



Beyond Sanctions: ECOWAS and the Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa

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Abstract

The recent resurgence of military coup d'état in the West African region is alarming and problematic because of its contagion effect. Since 2019, Chad, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger have experienced military coup d'état. As part of the efforts aimed at reversing military coups in these States, ECOWAS' swift response has been in the form of sanctions, which include economic blockade, movement restrictions for the coup leaders, severance of diplomatic relations, and suspension of military leaders from the international community, among others. This effort has neither deterred the coup leaders nor hastened the return to civil rule. This paper attempts to examine ECOWAS' responsibility beyond the imposition of sanctions in the era of resurgent coups in West Africa. The paper adopts the qualitative method of data collection using secondary sources, which include published books, journals, resolutions, and proceedings of ECOWAS. The paper argues that while ECOWAS is performing its moral obligation by imposing sanctions, the organisation lacks the capacity to compel West African leaders in the entrenchment of good governance. It, however, concludes that ECOWAS needs to re-strategize by having a potent framework capable of deepening good governance and stability of democracy in West Africa.

Keywords: Political Instability, Coup d'état, Democracy, Sanction, Good Governance.

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Introduction

The wave and prevalent culture of military coups d'état in African politics was on extinction for two decades after the triumph of democracy over militarism in governance. This development also accounted for the popular support of democracy over military rule globally. But in recent times, military coups have resurfaced in politics in Africa in a contagion dimension and it has continued to threaten democracy. Though this is not new in Africa, Falola (2022) posits that military disruption of democracy through coups has been a typical feature of Africa since the 1960s. Africa's political fragility as handed over by the former colonialists has largely been identified as the root cause of coups in the 1960s (McGowan, 2006; Ajayi and Olu-Adeyemi, 2015). The military seized the opportunity and launched themselves into the political landscape by assuming the position of Messiah with their messianic agenda to restore sanity, but perpetually held on to power. However, due to the end of the Cold War, most African States freed themselves from the claws of the military in the late 1990s. Suleiman (2021) posits that more than half of African States had successfully returned to democratic rule towards the end of the 20th century.

The rebirth of military coups in Africa has been alarming. Odigbo et al, (2023) provide a deep analysis of coups in Africa but note that fourteen (14) have been successful in Africa since the decades of 2010s. For instance, between 2019 and 2023, the contagion of coups spread rapidly among the West African States of Chad, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Guinea Bissau. This return of coups is hinged on the failure to deepen democracy in West Africa (Falola, 2022). Isilow (2022) ascribed several issues which include leadership failure, absence of democratic practice, leadership failure, economic crisis, the greed of military officers, and citizens' discontent.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has largely responded to the coup with sanctions even though there is a legal institutional framework for democracy in West Africa. The sanction is imposed with the hope that coup leaders will hurriedly reverse to democratic rule, but in most cases, the sanctions have never been effective, rather the citizens of the country bear the hardship. The alternative option for ECOWAS is to negotiate for a gradual transition programme which usually takes years.

The subject of military coups in Africa has been over-flogged by a plethora of research works with much emphasis on the histories, trajectories, causative factors and threats it poses to democracy. This paper takes a departure from such existing narratives, it however examines the nitty-gritty of ECOWAS' response in the face of coup rebirth in West Africa. The central argument of the study is that despite the existence of a legal framework for democracy, signed by all ECOWAS member states,

the instrument is grossly impotent in compelling member states to uphold democratic tenets. It is unsurprising, therefore, in the occurrence of coups, the organisation has no option but to impose sanctions. Therefore, this is a qualitative study which addresses ECOWAS' obligation amidst deep political instability which elicited a resurgence of coups in West Africa, while also suggesting possible ways forward to caution West African leaders other than sanctions.

Military Coups in West Africa: A Conceptual and Theoretical Discussion

The need to conceptualise key concepts in this intellectual enterprise is imperative to dispel the controversies that may surround their understanding and usage in this paper. Military coup d'état is used to describe the abrupt, armed and unlawful removal from power of an existing government by the military usually with violence (Shraeder, 2004). Military coups are either carried out against a civilian government or the military themselves irrespective of the type of government.

Among the third-world nations, Africa is the nastiest hit in the phenomenal surge of military coups. Thomas (2010) reveals that there were 71 military coups d'état in Africa between 1952 and 1990, and by 2012, the figure had surged to over 200, both successful and unsuccessful. No doubt, the above figure is astronomically high, but the prevalence of coups in Africa is not unconnected majorly with political instability. Several scholarly works on military coups in Africa underpin majorly political instability as a central factor in West African coups, a situation caused by power struggle by politicians, economic decline manifesting as a result of mismanagement of resources and foreign influence or interventions from colonial powers. The political instability and poor state of the economy made Shraeder (2004) posit that African States are increasingly incapable of responding to their citizens and, therefore, fell prey to military leaders who usually profess a special ability to commence political-military reforms and economic development. Experience in Africa in the last five decades has shown that military coups are either carried out against a civil-led government or the military themselves regardless of regime form.

This paper adopts the Frustration -Aggression theory in explaining the variegated issues that elicited military coups in West Africa. The theory was developed by John Dollard and associates in 1939 and was expanded and modified by Yale in 1962 and Berkowitz in 1969. The basic supposition of the theory is that there is a nexus between frustration and aggression, it postulates that aggression occurs as a result of frustration. Fererabend & Feirauben (1972) reinforce this position when they posit that aggression is a product of frustration from an individual who is unable to achieve their goals. In addition, frustration is only one form of unpleasant negative effect that can provoke violent responses. Berkowitz (1989) argues that aggression can

be driven by inherent personal benefits to the aggressor and not necessarily by past wrongdoings and that people are more akin to attack when they discover that they are willfully sabotaged or denied what is legitimately theirs than when the interference is an accidental occurrence.

The frustration-aggression theory is pertinent in the framework of coups in West Africa, as explained by Odigbo, Ezekewelu, and Okeke (2023). They posit that frustration stems from poor governance, economic hardship, and societal injustice as these could lead to aggressive actions and general support for military coups. The absence of good governance and Leadership deficit are very key factors that incite acute frustration among the people. While leaders in many West African States have displayed a lust for power and greed, weak state institutions pervert justice in favour of the political class. The implication is that it undermines democratic principles. Absence of good governance and leadership deficit resulted in socio-economic inequality, lack of infrastructure, environmental degradation, injustice, militancy, ethno-religious conflicts, and insecurity. These maladies breed resentment among the people and encourage hostility against political officeholders who have been seen as being responsible for the suffering.

In the true sense, democracy in West Africa has been relatively weak in most of the countries where coups have taken place. Some of the common observable traits include limited tolerance of political opposition; restrictions on freedom of expression and independent media; and a judiciary heavily influenced by the government. This is the reality behind the public support for the military coups in the region recently. The public is fed up with charlatans who have become experts at occupying the seats of power and refusing to budge.

Scope and Methodology

The scope of the study is West Africa and this is founded on the fact that the subregion has experienced military coups more than any part of Africa. Since 2020, democratic governments in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger were overthrown in quick succession through military coup d'état. Suleiman (2021) describes West Africa as an epicentre of military coup. While the nature of political instability among the West African States differs, it is evidenced through records that there are incidences of prolonged civil wars, secession agitation, jihadist attacks and insurgency and other forms of violence. These have destabilising effects on democratic governance in the sub-region. Interestingly, ECOWAS, since its inception, has played a major role in restoring stability and peace. However, ECOWAS' emphasis on sanctions as a strategy for coups has not been effective rather, it is the citizens that bear the brunt (Chigozie

and Oyinniebi, 2022). The data for this study were generated through the secondary sources and analysed using the thematic approach.

Democracy, Governance and Resurgence of Military Coup in West Africa

In Africa, the last decade of the 20th century marked a watershed in the return of democracy. It was a decade when most African States were freed from the claws of the military junta and the eventual return to democracy. Woldense, & Kroeger (2024) attributed the paradigm shift to the end of the Cold War, a situation which compelled the Western countries to begin championing the neoliberal democratic programme in Africa. Supporting the above, Odigbo et al (2023) posit that Africans were in the 1990s awakened with a high sense of optimism and hope following the acceptance and subsequent spread of democracy on the continent. By 1999, more than half of African States had transited into neoliberal democracy (Tar, 2009), while several other States followed suit in the first decade of the 21st century.

The intrinsic value of democracy includes popular sovereignty, periodic elections, tolerance of opposition, fundamental human rights, a multiparty system, accountability and transparency in governance. No doubt, the return of democracy in Africa was greeted with enthusiasm that the continent would be freed from authoritarianism and military seizures of power in favour of political pluralism and the rule of law. There were high expectations of several benefits of democracy which include the protection of life and property, poverty reduction, and provision of basic social amenities.

No sooner did democracy return, there was a new dimension to the African problem: political instability induced by governance deficit. This soon manifested in some West African States with the unhealthy struggle for power by the political elites. In most cases, the power struggle resulted in violence with youths becoming the willing tools. The fiercest struggle for power makes the conduct of elections difficult as the exercise is always marred with violence and other irregularities. The political elites want to remain in power perpetually and this explains why the sitting presidents tamper with constitutional terms to stay longer in power. In addition, impunity, display of authoritarianism and the ostentatious lifestyle of the political class amidst mass poverty, growing insecurity, infrastructural decay become sources of frustration and heightened tension (Bester, 2024). It is on this basis that the public is fed up and people's discontentment is expressed in protests and uprisings due to leadership ineptitude and non-fulfilment of electoral promises (Anyoko-Shaba, 2022). In summary, Cheeseman (2015) describes democracy as superficial in Africa which ultimately needs reform.

The above was the nature of democratic dysfunction in the West African States, and one need not doubt the consequences which is the return of imminent military coups. The rebirth of military coups has been greeted by popular support and applause in West Africa this is because people have not tasted the dividends of democracy. For instance, the July 2023 coup in Niger was greeted with elation as thousands trooped out and were ready to support the military junta (Agence France-Presse, 2023, August 6: Aljazeera, 2023 August 6)). This has raised the question of whether democracy has failed in West Africa and Africa in general Africa or the case of its death in the sub-region (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022).

One cannot downplay foreign influence in West African coups. Thus, in the 21st century, the quest for strategic influence and advantage by foreign powers in Africa has involved them in coups in the continent. The foreign powers tolerate local politics and authoritarianism as long as their strategic advantage is served. For instance, the mercenary called the Wagner group from Russia was fingered in the Mali and Burkina Faso coups this is because the coup leaders in these countries were sited hobnobbing with the mercenary group. Similarly, France and China were identified in the unsuccessful Chadian coup of 2021 (Foreign Policy, 2021 May 24). The involvement of foreign powers may not be unconnected to forged ties with several post-coup leaders to protect their economic interests in the affected country. All boil down to shallow democracy or democratic dysfunction orchestrated by the political elites in West Africa.

Table 1: *Military Coups in West Africa, 2020 -2023*

S/No	Country	Number of Coups	Date & Year of Coup	Causes	Status	Government in Power
1	Burkina Faso	1	September, 2022	Insecurity, Political corruption, lack of opportunity for the young and growing population, etc	Successful	Military
2	Guinea	1	September, 2021	Autocratic (civilian) government, economic mismanagement, eroding and faulty democratic practices	Successful	Military
3	Guinea Bissau	2	February, 2022 & December 2023	Insecurity, bad governance, citizens' discontent, youth unemployment, etc.	Unsuccessful	Civilian
4	Mali	2	August, 2020 & May, 2021	Electoral malpractice (parliamentary elections), growing insecurity in the country, corruption.	Successful	Military
5	Niger	2	March, 2021 & July, 2023	Insecurity, deficiency in the governance of the present civilian rule	Successful	Military

Sources: Compiled by the Author from different sources.

Of very recent, there were 8 coup attempts in 5 West African States, 6 succeeded while 2 unsuccessful. Consequently, 4 of the West Africa States are currently under military government (Mali, Niger, Guinea and Burkina Faso).

ECOWAS and Resurgence of Military Coup in West Africa

ECOWAS is a sub-regional body which came into existence in 1975 to promote economic growth and development in the region (Maiangwa, 2021). This was a period when almost all the West African States were under military rule. The organisation signed the Non-Aggression and Defence Accord in 1978, this marked the beginning of ECOWAS' incursion into security regionalism as a critical necessity for economic integration. It was within this context that ECOWAS has continued to act by mitigating the coups and other security threats in the region (Chigozie, & Oyinmiebi, 2022).

In 1991, ECOWAS adopted a declaration of political principles to encourage and promote the concept of “political pluralism” among its member states, this was a landmark in the entrenchment of good governance among member states (Charron & Portela, 2015). In addition, ECOWAS adopted a protocol on Good Governance and Democracy in 2001 (Leone, 2022). The protocol has various provisions for constitutional change of power and stability using various principles which are legally supported. Despite this protocol in place, coups have become a reoccurrence phenomenon among the West African nations, to this end, ECOWAS resolved to the route of sanctions. In the last 3 decades, ECOWAS sanctions have been deployed at various times as a response to the coup. The sanctions include suspension of the states from the regional body, economic blockade, travel ban on leaders, an arms embargo and the last resolution which is military interventions (Avoulete, 2022).

A few examples of these sanctions include; a petroleum and arms embargo in Sierra Leone, in 1997 (Vines and Cargill, 2009); suspension of Togo from ECOWAS, an arms embargo and travel ban on leaders in 2005 (Leone, 2022); economic sanction and suspension of Mali and Guinea in 2020 and 2021/2022 respectively (Aljazeera, 2021 September 16). Such was the case against Burkina Faso in 2022, while Niger was even threatened with military intervention in Niger in 2023. ECOWAS sanctions in these states vary, although their goals are the same, which is to stiffen the acceptability of military rule by the citizens and other non-state actors in the international system. Justifying ECOWAS' sanctions, Avoulete (2022) argues that unconstitutional change of government in West African states is a serious threat to democracy, good governance and political stability and ECOWAS must rise to the occasion through sanctions on states violating the principle of good governance. Similarly, Nnamdi, (2023) states that ECOWAS sanctions are justifiable based on the antecedent of states ridden by unconstitutional change of government in the region.

While acknowledging ECOWAS roles through institutional frameworks and sanctions, citizens are yet to see a change in the commitment of its member state to good governance and political stability. The abysmal performance of democracy and

rebirth of military coups raises the question of how ECOWAS seeks to put in place preventive measures that work other than sanctions which are ineffective and unsustainable.

The argument of why ECOWAS must look beyond sanctions is rooted in issues that have been reflected over the years in the response of the sub-regional organisation toward an unconstitutional takeover of government. The sanctions are not airtight and they give room for easy manoeuvrings by the states involved and this has undermined the relevance and goal of the sanctions, one way in which coup leaders have maneuvered ECOWAS is the promise to hand over within a short period and this usually propels ECOWAS to lift the sanctions hurriedly.

Another critical issue is the hasty constitutional amendment to accommodate an extension of tenure. For instance, Togo, Cote D'Ivoire and Guinea have carried out undue amendments to the constitution to accommodate an extension of tenures. A proposal to ban the third term was discussed in 2015, unfortunately, it was met with stiff opposition from leaders who have extended their terms to remain in office (Leone, 2022), although there is a stipulation in the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance which states that "every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections," with zero tolerance for heads of states who obtain power through unconstitutional means (Leone, 2022). It is glaring from the foregoing that the leader becomes legitimate as long as the emergence is through election without any recourse to the process of the election.

The contradiction in the structure of ECOWAS particularly as regards the leadership of the regional body which have in the past been bestowed upon leaders who emerged through unconstitutional means (coups). An illegitimate leader should be ostracized and rejected and their emergence to the position of authority in the regional body speaks to the acceptance of the coup and the government it has formed and therefore it becomes impossible to hold them accountable. Leone (2022) supported this with his argument example of Togo in 2005, One example of this is the Togolese president, Faure Gnassingbé whose ascension to power in 2005 was widely deemed a coup, as the ruling party was under strict instructions to declare him as president. This was met with nationwide protests, and over a thousand people were killed by security forces (Ghanaweb, 2005 February 19). ECOWAS suspended Togo and implemented sanctions such as travel bans on its leaders and an arms embargo. A few years later, the controversial political process in Togo produced Faure Gnassingbé as a presidential candidate in the 2010 election. His emergence was a contravention of ECOWAS' Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. In the election, he was declared the winner. Despite his clear violation of ECOWAS' Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, Gnassingbé remains an active and

welcomed member of the organization and was even elected as its chairperson in 2017. What is observed in the protocol is that it allows coup leaders to easily meet the requirements to be recognized as head of state if they subsequently win an election, and this essentially renders it ineffective.

ECOWAS' stand on suspension has not been rigid, rather it is a whole lot of shenanigans, riddled with the flexibility of sanction and suspension style. States that are suspended are easily reabsorbed into the organization and this undermines the efficiency of sanctions as a means of punishing states who go against the norms and ethics of ECOWAS principles. A good example is the case of Guinea which has a long history of unconstitutional change of government. In 2020, former president Alpha Condé, the first president to be democratically elected in Guinea amended the constitution to allow himself to serve for two more terms. The news of the constitutional amendment was met with large opposition protests across the country, despite the protests, ECOWAS responded only by calling for dialogue between the two sides and refused to sanction Condé (Leone, 2022). Condé narrowly escaped losing the 2020 elections, surprisingly, election observers from ECOWAS certified the results as lawful and upheld by the 15 member states. A year later, Condé was deposed in a military coup, and ECOWAS immediately suspended and imposed sanctions on Guinea (Leone, 2022).

It is noteworthy that ECOWAS' action of downplaying the preventive approach to coups in West Africa is in itself a threat to democratic stability and peace. However, the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security does not consider coups and their threat as a violent threat to the region as opposed to the classification of non-state actors that can carry out violent activities.

The recent coup in Niger brought West Africa into another round of unwanted unconstitutional change of government. Member states of ECOWAS gave a 7-day ultimatum for the restoration of constitutional order by the junta of which if not met, stringent sanctions which include the closure of borders with Niger, suspension of financial transactions and freezing of assets, travel ban and a possible military intervention will be carried out (Pacot, 2023). The goal of the sanctions on Niger was to put pressure on the military junta to restore the democratic order, unfortunately, this did not happen. Rather the Junta ignored the ultimatum, then teamed up with Burkina Faso and issued withdrawal of membership from ECOWAS.

The sanctions rather created a diplomatic and political ruckus between Niger, ECOWAS and particularly Nigeria, because the livelihoods of the citizens were affected and it began to cripple the economic relations between Nigeria and Niger (Nnamdi, 2023, December, 5). The implication of the sanctions was predominately

on the citizens such as food scarcity, loss of power supply and other issues. The public opinion and outcry by citizens made to rally support for the junta made the sanctions as a witch hunt of the state and therefore the sanctions have to be lifted to ease the effect of the sanctions on the citizens. It must be stated that in the case of Niger, the sanctions also have a security implication as we saw the withdrawal of Niger from the Multinational Joint Task Force and this opens Nigeria up to easy access for terror groups (Nnamdi, 2023).

Lifting the sanctions solidifies the argument that the ECOWAS must now look beyond sanctions and come up with a sustainable framework to prevent the return of coups in the region to ensure the sustainability of democratic principles and peace. Sanctions cannot always be the response rather ECOWAS must take a stand to ensure coups are not a reoccurring phenomenon in the West African Political landscape.

Issues in ECOWAS' Moral Obligation Towards Good Governance

The role of ECOWAS must be acknowledged in its stand against unconstitutional change of government in the form coup in the subregion, which has inflicted upon the subregion the illegal transfer of power to the military. ECOWAS in the year 2001 developed a legal framework titled 'Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance' which aimed at ensuring democratic structure and process, preserved to ensure peace and stability (Leone, 2022). The 2001 protocol includes a mechanism for responding to such unconstitutional changes of government. The protocol also includes provisions on the democratic governance of ECOWAS members, including elections, the neutrality of the judiciary, and the impartiality of the security forces. The protocol has all member states as signatories to the protocol, unfortunately, some member states are failing to adhere to these stipulations (Leone, 2022).

The protocol recognises elections as the constitutional and legal means of changing government as well as power must be obtained through constitutional means as a constitutional principle shared and adhered to by all member-states. These can be found in Chapter 1, section 1 under article 1, items (b & c) while items e clearly states members of the armed forces cannot run for political office (see below).

- b) Every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections;
- c) Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means;
- e) The armed forces must be apolitical and must be under the command of a legally constituted political authority; no serving member of the armed forces

may seek to run for elective political (ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, 2001).

The protocol has been a reference point for ECOWAS' response to an unconstitutional change of power in the region. ECOWAS response can be regarded as more of a preventive measure rather than addressing the core issues encouraging the unconstitutional change of power which has now returned to West Africa in the last few years. These issues include the extension of office terms by amending the constitution which is now a common practice in most West African states. There was an attempt to put forward a proposal to be included in the protocol to discourage the third term, unfortunately, it did not see the light of day as it met with stiff opposition from erring states and their leaders.

The protocol stipulates the change of government must be done through legitimate means, but West African leaders have exploited that provision by simply proving that elections were held and legitimacy is placed on the government and its leaders and this is undermining the importance of democratic principles.

Also, ECOWAS must collectively take a stand on discouraging and denying states with an unconstitutional change of power access to ECOWAS structure such as Chairmanship of the community, if they are not suspended outrightly as this makes legitimacy on their government and in turn, the community lacks the political will to deal with such states in form of sanctions and suspension.

The sanctions issued by ECOWAS are not always stringent on erring member states as they are easily readmitted upon conduct of elections which are mostly shams and state-controlled towards the interest of the military junta and its sympathizers. Interestingly, ECOWAS does not have a legal framework to prosecute individuals who participated in the coups and now holding the state hostage rather it is the state that gets punished and sanctioned. The sanctions have become ineffective and it is time ECOWAS must look beyond sanctions and come up with a lasting legal framework to ensure coups as a means of obtaining power are completely eradicated from the West African region to ensure stable peace, security and prosperity.

Good Governance as a Panacea to Breaking the Cycle of Coups in West Africa

West Africa like other regions of Africa has continued to be plagued with a plethora of crises which include political instability, military coups, ethno-religious and civil wars, terrorism, among others. These problems majorly stem from the inability of the political class to deliver good governance to citizens.

Good governance as witnessed in advanced Western countries has the characteristics of legitimacy, accountability, respect for the law protection of human rights, and competence, (African Governance Report, 2019). In this circumstance, government does not only demonstrate the ability to fulfil its responsibilities but promote the public good to improve the quality of life (Safdar et al., 2022). Where this is lacking, citizens become discontented and the entire governmental structure is thrown into chaos, violence and political instability. In a democratic rule, good governance is a necessity for delivering dividends of democracy to the people. The World Bank in 1989 enumerated essential characteristics of good governance in a country to include accountability, participation, predictability, and transparency of which, if lacking, the country is off the path of development. Oshodi (2008) also reinforces this when it identifies six (6) main indicators to measure good governance performance in any democratic society. These are political stability, voice of accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption.

According to Utazi (2019), the objectives of good governance include the following:

- enhancing effective and efficient administration;
- improvement of the quality of life of citizens;
- establishment of legitimacy and credibility of institutions;
- promotion of citizens' fundamental human rights;
- make administration responsive;
- reduction of the cost of governance and ensuring accountability;
- improvement of quality of public services;
- eradication of corruption to re-establish the credibility of government; and
- removal of arbitrariness in the exercise of authority.

Against this background, the preliminary condition for good governance is the establishment of the rule of law to supplant the rule of whims and caprices of the power that be.

Empirical studies have shown that good governance and rapid socio-economic development are intertwined. Supporting this view, Ohiomu and Dibia (2014) posit that the entrenchment of good governance enhances government to provide an enabling environment for citizens to engage in economic activities, attract foreign investors, diversify the economy, reduce poverty, promote accountability, transparency and social justice through the rule of law. Suleiman & Onapajo, (2022) also advocate good governance as the antinode to military coups in West Africa

Without any doubt, the two decades of democratic experiment in West African states lack good governance and this has been a source of discontent among the citizens. The military capitalise on governance loopholes to launch a return to power as the people's messiah. The entrenchment of good governance will not only strengthen democracy but will keep the military off politics.

Recommendations

The recent resurgence of coups and military governments in West Africa has called into question the ability of ECOWAS to uphold democratic principles and maintain peace in the region (Maluleke & Bennett, 2022). It is glaring that ECOWAS lacks the weapons to checkmate leaders who engage in antidemocratic tendencies capable of plunging their countries into political crises. It is when the political instability has degenerated into coups, that sanctions will be slammed on the coup leaders. Imposing sanctions without acknowledging the root cause of a coup can be likened to treating the symptoms instead of the ailment. The ailments are rooted in governance failure by those who manipulate the system to gain or remain in power. Therefore, the following are recommended as moral obligations of ECOWAS.

- a. ECOWAS as a regional bloc must rise to the challenge of ensuring peace and stability in the region. They must swing into action with more comprehensive principles and protocols for good governance to address contentious issues that could destabilise the political climate of a State.
- b. The organisation must be firm and unbiased in their show of contempt for all types of coups.
- c. There should be an international avenue for punishing coupists and this should be supported by global powers.
- d. ECOWAS and other African regional organisations must resist foreign interference in African countries that leads to political instability.

Conclusion

The recurring issue of coups in West Africa has been a persistent challenge to regional stability and democratic governance. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has emerged as a key actor in addressing this issue, primarily through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which outlines principles and mechanisms for promoting democratic governance and preventing unconstitutional changes of government. ECOWAS has demonstrated a strong resolve in condemning and responding to coups in the region, often through the

imposition of sanctions on coup leaders and their supporters. While these measures have been effective in some cases, such as in the recent coup in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso they have also faced criticism for their limited impact and potential unintended consequences, such as exacerbating humanitarian crises.

Moving forward, ECOWAS needs to continue strengthening its institutional capacity and mechanisms for preventing coups, including enhancing early warning systems, promoting dialogue and conflict resolution, and supporting democratic institutions and processes. Additionally, ECOWAS should work closely with the African Union and other regional and international partners to develop a comprehensive and coordinated approach to addressing the root causes of coups, including governance challenges, socio-economic disparities, and security threats. Ultimately, the success of ECOWAS in preventing coups and promoting democratic governance in West Africa will depend on its ability to effectively implement and enforce its protocols and agreements, as well as its willingness to engage with stakeholders at all levels to address the underlying drivers of political instability and conflict in the region.

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