

Effectiveness of ECOWAS in Countering Coups in West Africa: A Case Study of Niger Republic

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in deterring and responding to coups d'état, focusing on the 2023 military takeover in Niger Republic. It analyses both the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS's response to the coup while proposing key areas for improvement in the organisation's efforts to promote regional democratic stability. Employing a liberalist theoretical framework and utilising secondary data sources, the study finds that ECOWAS' sanctions on Niger Republic established a regional precedent, influencing actions by the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and sending a message of deterrence. However, inconsistencies in applying sanctions hampered its effectiveness in restoring President Bazoum to power. Additionally, ECOWAS faced challenges in securing unanimous support for military intervention. These weaknesses significantly hampered ECOWAS' ability to achieve its goals in Niger Republic. To strengthen its response to coups, the paper recommends that ECOWAS must ensure uniform and robust enforcement of sanctions and other measures against all coup perpetrators in the region. It further recommends prioritising preventive diplomacy by proactively identifying and addressing potential conflicts before they erupt into coups, promoting economic development by supporting initiatives that tackle poverty and create opportunities, reducing the appeal of military intervention, and collaborating with member states to strengthen democratic institutions, transparency, and accountability. By implementing these multi-pronged approaches, ECOWAS can become a more effective force for lasting stability and democracy in West Africa.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Democratic Governance, Military Coups, Liberalism, Niger Republic

Introduction

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 as a regional economic community with the primary aim of facilitating trade among its members. However, as conflicts arose within the region, ECOWAS gradually shifted its focus towards addressing military concerns in addition to economic objectives. The experiences of the Liberia and Sierra Leonean Civil Wars vividly illustrated the connection between economic development, peace, and security, in the region. From the 1990s onwards, ECOWAS has implemented various legal frameworks such as the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security to provide military support, mediation services, and assistance for peacebuilding efforts to its member countries (Mills, 2022).

The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of ECOWAS, adopted in 2001, contains a mechanism for addressing unconstitutional changes in government. This protocol also includes clauses about the democratic governance of ECOWAS members, encompassing aspects such as

electoral processes, judicial impartiality, and the neutrality of security forces (ECOWAS, 2001). ECOWAS' efforts at enthroning democracy and constitutional transfer of power in the region have unfortunately been jeopardised by the resurgence in coups in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and most recently Niger (Darko, 2015).

Besides military coups in the region, cases of third terms or unlimited presidential terms, problematic re-elections of leaders and instances of alleged corruption have become rampant over the years. A proposition to prohibit third terms was deliberated in 2015 but was set aside following resistance from leaders of Togo and The Gambia, who themselves extended their tenures by amending term limits (Darko, 2015). The narrow framing of democracy allows leaders in the region to circumvent critiques that they are defying rules, as long as an election has taken place. This contradiction is rooted in the structure of ECOWAS, including with the officials who are currently serving in national government positions, most notably the chairperson of ECOWAS, who must be a current head of state. Even leaders who obtained power via coups have been selected for this position, effectively legitimising their rule. One example of this is the Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé, the son of Gnassingbé Eyadéma who had himself presided over Togo for thirty-eight years (Mills, 2022).

Faure Gnassingbé's ascension to power in 2005 was widely deemed a coup. He was declared by the ruling party as president. This was met with nationwide protests, and over 1,000 people were killed by security forces (Togo deputies legitimise coup, 2005). During this time, ECOWAS suspended Togo and implemented sanctions such as travel bans on its leaders and an arms embargo (ECOWAS Sanctions Togo in Response to Country's Political Situation, 2005). Several months later, Gnassingbé won the presidential election, which ECOWAS declared free and fair. As a result, despite his clear violation of ECOWAS's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, Gnassingbé remains an active and welcomed member of the organisation and was even elected as its chairperson in 2017 (Akwei, 2017).

In the case of Guinea's political trajectory and ECOWAS response, the country has a history of long-serving rulers such as Ahmed Sékou Touré and Lansana Conté, who served as president for twenty-five and twenty-four years, respectively. Perpetuating this trend, 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. Condé had initially represented a fresh start for Guinean democracy, but news of the constitutional amendment was met with large opposition protests across the country. Despite the protests, ECOWAS responded only by calling for dialogue and refused to sanction Condé. Condé managed to win the 2020 elections, which election observers from ECOWAS concluded were lawful, upholding the results. One year later, Condé was deposed in a military coup, and ECOWAS immediately suspended and imposed sanctions on Guinea (Mills, 2022).

In the aftermath of the 2023 coup in Niger, that led to ousting of President Mohamed Bazoum due to the growing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of security issues. Particularly, the rising threat of terrorism, allegations of embezzlement and the mismanagement of public funds were the issues that led to the conflict (Zambakari, 2023). The Niger coup has raised questions about the effectiveness of ECOWAS in countering coups in the region. Traditionally, ECOWAS has responded to coups through measures such as imposing sanctions on coup leaders,

suspending member states from the organisation, and mediating dialogue between the military and civilian actors in the region. Therefore, this paper contributes to the discourse by analysing the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS' response to the 2023 Niger coup and proposing key areas for improvement to deter future coups and foster lasting democratic stability in West Africa.

Methodology

This study relies on secondary data sources to examine the effectiveness of ECOWAS' response to the 2023 Niger coup and to identify areas for improvement in its efforts to counter-coups in West Africa. Data sources include relevant official statements, speeches, scholarly articles retrieved from academic databases like JSTOR and Science Direct, reports from international organisations like the World Food Programme (WFP), and news articles from regional publications like The Africa Report, as well as international news outlets such as BBC News and Al Jazeera. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes within the data corpus. These themes focused on ECOWAS' response to the Niger coup, including the strengths and weaknesses of their approach, the challenges they faced, and the overall effectiveness of their actions.

Table 1: Objectives of the Study and Unit of Analysis

Objectives of the Study	Themes/ Unit of Analysis
To examine the effectiveness of ECOWAS's response to the 2023 Niger coup	Strengths of ECOWAS's actions in response to the coup
To assess the challenges faced by ECOWAS in its response to the 2023 Niger coup	Weaknesses of ECOWAS's actions in response to the coup

Source: Authors' compilation, 2024

Literature Review

The Concept of a Coup d'état

Chin *et al.* (2021) opine that a coup d'état transpires when the existing ruling regime or its leader is deposed from authority or when a potential regime leader is hindered from assuming power due to specific, observable, and unconstitutional actions carried out by one or more civilian members of the ruling regime or military and security personnel. According to Powell and Thyne (2011), a coup is described as an unlawful and conspicuous attempt by the military or other influential individuals within the governmental structure to remove the current executive in power. They argue that coups can be instigated by any elite affiliated with the state apparatus, encompassing non-civilian military and security personnel or civilian government officials.

In the view of Huntington (1957), a military coup is characterised by the abrupt, forceful, or coercive takeover of political authority by the military faction from the legitimate civilian leadership. Expanding on this, Accord (2022) clarifies that military coups occur when the military, or a faction within it, employs its coercive capabilities against the apex of governmental power, establishes control, and commands obedience from the remaining state institutions under the new regime. Such instances of coups have been notably frequent in the post-independence era of African nations. Consequently, the military coup that unfolded in Niger in 2023 constituted an illegal and forceful usurpation of a legitimately elected government by the military forces in the country.

Since gaining independence in 1960, Niger has experienced four successful coups along with numerous attempted coups, one of which occurred just two days before Bazoum assumed office, to obstruct his inauguration. The concept of the military subordination to civilian political authority has not been fully embraced by many Niger military officers. The rationale provided by the junta for the 2023 coup in Niger revolves around the poor management of the economy and the worsening security conditions under Bazoum's leadership (Yabi, 2023). Before the coup, economic projections indicated an anticipated growth of 6.9 per cent in 2023 and a substantial 12.5 per cent in 2024, contingent upon meeting targets for oil production and receiving international financial assistance. However, effecting significant changes in the economic and social landscape of the nation would require considerable time and effort, even amidst a period of strong economic expansion. As of 2022, Niger's per capita income stood at \$533 (Yabi, 2023), reflecting the challenges faced by the country.

In terms of security, Niger has not been immune to attacks by armed groups; nonetheless, it has demonstrated a greater level of resilience compared to neighbouring countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso. The nation suffered significant casualties from assaults on military installations in 2020 and 2021; however, no similar large-scale attacks have been reported since 2022. Insecurity remains a pressing issue in the Tillabéry region near the Mali border, where armed jihadist factions operate with relative impunity. Despite these challenges, the government of Niger maintained a substantial presence across a significant portion of its territory (Yabi, 2023). The coup has introduced a potential threat to the efforts against jihadist groups, as militant activities have escalated following the deployment of troops to Niamey by the junta (Melly, 2023).

Buchan and Tsagourias (2023) ascribe the 2023 military coup in Niger to the dissatisfaction felt by the military towards President Bazoum. Certain military officials opposed Bazoum, particularly due to his removal of General Salifou Mody as the armed forces Chief of Staff in April 2023. Furthermore, there were speculations regarding potential actions to be taken to replace General Tiani, who had served as the head of the presidential guard since Issoufou's presidency in Niger. Melly (2023) associates the coup with an ideological challenge to the established ECOWAS model of civilian-led constitutional governance. It shows that the cause of coups in West Africa only goes beyond governance issues and internal power struggles. It has involved identities, social attitudes, and a populace's rejection of conventional political practices. The sudden appearance of Russian flags in Niamey post-coup highlighted these multifaceted social dynamics rather than indicating any substantial Russian influence. The 2023 coup in Niger poses risks to the previously cohesive national unity within the country and could lead to destabilisation in the ECOWAS region. The military takeover in Niger presented a significant challenge to ECOWAS's efforts to promote democratic governance in the region. The next section reviews empirical works on ECOWAS' response to the Niger coup.

Empirical Review on ECOWAS Response to the Niger Coup

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.

While ECOWAS responded swiftly with sanctions and suspension, the effectiveness of these measures in reversing the coup is debatable. Melly (2023) in his study titled "The Challenge to Democracy in West Africa Highlighted by the Niger Coup" utilises secondary data to argue that the 2023 coup in Niger has placed the fate of democracy in West Africa in a precarious position. The hard-earned progress made over decades to move away from past authoritarian regimes is now under threat. For example, in Mali, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta neglected the northern and central regions, manipulated elections, and brutally suppressed urban protests.

In Guinea, President Alpha Condé manipulated a constitutional referendum to secure a third term, and Burkina Faso's Roch Marc Christian Kaboré struggled to address jihadist attacks that inflicted heavy casualties on the army. These issues of neglected regions, manipulated elections, and jihadist threats were also present in Niger, potentially contributing to the coup's success. The Niger coup represents a traditional power seizure that jeopardises stability, development, and security for the benefit of a few elite military leaders. This coup also endangers the fight against jihadist groups, as militant activities have escalated following the junta's actions to concentrate troops in Niamey. Melly (2023) suggests that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must promptly devise strategies to tackle the decline of democracy in West Africa. He analyses the broader implications of the Niger coup, particularly the threat to democracy in West Africa but does not delve into the ECOWAS' response in detail.

Sotubo (2023) in his research titled "Is ECOWAS in Niger in Need of Assistance?" based on secondary sources, identifies a key limitation of ECOWAS's response its potential lack of military power to enforce its will. His suggestion to seek assistance from the African Union (AU) or the United Nations (UN) implies that ECOWAS recognised this limitation and might be open to collaboration. However, Sotubo's (2023) focus on military intervention does not comprehensively address the full range of measures potentially included in ECOWAS's response. In addition to a possible military threat, ECOWAS's actions encompassed economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, or efforts to mediate a solution. A more comprehensive analysis would explore these various aspects of ECOWAS' response and their potential strengths and weaknesses.

Buchan & Tsagourias (2023) in their research titled "The Niger Coup and The Prospect of ECOWAS Military Intervention: An International Law Appraisal" utilising secondary data, provide a compelling analysis of the legal basis for ECOWAS's intervention in Niger. They argue that ECOWAS treaties, particularly Article 25 of the 1999 Protocol on Conflict Prevention, empower the organisation to intervene in cases of unconstitutional overthrow of governments. However, interpretations of these treaties and the specific circumstances surrounding a coup might lead to legal arguments against intervention. Additionally, some member states might have reservations about the extent of ECOWAS' authority (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023). While the legal debate is important, this study delves deeper to examine both the strengths and weaknesses of ECOWAS' overall response to the 2023 Niger coup. This comprehensive approach will explore weaknesses such as the potential limitations of sanctions or the challenges of forging regional unity in the face of a coup. By examining both strengths and weaknesses, this study sheds light on the effectiveness of ECOWAS' actions and areas for potential improvement in deterring future coups and fostering democratic stability in the region.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs liberalist theory also known as liberalism as the theoretical framework for comprehending the effectiveness of ECOWAS in responding to the 2023 military coup in Niger. Liberalist theory advocates for the promotion of liberal values such as individual freedom, equality, democracy, and the rule of law through the utilisation of institutions and norms (Toprak, 2022). Notable proponents of liberalism include Immanuel Kant, who is often associated with his essay "Perpetual Peace," regarded as a seminal work in liberalist thought within international relations. Kant's arguments advocate for the formation of a federation of republics, and democratic governance, and underscore the significance of international law and institutions in upholding peace among nations (Kant, 1795).

Another influential Proponent of liberalism is Woodrow Wilson, who played a pivotal role in the establishment of the League of Nations, an early endeavour aimed at creating a global entity to foster peace and collaboration among different nations (Wilson, 1919). Furthermore, scholars like Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have contributed to the discourse on liberalism by emphasising the critical role played by international institutions, norms, and regimes in facilitating cooperation and managing conflicts among states, thereby highlighting the multifaceted nature of liberalist perspectives in the realm of international relations (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Core Assumptions of Liberalist Theory

Liberalist theory is based on several core assumptions that guide its analysis of global politics and interactions among states. These assumptions include:

Liberalism strongly emphasises the individual as the primary unit of analysis in international relations. It assumes that individuals are rational actors who pursue their interests and goals, including economic prosperity, security, and personal fulfilment. This individualistic perspective contrasts with more collectivist theories that prioritise the interests of groups or states over individuals (Owen, 2010).

Liberalist theory assumes that actors in the international system, including states, international organisations, and non-state actors, behave rationally to maximise their interests. Rational

decision-making involves weighing the costs and benefits of different courses of action and choosing the option that is perceived as most advantageous. This assumption underpins liberalist explanations of state behaviour and international cooperation (Owen, 2010). Liberalism is optimistic about the potential for cooperation and mutual benefit among states in the international system. It assumes that states can overcome their differences and work together to achieve common goals, such as promoting peace, trade, and economic development. Liberalist theorists point to institutions, norms, and diplomatic practices that facilitate cooperation and manage conflicts among states (Toprak, 2022).

Liberalism emphasises the interconnectedness and interdependence of states in the global economy and society. It assumes that states' economic, political, and social interactions create mutual dependencies and shared interests. This interconnectedness reduces the likelihood of conflict and incentivises cooperation to address common challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and economic instability (Owen, 1994). Liberalist theory highlights the importance of international institutions, regimes, and norms in shaping state behaviour and promoting cooperation. Institutions provide frameworks for managing interstate relations, resolving disputes, and coordinating collective action. Norms, such as those against aggression, genocide, and human rights abuses, shape state behaviour by establishing expectations of appropriate conduct and fostering trust among states (Toprak, 2022). Liberalism is characterised by a belief in the possibility of peaceful change and progress in international relations. It assumes that conflicts between states can be resolved through negotiation, diplomacy, and institutional mechanisms rather than resorting to violence (Toprak, 2022).

The Relevance of Liberalist Theory to the Study

Liberalism's emphasis on individual well-being and cooperation through institutions sometimes overlooks the inherently conflictual nature of international politics. However, liberal principles remain highly relevant to understanding ECOWAS' response. The organisation's core values align with liberalism's focus on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law all essential for a just and equitable society. ECOWAS's commitment to these principles is evident in its various protocols and frameworks, such as the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. This protocol highlights its dedication to strengthening and protecting democracy within member states. In the case of the Niger coup, ECOWAS' swift condemnation of the unconstitutional power grab and its advocacy for restoring democratic order demonstrates its adherence to liberal norms. This aligns with the liberal assumption that states can overcome differences and work together to achieve common goals, such as promoting democracy.

Furthermore, ECOWAS' use of diplomatic and economic pressure to encourage a peaceful resolution aligns with the liberal emphasis on peaceful conflict resolution and international cooperation. Economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts can be seen as attempts to influence coup leaders' behaviour through rational calculations of cost and benefit another core assumption of liberalism. ECOWAS response also highlights the role of institutions in shaping state behaviour, another liberal assumption. The organisation itself serves as a platform for dialogue and collective action among member states. By acting through ECOWAS, member states overcome individual limitations and exert greater pressure on the coup leaders. The next section examines ECOWAS response to the coup, analysing its strengths and weaknesses

Strengths of ECOWAS Actions in Niger Republic to the Coup

In response to the 2023 coup in Niger, ECOWAS condemned and imposed the most stringent sanctions ever levied against a member state. These sanctions significantly impacted trade and movement by closing land and air borders between Niger and other ECOWAS states. Additionally, they halted all financial transactions between ECOWAS states and Niger, making it difficult for the junta to access funds. Furthermore, Niger's assets held in foreign banks were frozen, to limit the junta's financial resources. The sanctions were aimed at pressuring Niger to restore constitutional order. This signifies the seriousness with which they viewed the coup and their commitment to pressuring Niger back to constitutional order (Ronceray, 2023). In addition to imposing sanctions, ECOWAS also suspended Niger. Justifications for the suspension were premised on violation of democratic norms. ECOWAS' core principles emphasise adherence to democratic governance. The military takeover in Niger constituted a clear violation of these principles, threatening regional stability and setting a dangerous precedent (Melly, 2023).

By suspending Niger, ECOWAS sent a clear message to other member states that military takeovers would not be tolerated and would come with significant consequences. The suspension meant Niger was excluded from a range of benefits associated with ECOWAS membership, including access to funding and technical assistance for economic and social development initiatives; participation in preferential trade agreements that facilitate the movement of goods and services within the bloc; exclusion from joint security efforts and peacekeeping missions undertaken by ECOWAS; and limited access to scholarships and educational programmes offered through ECOWAS partnerships (Ronceray, 2023).

ECOWAS secured the crucial support of the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) for the closure of all borders with Niger, halting financial transactions, and freezing the country's assets held in foreign banks. These comprehensive sanctions disrupted trade isolated the country economically, and made it difficult for the junta to obtain essential goods, finance themselves, and conduct international business. Freezing Niger's assets in foreign banks further restricted their access to funds and weakens their financial position. This regional unity strengthens the impact of the sanctions and demonstrates a collective stance against unconstitutional power grabs (International Crisis Group, 2023). The regional body issued a clear ultimatum to the junta ruling Niger to reinstate the deposed president, Mohamed Bazoum, within a week, or face additional measures, including military intervention. The threat of military intervention served as a powerful deterrent, to pressure the junta to reconsider their actions and avoid further escalation (Melly, 2023).

Weaknesses of ECOWAS's Actions in Response to the Coup

Despite its initial strong response, ECOWAS' efforts in Niger faced significant challenges. A key issue was the inconsistent application of sanctions. In response to the joint withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS and their subsequent formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) in January 2024, the bloc announced the lifting of most sanctions imposed on Niger in February 2024 (Idris, 2024). This decision, confirmed by ECOWAS Commission President Omar Aliou Touray during the Abuja summit, included the immediate revocation of measures like the no-fly zone, border closures, and sanctions on access to regional economic and financial institutions. However, lifting sanctions came with conditions, including the release of President Mohamed Bazoum and his family (Touray, 2024).

The easing of sanctions across the region was a conciliatory gesture by ECOWAS to persuade these states to remain within the alliance and reconsider their withdrawal. The departure of these nations could jeopardise regional integration efforts and lead to a complex disentanglement from the bloc's trade and service networks, estimated to be worth around \$150 billion annually (Idris, 2024). As part of a conciliatory gesture to persuade Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to remain within ECOWAS, the bloc allowed them to participate in technical discussions again. However, this limited re-engagement did not reinstate them as full participants in summits. Furthermore, ECOWAS lifted specific sanctions on individuals from Mali and some on the military-led government in Guinea (Idris, 2024).

The lifting of sanctions on Niger after the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) undermines ECOWAS' credibility as a forceful advocate for democracy. Similarly, the regional solidarity of Mali, and Burkina Faso, with Niger forming their alliance (ASS) weakens economic pressure and hinders ECOWAS' ability to achieve its goals and enforce its demands (Zambakari, 2023). Beyond the immediate challenges of sanctions, ECOWAS faced internal divisions and regional rivalries that undermined its ability to respond to the Niger's coups. The formation of the ASS and the inability of regional powers like Nigeria to commit its military, in the long run, to forcefully remove the junta highlight the lack of consensus on how to handle coups. Additionally, the involvement of external actors like France with its interests in the region adds another layer of complexity, making it difficult for ECOWAS to present a unified front on issues like the Niger coup. This emboldens those who defy the organisation and undermines its overall influence (Zambakari, 2023).

The military junta remained in power despite the sanctions and threats of military intervention. Following the expiration of the ultimatum on 10 August 2023, ECOWAS released a statement. It officially announced the formation of a "standby force" and reiterated its warning to the military junta (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023). The military regime in Niger defied ECOWAS's warnings. It announced the formation of a new government on 10 August 2023 and even vowed to prosecute the ousted president for high treason (Buchan & Tsagourias, 2023).

Beyond this, the sanctions on Niger, intended to pressure the junta, had a devastating humanitarian impact on ordinary citizens. The closure of borders between Benin and Nigeria, which was the crucial sources of food supply and other essential commodities, worsened food insecurity and shortages of essential goods. The scarcity of medicines, cereals such as millet and sorghum, as well as imported food items like sugar, powdered milk, and vegetable oil became a pressing issue, with the World Food Programme (WFP) reporting a sharp 21% increase in the price of rice in August 2023. Subsequently, by mid-October 2023, the cost of a 25kg (55 pounds) rice sack had surged by more than 50% in just two months (International Crisis Group, 2023). The sanctions also resulted in blackouts and a petroleum shortage in Niger, leading to severe electricity and fuel shortages in major urban centres like Niamey, Maradi, and Zinder. While some businesses started using generators to cope, those without access to diesel or unable to afford them were forced to close. (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The domestic popularity of the Junta limited ECOWAS achievement in Niger. The high approval rating for the junta suggests a lack of public support for ECOWAS' measures, intervening even more complex. A study conducted in August 2023 by a polling company,

Premise Data, revealed that 79% of the participants backed the junta and its measures. This high approval rating was attributed to the military junta's framing of the coup as a move to free Niger from France's influence. This widespread domestic support for the junta limited the effectiveness of sanctions and outside pressure, as the population did not perceive the junta as illegitimate (Melly, 2023).

Figure 1: Military Coup Justified in Niger



Source: Premise Data, Opinion Poll, August 23rd, 2023

Furthermore, in defiance of ECOWAS' ultimatum, the junta, in collaboration with six Nigerien civil society groups and a citizen, filed a lawsuit at the ECOWAS Court of Justice in Abuja on November 21, 2023. The lawsuit demanded the removal of the sanctions, arguing that ECOWAS had imposed harsher penalties on Niger compared to those following coups in other member states. Conversely, ECOWAS contended that the junta was ineligible for a hearing, not being recognized under the bloc's protocol. The ECOWAS Court of Justice rejected Niger's lawsuit on December 7, 2023, refusing their request to halt the sanctions imposed by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government (ECOWAS, 2023). The ECOWAS Court of Justice's rejection of Niger's lawsuit challenging the sanctions highlights a potential legal hurdle in enforcing sanctions.

Nevertheless, the challenging situation in Niger presented ECOWAS with its most significant obstacle in thirty years. These challenges do not diminish ECOWAS' significance in the region, given its enduring presence over 50 turbulent years. West Africa has witnessed various regimes rise and fall. The current military juntas may not hold onto power indefinitely. Nevertheless, this scenario serves as a critical test for evaluating the bloc's effectiveness (Barnett, 2023).

Conclusion

ECOWAS, initially envisioned as an economic union, underwent a significant transformation due to the rise of civil conflicts and military takeovers that threatened democratic progress in the 1990s. Consequently, member states transformed ECOWAS into a guardian of democratic principles. A pivotal moment it arrived with the introduction of a progressive democracy protocol in 2001. This move not only influenced the pan-African governance charter but also empowered ECOWAS to address governance issues across the region (ECOWAS, 2001). The evolution of ECOWAS into a defender of democratic values was not straightforward, but for over two decades, the organisation has possessed mechanisms to address unconstitutional power grabs and human rights violations. These tools include dialogue, sanctions, election observers, mediation

missions, occasional military deployments, and legal recourse through its court of justice. Recent military interventions in The Gambia (2017) and Guinea-Bissau (2022) demonstrated ECOWAS's ability to project power in smaller member states, especially when backed by the United Nations and Western allies.

In Niger, ECOWAS promptly issued an ultimatum threatening military action to remove the illegitimate government in Niamey (Lawal, 2023). This bold move was accompanied by a range of responses, including economic sanctions, asset freezes, power supply disruptions, border closures, and Niger's suspension from ECOWAS. It is important to highlight that ECOWAS' swift reaction not only set a precedent for other regional responses but also triggered sanctions by the smaller, more interconnected West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU or UEMOA), to which Niger also belongs (Ronceray, 2023). Nevertheless, ECOWAS' reaction to the Niger coup and the broader resurgence of coups highlights the limitations of its existing approach. A more effective strategy requires the development of new methodologies, tools, and protocols to address undemocratic behaviours in the region.

Recommendations

In consideration of the constraints faced by ECOWAS in addressing coups in the region and fostering democracy in Niger, it is thus suggested that the following actions should be taken:

- i. ECOWAS should ensure uniform and robust enforcement of sanctions and other measures against all coup perpetrators, irrespective of regional dynamics. This is crucial. Inconsistent application of sanctions weakens ECOWAS' authority and creates loopholes for coup leaders. Targeted sanctions that hit the junta and their finances directly, while minimising harm to ordinary citizens, could be more effective.
- ii. ECOWAS should strengthen its early warning system. ECOWAS' system can be improved to identify warning signs of potential coups, such as rising political tensions, economic hardship, or military discontent. Early intervention through mediation and addressing grievances could help prevent coups from happening in the first place.
- iii. ECOWAS should proactively engage with member nations to tackle the root causes of coups in the region. This is essential for long-term stability. ECOWAS can strengthen its network with member states on issues like promoting good governance, tackling poverty reforming militaries to be professional.
- iv. ECOWAS should also, ensure improvement in democratic processes in order to avoid gross dissatisfaction among the electorates check the issue of legitimacy as clearly stated in your work.

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