea. The corruption that characterises ECOWAS has been a big issue of contention leading to yearning for an alternate organisation that is capable of performing better in matters concerning governance.

Assessing How the Decisions of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea Will Affect Democratic Governance in West Africa

The latest in a series of developments, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea decided to withdraw from the ECOWAS to form a new CASS. It is potentially an event of unprecedented political upheaval within West Africa. This raises critical questions for democratic governance in the region's future, especially given the historical backdrop featuring political instability and authoritarianism. This is further complicated by the influence of external powers such as Russia and China, aside from the ECOWAS sanctions. Thus, the study examines how these developments will likely affect democratic governance in West Africa.

Impact on Democratic Governance

With the withdrawal of the trio—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea—the influence of the regional mechanisms put in place to promote and protect democratic governance is thus eroded. Traditionally, ECOWAS has played a large role in mediating political crises and supporting democratic transitions in member states. Its institutional framework is based on protocols that promote democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights (Akinyemi, 2015). The withdrawal by these three countries will, therefore, reduce ECOWAS's ability to enforce the implementation of such protocols and reduce its influence in the sub-region.

The formation of CASS thus reflects a strategic shift toward a more localised form of regionalism that focuses first on security and economic cooperation, not democracy. It reflects a broader trend in which immediate concerns, such as security and economic stability, are prioritised over the long-term goal of democratic consolidation (Dersso, 2018). While CASS may offer more focused

solutions to the individual problems that the Sahel faces, it is unlikely that democratic governance would become a priority as it did in ECOWAS.

Exogenous Factors: The Case of Russia and China

The geopolitical interests of external actors, notably Russia and China, stand strong in shaping the political paths that Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea took. Both countries have expressed renewed interest in the extension of their influence in the African region through increased economic investments, military cooperation, and diplomatic representation. Russia, in particular, has been exerting effort to expand its presence in the Sahel region by providing military support and security assistance (Shinn, 2015). Indeed, this, in most cases, involves fewer political strings attached than Western aid, traditionally linked to democratic reforms and human rights (Adebajo, 2020).

Compared to China's approach, which focuses on infrastructure development and economic partnership as it has stipulated in the Belt and Road Initiative, all these investments are important for economic growth but not in themselves leading to democratic form of governance; they rather strengthen the power of incumbent regimes by giving them resources and with it, therefore, reinforcing the means of maintaining control without genuinely democratic concessions (Alden & Large, 2019). The rising influence of Russia and China in West Africa is, a threat to democratic governance, given that such support could deepen autocratic trends in the beneficiary country.

The Effects of the ECOWAS Sanctions

The imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea for their anti-democratic actions has recorded mixed results. These measures are meant to compel these countries to go back to democratic rule by raising economic and political costs for non-compliance. However, the efficacy of such sanctions is open to question. In some instances, these sanctions have deepened the economic suffering of the masses, without really affecting any change in the behaviours of the power elite, as Ademola (2016) opines. Such an outcome breeds further resentment in the public towards ECOWAS and deepens authoritarianism.

Even more here, a reliance on sanctions as the main tool in democratic norms enforcement has some limitations. The sanctions alone do not correct the political and social dynamics that impel authoritarianism. Without comprehensive strategies that also include diplomacy engagement, capacity building, and support for civil society, their effect is bound to be ineffective (Afolabi, 2017). The pressure exerted by ECOWAS through the use of these sanctions needs to be complemented by more robust, multi-dimensional approaches to democratic governance.

Evaluating the Possible Effects on Stability and Regional Cooperation in West Africa

Withdrawal by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea from ECOWAS to form the CASS mirrors deep concerns in governance, security, and international influence. The decisions of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States and then constitute the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States are highly challenging to stability and regional cooperation in West Africa. The essay will critically evaluate the possibilities of these decisions

to affect stability and regional cooperation, given the possible domino effect of military coups in other West African states and the role of such external powers as Russia and China.

Impact on Stability

To this end, with the withdrawal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea will no longer be bound by ECOWAS rulings, which is likely to fuel the current instability in West Africa further. For the past years, ECOWAS has strongly contributed to maintaining peace and security on this continent through mechanisms like conflict mediation, peacekeeping missions, and other diplomatic interventions (Akinyemi, 2015). These efforts are threatened due to the weakening of its influence, leaving behind a power vacuum that insurgent groups and criminal networks could easily exploit. This is more worrisome in the Sahel, a region already plagued with terrorism and other armed conflicts. Even though CASS may be oriented toward security cooperation and hence competent to address some of those challenges, its potential effectiveness is uncertain. Without wider support and resources from ECOWAS, it will undoubtedly undermine CASS's comprehensive implementation of security strategies. On the possible negative implications of the pursuits of CASS, its exclusions of other members of ECOWAS may lead to fragmented security efforts and a lack of united regional responses to such transnational threats to security (Zartman, 2015). This will engender a piecemeal approach to regional security matters, with the likelihood of creating more inconsistent and incoherent approaches to an already volatile security landscape (Zartman, 2015).

Impact on Regional Cooperation

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea from ECOWAS will undermine regional cooperation in the West African region. ECOWAS drives economic integration, political stability, and social development in its member countries. These have ranged from setting a common tariff for external countries and facilitating the free movement of persons and goods across borders to executing infrastructural projects at the regional level (Adebajo, 2020). A withdrawal by these three nations may undermine all these efforts and hinder regional cooperation. The creation of CASS is, therefore, an expression of a localised form of regionalism that may not comport with the broader goals of ECOWAS. This can result in divergent interests and priorities being crystallised in competing regional blocs, making it very hard to effectively deal with common challenges like economic development, security threats, and climate change. In effect, this would weaken the collective bargaining power of West African states on the international level. This divergence in regional integration strategies may take a toll on the long-term goals of economic growth and development and weaken the unity of West African states in their relations with their external partners (Dersso, 2018).

Possible Domino Effect of Military Coups

The decisions to leave ECOWAS and the creation of CASS by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea trio could establish a domino effect whereby other West African countries emulate this trend. Recent military coups in these countries have already set a precedent that could galvanise other military units into power, particularly in states undergoing political instability and economic

hardships. This has been evidenced by recent protests in Ghana and Nigeria, where protesters have come out to register their discontent with governance and economic conditions (Adejumobi, 2015). Indeed, in Nigeria, there are even calls for military intervention, a clear expression of disenchantment with the practice and operation of democratic governance, and the need for alternative forms of leadership. Perceptions of corruption, inefficiency, and unresponsiveness among civilian governments further fuel this sentiment. Such sentiments could further destabilise the region as support for coups grows. In that respect, there is the risk of a spillover effect from military coups that would topple gains made in democracy within West Africa over the past couple of decades.

The Role of Russia and China

The involvement of external powers, such as Russia and China, in West Africa adds complexity to stability and cooperation. Growing Russian influence in the Sahel, built on a foundation of military support and security assistance, gives an alternative to Western aid—often poisoned by demands for democratic reforms and human rights protections (Shinn, 2015). This support emboldens military regimes and erodes efforts to promote democratic governance. Another complicated matter is China's involvement in West Africa. Huge economic investments and infrastructure projects within the Belt and Road Initiative framework have huge implications for the area. Though these investments will be crucial for economic development, they are unfavourable to democratic governance. On the contrary, in most cases, they strengthen incumbent regimes at the expense of international actors seeking far-reaching democratic reforms (Alden & Large, 2019). It can thus be expected that an increasingly influential Russia and China will challenge the promotion of democratic governance and possibly even entrench more authoritarian tendencies in the region (Alden & Large, 2019).

Contextual Relevance of Theoretical Frameworks to the Findings of the Study

The research findings are very strongly theoreticised with the Marxist Political Economy and the RSCT. These latter frameworks offer important lenses through which the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to leave the ECOWAS and create the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States (CASS) can be explained. These results can be understood within these theories, therefore providing a greater depth into political and economic dynamics underway in West Africa. According to the Marxist political economy, political institutions and processes are founded on an underlying structure of economic interests. This can be applied directly to explaining democratic erosion and political instability witnessed in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. The finding of the research raises a number of points corresponding to the Marxist Political Economy.

It has played an instrumental role in reducing democratic norms by economic elites within these countries. State power resources have been in the control of elites, and democratic practices are smothered by elites—this cardinal factor of Marxist theory. That is to say, the manipulation of economic resources to maintain political power shows that this notion is part of a broader critique of how economic inequality and elite interests contribute towards political instability. The decision to form CASS can be interpreted as a reaction to the economic disparities that typify ECOWAS. Marxist political economy is of the view that such disparities often lead to conflicts and political

revolutions. In that light, therefore, the formation of CASS is an attempt on behalf of the local elites to guarantee the protection of their interests in both the economic and political spheres through a regional bloc that best serves their needs, at the same time lessening the influence of more economically hegemonic states within ECOWAS. What is brought out clearly here is that corruption and elite manipulations have been singularly pointed out as major contributing factors to the deepening of these countries' economic crises. Marxist theory focuses on how elites often seize on economic crises to deepen their power entrenchment. It puts into perspective the recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, which all exploited economic turbulence as a basis for military intervention and political upheaval.

The RSCT framework hence provides insight into how regional security dynamics influence state interaction and security policies. In that respect, understanding how CASS was formed and what this means for regional stability becomes very relevant. Indeed, the formation of CASS is driven by Sahel-specific security concerns. According to RSCT, regional security complexes are formed out of patterns of amity and enmity among states. The very decision to establish CASS is a strategic realignment necessitated by perceived security threats and hence attests to the prominence of regional security dynamics in influencing state behaviour. The resultant withdrawal from ECOWAS to form CASS will only expedite fragmented security efforts within West Africa. For RSCT, regional security is a derivative of interactions and interdependence among states. With the establishment of CASS, a new regional security configuration can stand outside the umbrella or broader security architecture of ECOWAS and result in fragmented efforts at security with less potency. Taken into account here is also the increasing involvement of extra-regional actors—in particular, Russia and China—in the Sahel region. RSCT has an exogenous actor emphasis on regional security complexes. It is in this regard that this support can also embolden such regimes and alter regional security dynamics by the nature of this support, which is often with fewer political conditions than those attached by the powers mentioned above. This exogenous influence can complicate an already complex security landscape by altering the prospects for democratic governance and regional stability.

This can be seen in the integration of a Marxist political economy with RSCT for an overarching framework within which one can make sense of the complicated interplay between economic interests and security dynamics in West Africa. From these theoretical lenses, the findings of the study suggest that economic and security factors are intertwined. The economic interests of elites and the security concerns of states are deeply entwined. CASS is, therefore, a strategic step taken towards countering the economic and security predicaments faced by the trio: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. These dual foci of economic and security motivational factors find relevance in its contribution to an integrated theoretical framework for the holistic understanding of the exit from ECOWAS. Democratic governance erosion and, ultimately, the emergence of CASS have crucial implications for regional integration and stability. Marxist Political Economy analyses the economic drivers of these shifts, and RSCT explains the security consequences. Viewed together, these two frameworks underline the basic potential for an increase in fragmentation and instability across West Africa driven both by the economic and security axis.

Conclusion

The decisions by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea to leave the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, and the creation of a new regional bloc called the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States are thus a defining moment in the geopolitics of West Africa. This paper has attempted to interrogate drivers for establishing the CASS, waning democratic governance, and potential impacts on regional stability. On a broader spectrum, major forcing factors for this exit can be summarised as dissatisfaction over its economic policies, governance problems, and weak responses to security concerns. For Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, there has been frustration over ECOWAS's inability to pay more attention to their particular economic needs and inefficient governance. Finally, the sustained security threats right across the Sahel expose the failure of the security architecture of ECOWAS. This has compelled these countries to find integration under a more local and responsive regional alliance.

Recommendations

The findings make some policy recommendations to overcome the challenges presented by forming the CASS, the erosion of democratic governance, and its potential impacts on regional stability. The proposed recommendations will affect democratic governance, regional cooperation, and strengthening security in the Sahel.

1. Democratic Governance

Against the Erosion of democratic governance in West Africa, it is essential to strengthen democratic institutions and practices. These include;

- a) The regional and international partners have to offer targeted support to strengthen democratic institutions in the countries of West Africa. This shall include funding electoral processes, capacity building for civil society organisations, and technical support to the judiciary and legislature arms of government.
- b) The debate has to be based on a collective effort to promote good governance practices concerning transparency and accountability. This could be reached by using anti-corruption and oversight measures and increasing public participation in governance.
- c) There is a requirement to have more involvement of civil societies in the political process. Grassroots movements and advocacy groups work at the grassroots level to safeguard democratic principles and keep governments in check, among other things.

2. Strengthening Regional Cooperation

The following steps, one at a time, will reduce the effect of fragmentation of ECOWAS and enhance regional integration:

- a) Activities shall be carried out to strengthen the existing regional frameworks and institutions. These include resuscitating the ECOWAS region and ensuring that the institution remains relevant in solving the various needs of its members.

- b) For this case, inclusive regional dialogue platforms shall be set up between state and non-state actors. This helps address regional concerns in cooperative ways. The discussions aim to achieve consensus on central issues and design common ways forward for economic integration, security and development.
- c) A regional trade agreement or such economic partnerships can replace the economic fragmentation resulting from CASS's formation. Regional economic policies would further trade, investment, and infrastructure developments across West Africa.

3. Strengthening the Regional Security in the Sahel Region

Absent the security challenges in the Sahel, there remains the imperative need to design comprehensive strategies for improving regional security.

- a) Regional security frameworks should be strengthened to enhance coordination and cooperation amongst states in the Sahel ... to economic integration, security, and development. This comprises intelligence sharing, joint security operations, and mutual support in fighting terrorism and insurgency.
- b) Attention should be channelled to the roots that instigate insecurity. These roots include poverty, joblessness, and marginalisation. This comprises development programs oriented at improving livelihoods, education, and social services that might reduce the appeal of extremist groups.
- c) While collaborating with these external powers, like Russia and China, West African countries should make sure that such partnerships are in no way adverse to democratic governance or regional stability. Such aid from the outside world must be attuned to regional priorities that really do make a difference in democratic and developmental quests.

As such, meeting the challenges arising from the formation of CASS, democratic governance erosion, and possible spillover impact on regional stability requires a multi-faceted approach. In a nutshell, democratic institution-building, strengthening regional cooperation, and enhanced security cannot be achieved without a stable democratic West Africa. In implementing these recommendations, regional and international actors can work toward an integrated West Africa: secure and prosperous.

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