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ECOWAS Coup Prevention Strategies in West Africa and the Resurgence of Military Intervention in Niger Republic, Mali and Burkina Faso

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ABSTRACT :

Military interventions in West Africa have re-emerged as a critical challenge to democratic governance, particularly in Niger Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso. This study investigates the underlying causes of the resurgence of coups in the subregion and examines the limitations of ECOWAS coup prevention strategies in addressing these challenges. Drawing on reports, policy briefs, and scholarly works, the study finds that escalating extremist violence in the Sahel, political instability, weak governance, and deepening economic hardships collectively undermine civilian governments and embolden military actors. The analysis highlights that from 1960 to 2022, West African states experienced recurrent coups, with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso recording multiple takeovers driven by security breakdowns and fragile institutions. Recent dynamics, such as the failure of ECOWAS to enforce consensus on military intervention, and the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from the bloc in 2024, have further weakened regional authority. Findings also reveal that economic mismanagement, poverty, and widespread public dissatisfaction with elected governments fuel popular support for military takeovers. Furthermore, the weakening of international influence, particularly France's declining role in the Sahel, has created space for juntas to consolidate power. The study concludes that while ECOWAS has developed protocols for conflict prevention and democratic consolidation, its inconsistent enforcement and weakened legitimacy limit its effectiveness. Strengthening regional cohesion, addressing governance deficits, and tackling socio-economic drivers of discontent are critical to curbing the recurrence of military interventions in the subregion.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Coup Prevention Strategies in West Africa, Resurgence of Military Intervention, Niger Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has faced significant challenges in addressing the recent military coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Despite its mandate to promote regional stability and democratic governance, ECOWAS's interventions have often been met with limited success, raising concerns about the effectiveness of its current strategies. One of the primary issues is the perceived ineffectiveness of ECOWAS's punitive measures, such as economic sanctions and suspensions. These actions have not consistently deterred military takeovers and, in some instances, have exacerbated economic hardships for the civilian population without compelling juntas to restore constitutional order. For example, following the 2023 coup in Niger, ECOWAS imposed sanctions that critics argue disproportionately affected ordinary citizens while having little impact on the ruling military leaders (NRC, 2023; Deutsche Welle, 2024).

Furthermore, the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2024 underscore a significant challenge to regional cohesion. This development not only diminishes ECOWAS's influence but also highlights the organization's struggle to maintain unity among its member states in the face of divergent political trajectories (Africanews, 2025; Anadolu Agency, 2025; Deutsche Welle, 2024). Additionally, ECOWAS's interventions have been criticized for lacking a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of military coups, such as governance deficits, corruption, and security challenges. The organization's focus on punitive measures, without corresponding efforts to promote political dialogue and institutional reforms, has limited its ability to foster sustainable democratic transitions.

ECOWAS's current strategies in responding to military coups in West Africa face significant limitations. The organization's reliance on sanctions and suspensions has not effectively deterred unconstitutional power seizures and may have unintended negative consequences for civilian populations. The recent withdrawal of key member states further challenges ECOWAS's cohesion and effectiveness, indicating a need for a reassessment of its intervention approaches to better address the underlying issues contributing to political instability in the region.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine ECOWAS coup prevention strategies in West Africa and the resurgence of military intervention in Niger Republic, Mali and Burkina Faso with a focus on:

1. identification of the major reasons for the resurgence of military intervention in Niger Republic, Mali and Burkina Faso

Research Questions

1. What are the major reasons for the resurgence of military intervention in Niger Republic, Mali and Burkina Faso?

Review of Related Literature

Military Coup

Military coups have been a significant aspect of political change throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Scholars have extensively studied the causes and consequences of coups, as well as their implications for democracy, governance, and international relations. A military coup is often defined as the sudden overthrow of a government by a faction within the military. Various scholars categorize coups based on their characteristics, such as whether violence is employed, the level of state or elite support, and the objectives of the coup plotters (Mushoriwa, 2021; Kposowa & Jenkins, 1993). Kposowa and Jenkins (1993) define a coup as the “irregular seizure of the state’s central executive by the regular armed forces or by the internal security forces through the use (or the threat of the use) of force.”

Some definitions draw on broader institutional or legal-dictionary standards. For example, Merriam-Webster defines a coup as “the sudden, extrajudicial deposition of a government, usually by a small group of the existing state establishment, typically the military, to replace the deposed government with another body, either civil or military” (Merriam-Webster, 2013). In assessing success, coups are often seen as effective when the usurpers establish dominance, particularly when the incumbent regime is unable to resist or lacks sufficient capacity to prevent the takeover.

Factors Responsible for the Resurgence of Military Interventions in West Africa

Academic studies have consistently demonstrated that structural conditions play a critical role in shaping the likelihood of coups across Africa. Jenkins and Kposowa (1990) and Kposowa and Jenkins (1993) underscore the importance of persistent factors such as ethnic fragmentation, weak institutional checks, and economic dependency on primary commodity exports. Ethnic and regional cleavages, for example, often foster divisions within the military and political elite, which can escalate into power struggles and coup attempts. Similarly, the overreliance on volatile export commodities like oil, cocoa, or gold creates economic instability, weakens state capacity, and makes regimes vulnerable to crises that military actors can exploit. In addition, elite rivalries rooted in the distribution of scarce resources, patronage, and political offices have historically provided fertile ground for military adventurism. These conditions remain relevant in contemporary West Africa, where fragile institutions often lack the strength to mediate conflicts or withstand internal pressure.

Recent studies highlight that the resurgence of coups in West Africa—particularly in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and Guinea (2021)—is driven not only by these structural factors but also by more immediate governance failures. Mushoriwa (2021) and Nweke-Love et al. (2024) emphasize how deficits in democratic accountability, entrenched corruption, and poor service delivery have eroded citizens’ trust in civilian governments. Economic hardships, characterized by rising unemployment, inflation, and inequality, have deepened public frustration, making military intervention appear as a corrective alternative. Security challenges, especially the spread of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, further exposed the weaknesses of civilian governments in maintaining territorial integrity and public safety. The inability of regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the African Union to enforce strong democratic norms has compounded these problems, as sanctions and mediation efforts have often failed to deter soldiers from seizing power.

Another dimension of the literature stresses that coups are rarely the product of a single event, but instead the culmination of both proximate triggers and long-standing vulnerabilities. O’Kane (1993) argues that proximate causes—such as disputed elections, leadership succession crises, or sudden security breakdowns—often act as catalysts for military intervention, but these events only become destabilizing when combined with deeper weaknesses in governance. For instance, a fraudulent election in a country with strong institutions might lead to protests or legal redress, whereas in a fragile state it can pave the way for military actors to justify intervention. Weak rule of law, exclusionary political practices, and low regime legitimacy amplify these risks, creating an environment where coups are framed as necessary to “rescue” the state. In this sense, coups in West Africa are best understood as products of both long-term structural fragility and short-term crisis dynamics.

Finally, scholars note that the inability of democratic institutions to deliver tangible public goods has intensified the appeal of military takeovers. Citizens in many West African countries continue to suffer from limited access to quality education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, despite decades of democratic transitions. When elected leaders fail to meet these basic expectations, public dissatisfaction rises, and militaries often exploit this disillusionment to legitimize their interventions. Adams, Ashibi, and Onyangbe (2025) observe that popular support for recent coups reflects not only elite dynamics but also widespread perceptions of civilian governments as corrupt and ineffective. Thus, recent coups are emblematic of a dual crisis: enduring structural vulnerabilities embedded in weak state institutions, and proximate shocks that trigger sudden military interventions. This duality underscores the need to analyze coups as both systemic and contingent phenomena, shaped by historical legacies and immediate political realities.

Empirical Studies

Recent quantitative empirical studies have critically examined the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its responses to the resurgence of military coups in West Africa. These studies employ various methodologies to assess the effectiveness of ECOWAS interventions and their implications for regional stability and democratic governance. Williams and Sunjo (2024) conducted a quantitative analysis to assess the effectiveness of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in preventing military coups. Utilizing a content analysis approach, they examined the resurgence of coups in member states and identified a dichotomy between normative idealism and political realism within ECOWAS's framework. Their findings suggest that despite the protocol's comprehensive guidelines, its implementation faces significant challenges, leading to a recurrence of military interventions in politics.

Another study by Oyekunle et al. (2024) explored the factors precipitating military coups and scrutinized how these events affect regional stability and integration in West Africa. Employing a quantitative design and content analysis, the researchers found that ECOWAS's interventions, including sanctions and diplomatic efforts, have had limited success in deterring coups. The study highlights the need for ECOWAS to adopt more proactive and preventive measures to address the underlying causes of political instability.

Olukolade and Olusola (2024) examined ECOWAS's reliance on sanctions as a primary tool for addressing military coups. Through a quantitative assessment of recent coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the study found that sanctions alone have been insufficient in restoring constitutional order. The authors recommend that ECOWAS develop a more robust framework that includes political dialogue, economic incentives, and support for democratic institutions to effectively mitigate the resurgence of military coups in the region. A recent study by Abdulrahman, Taiwo and Nazifi (2025) examined the effectiveness of ECOWAS in deterring and responding to coups d'état, focusing on the 2023 military takeover in Niger Republic. The study analyzed both the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS's response to the coup, proposing key areas for improvement in the organization's efforts to promote regional democratic stability.

Mills (2022) evaluated ECOWAS' effectiveness in mitigating coups in West Africa, focusing on the organization's preventive and reactive measures. The study highlighted ECOWAS's challenges in adopting a preventive approach to coups, as evidenced by the 2021 coup in Guinea following constitutional violations by the then-president. The research suggests that ECOWAS's mechanisms for conflict prevention need to be more proactive to effectively deter unconstitutional changes of government.

Ronceray (2023) in his article entitled "Can ECOWAS Still Defend Democracy in West Africa After the Niger Coup" utilises secondary sources to elucidate the rationale behind the eagerness of the region's remaining civilian leaders to take decisive action against the military coup in Niger. ECOWAS' stance was manifested through the swift issuance of an ultimatum threatening military intervention to oust the putschist government in Niamey. The unprecedented ultimatum was complemented by a spectrum of responses encompassing economic sanctions, asset freezes, disruption of electricity supply, closure of land and air borders, and the suspension, of Niger from ECOWAS. He proposes a variety of pathways for the civilian government of the ECOWAS-11 entity and urges civilian leadership of 'ECOWAS-11' to fortify its unity and embrace novel mechanisms to counter unconstitutional changes in government, including the establishment of a more robust military coalition. Furthermore, he suggests that the civilian administration of ECOWAS-11 should resuscitate the ethos of an 'ECOWAS for the people' and delve more profoundly into the root causes of coups, such as prolonged tenure of rulers, endemic corruption, absence of strong state institutions, security dilemmas, democratic ethos, and external influences. Those leaders who evade scrutiny should face suspension. Ronceray (2023) highlights the swiftness and comprehensiveness of ECOWAS' response ultimatum, sanctions, and suspension, and calls for a more robust military coalition, it does not delve into potential weaknesses of ECOWAS' response in Niger.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory. The Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory was developed by Holland, Gell-Mann, Kauffman, Aulur and Mitchel (1980) at the Santa Fe Institute. The theory explains complex relationships of regional organizations and their roles on states politics. It is a framework for studying, explaining and understanding how systems of agents such as (civil society, NGOs, ECOWAS) at the domestic and international level form emergent of the global level. These agents produce emergent patterns via correlated feedbacks throughout the system, (Kauffman, 1993). Complex Adaptive System has proven to be a powerful framework for exploring thresholds and resilience and other related phenomenon. The theory is used to understand how various elements within a system interact in a dynamic and often unpredictable ways, these systems are characterized by multiple interconnected agents that adapt and evolve based on their individual behaviors and interactions, (Miller & Page, 2007). CAS theory is relevant across various fields, including ecology, social sciences, and organizational studies. It differs from traditional system theories that focus on linear relationships and predictable outcomes by emphasizing the non-linear, emergent properties of systems, (Kauffman, 1993). Analyzing the effectiveness of ECOWAS in dealing with the coups in West African Sub-Region particularly in Niger Republic, Mali and Bokinafaso, can be approached using the theoretical framework of Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS).

Bruine (2018) mobilized the complex adaptive system to understand policy action at the regional level while discussing the concept of resilience in the context of regional and local economies. The author emphasizes three critical dimensions for policy intervention in managing regional economic resilience, governance structures, types of policy interventions, and the timing of policy intervention. Maluleke (2022) highlights the normative and institutional framework of ECOWAS, which can be seen as a set of rules and behaviors that adapt to the changing environment, such as adopting mechanisms for conflict resolutions when it was first created to enhance economic cooperation in the region. This is in line with the CAS Framework, which emphasizes the adaptive nature of systems.

Application of the Theory

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional economic group comprising 15 countries in West Africa that was established in 1975. One of its critical roles has been to respond to political instability and military coups in the region (ECOWAS, 2021). In this context, the application of CAS theory provides a nuanced understanding of how ECOWAS operates and adapts in the face of changing political landscapes. For instance, ECOWAS itself can be viewed as a CAS where various member states (agents) interact and influence one another, and over time, a collective response to various challenges, including military coups emerges, as each member state has its own political, economic, and cultural contexts, but they all share an overarching goal of regional stability and cooperation. The key agents in this context include ECOWAS member states, military juntas in the affected states, civil society groups, regional and international stakeholders e.g. A.U, UN, E.U.

Research Method

The study adopted historical research design which involves the analysis of secondary data. The study was hinged on the evaluation of the available secondary data obtained from existing materials and general information to establish facts, trends and to draw conclusions. This study employed a qualitative research approach to examine the response of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to military coups in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The data collection method was Document Analysis. The study relies on reports from ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and other international organizations. Official statements, resolutions, communiqués, and policy documents were examined to understand ECOWAS's diplomatic, economic, and military responses. The study employed the use of thematic analysis as a strategy for data analysis.

Result and Discussion

Analysis of the Research Question: What are the major reasons for the resurgence of military intervention in Niger Republic, Mali and Burkina Faso?

Several scholars advanced reasons for military intervention in West Africa subregion. According to Adesan (2024), escalating security threats is a major factor. Adesan (2024) stated that the Sahel region has experienced a significant increase in extremist violence. In the first half of 2024, fatalities reached 7,620, marking a 190% rise from 2021. This surge in violence has undermined public confidence in civilian governments' ability to ensure security, creating a vacuum that military actors have exploited. Also, the Centre for Preventive Action (2024) argued that the problem of political instability and governance challenges also form part of the reason for resurgence of military in democratic regimes in West Africa. In the words of Centre for Preventive Action (2024), the region has been plagued by frequent transfers of power and between 1960 and 2022, countries such as Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger experienced a combined twenty-five successful coups d'état. This history of political instability, coupled with corruption and ineffective governance, has eroded public trust in democratic institutions, making military intervention appear as a viable alternative.

The Centre for Preventive Action (2024) further posited that there is the problem of economic hardships that is sweeping across West Africa countries. Some countries consistently rank high on the Fragile State Index, particularly Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Economic mismanagement and public dissatisfaction with elected governments have created conditions that justify military takeovers. According to the Georgian Journal of Economic Affairs (2024) the erosion of regional and international influence in most of West Africa states paved the way for the military to easily take over the reins of governance. As pointed out by the author, the effectiveness of regional mechanisms has decreased. For instance, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) failed to marshal a consensus for military action against the Niger coup. It was further weakened by the withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso in January 2024, aimed at reducing regional pressure on the juntas to return to constitutional rule and hold elections. This erosion of regional influence has emboldened military actors to seize power without fear of significant repercussions.

Discussion of Finding

The findings of this study suggest that military interventions in West Africa remain a persistent challenge, influenced by internal political instability, economic crises, and the changing regional and global dynamics. The study revealed the reasons for the resurgence of military intervention in Niger Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso. According to the Institute for Security Studies (2024), these countries have faced escalating threats from insurgent groups, particularly jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These groups have capitalized on the weak governance structures in these countries, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and a breakdown of security. This aligns with the findings of Kante (2024), who argues that the growing threat of jihadism, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, has significantly undermined state authority, prompting military takeovers as the solution to the security crisis. Military leaders in these countries often justify their interventions by presenting themselves as the only viable force capable of tackling the insurgency, particularly when civilian governments were seen as ineffective in responding to these security challenges.

According to Laub (2021), economic mismanagement, rising unemployment, poverty, and the inability of governments to address basic socio-economic issues have fueled dissatisfaction among the population. In Mali, for instance, the worsening economic conditions and the inability of the government to generate employment or improve living standards played a key role in the loss of support for the civilian government, as evidenced by the 2020 coup. Similarly, Felter (2021) highlights how military leaders often frame their interventions as a necessary step to improve the economy, restore national dignity, and reverse the decline in living conditions. The findings show that economic dissatisfaction, combined with the collapse of social services, has been a significant driving factor in these coups. As Hassan (2019) argues, military leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have increasingly accused

ECOWAS and France of failing to effectively address the security challenges posed by jihadist groups in the region. This disillusionment with international interventions has led to a rise in anti-Western sentiment and the embrace of alternative forms of governance.

Conclusion

This study established that military coup in these countries are deeply rooted in structural issues such as political instability, economic challenges, governance failures, and security concerns exacerbated by terrorism and insurgency. The resurgence of coups in the region, particularly since 2020, has been a response to the perceived inability of civilian governments to effectively address these issues. The reactions of the governments of Niger Republic, Mali, and Burkina Faso to ECOWAS interventions have varied, with these states exhibiting a growing resistance to ECOWAS' external influence, particularly in light of perceived neocolonial undertones in the interventions. In response to sanctions and political pressure, these countries have sought alternative alliances, notably with Russia, showcasing a shift in their foreign policy orientation.

Recommendation

ECOWAS should prioritize early diplomatic engagement to address the underlying causes of political instability. By engaging in preventive diplomacy, ECOWAS can work with member states to address governance challenges, including corruption, weak institutions, and socio-economic inequalities that often serve as triggers for military interventions. ECOWAS should offer targeted political and economic support to bolster civilian governments' capacity to address public grievances. This could involve supporting democratic processes, strengthening electoral systems, and promoting good governance initiatives. Additionally, assisting in building strong, transparent institutions can reduce the appeal of military interventions as a perceived solution.

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