

APPRAISING THE LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS OF ECOWAS FOR THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIO-POLITICAL INTEGRATION OF WEST AFRICA*

Abstract

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a multinational regional organization whose establishment was primarily inspired by the motivation to promote economic collaboration and advancement across West African countries. This is reflected in ECOWAS founding and subsequent Treaties. In recognition of the significance of good governance, security and stability to the economic development and progress of the region, ECOWAS Treaties and Protocols also made provisions for the promotion of political stability and collective security in the region. In previous years, ECOWAS recorded commendable achievements particularly in the maintenance of political stability and security, while striving to facilitate economic acceleration in the region. Currently, the contrary seems to be the case as the region has become a hub for political instability, the violation of democratic principles, military intervention in government, economic depreciation and insecurity. The relevant question now is: to what extent has ECOWAS actually achieved its objective of promoting economic integration and development, political stability and regional security in West Africa? This work will examine the efforts made by ECOWAS to galvanize economic prosperity and socio-political synergy in the region. The major setbacks and limitations of ECOWAS will also be highlighted and pragmatic recipes for the actualization of the ECOWAS objectives will be prescribed. This research will be of utilitarian value to policy and opinion molders, government of West African states, ECOWAS institutions, researchers, public affair analysts, scholars and the general public. The research will, among other things, demonstrate how ECOWAS can be revolutionized into a formidable alliance and how the bloc can be transformed into an economic and political force to reckon with, while emerging as a result-oriented institution that is worthy of emulation by other regional blocs in Africa and beyond. Doctrinal approach of data collection is adopted here comprising of primary and secondary sources including ECOWAS Treaties, Protocols, journals, books and other relevant publications from the internet source. It is recommended that ECOWAS countries must demonstrate political will and commitment towards achieving national economic development as the vibrancy of the domestic economies of ECOWAS countries is indispensable to ECOWAS economic growth, regional integration, security and socio-political stability.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Legal and Policy Frameworks, Economic Development, Socio-Political Integration, Appraisal

1. Introduction

ECOWAS was established by a treaty signed in Lagos, Nigeria in May 28th 1975 with 15 member states at its inception with the cardinal objectives of stimulating economic growth, regional integration, political stability and security in West Africa.¹ ECOWAS emerged at a time when the world and Africa in particular was economically challenged with failing policies, over-dependence on colonial authorities, difficulty in recording global economic impact and the paradox of sovereign equality of states. ECOWAS target was to achieve a unified regional economic ideology of collective self-sufficiency, development and global competitiveness. Its strategy was to deploy policy harmonization and infrastructural development including roads, telecoms and energy to foster

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¹ Light Ray Media, *West-Africa's Path to Prosperity: A Report on ECOWAS' Progress and Challenges.* (Accessed 27/10/2025) <https://lightraymedia.org>

commercial collaboration.² ECOWAS regional economic integration was designed to combat poverty, curtail economic disparity, minimize external dependency and accelerate self-sufficiency.³ ECOWAS secretariat was transformed into a commission in 2007 to enhance efficiency.⁴

However, ECOWAS can hardly be said to have achieved satisfactory results in terms of its paramount priority and core mandate of economic development and integration. This situation is further exacerbated by the political and security challenges currently bedeviling the region. The influence of ECOWAS is currently critically undermined to the extent that its relevance is conspicuously threatened. To assert its relevance and influence, ECOWAS must address its besetting challenges and realize its agenda of promoting regional economic growth, political stability and security.

2. Primary Objectives of ECOWAS

ECOWAS is essentially an economy-oriented institution with a major agenda of catalyzing industrialization and multinational trade integration that will precipitate economic acceleration in West Africa. Its objective as captured in the ECOWAS Revised Treaty is the promotion of cooperation and economic stability. This is to be achieved through the following strategies: harmonization of national policies and programmes in industry, trade, finance and economic reforms; trade liberalization through abolition of custom duties and non-tariff barriers, removal of barriers to free movement of persons, goods, services and capital across the region.⁵ Under the treaty, in order to promote industrial development of the region, member states are enjoined to prioritize the development of energy, agriculture, transport, communication, natural resources, small and medium scale enterprises. The treaty also enjoins member states to support institutional financing of multinational industrial projects in West Africa, encourage industrial investments, promote the sale and consumption of locally manufactured products by member states, encourage technical support and collaboration in industrial technology and training, support specialization and economy of scale based on natural resource endowment.⁶

3. Economic Development Policy Framework

The West African Regional Action Plan, the ECOWAS common market initiative, the West African Monetary Zone and the proposed single currency “ECO”, are among the policies designed to accelerate intra-regional trade, economic synergy and business efficiency.⁷ The organization adopted the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme and the ECOWAS Common External Tariff to promote trade integration,⁸ facilitate free movement of goods and eliminate tax barriers. To enhance free movement of persons within the region, the idea of abolition of VISA as entry requirement, provision of right of residence and the introduction of Common ECOWAS Passport and ECOWAS Brown Card were conceived to facilitate seamless human and vehicular movement across ECOWAS countries.⁹

² M. Chambas. *The Role of ECOWAS in Achieving the Economic Integration of West-Africa*. 19/10/2007 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org> p.2

³ B. Ndiaye. *A Shift of the Collective Security Architecture in West-Africa*. 19/9/2024 <https://tdhj.org>

⁴ F. Anderson. *ECOWAS @ 50: A Diplomatic Evolution of Successes, Challenges and Regional Integration*. 4/18/2025 <https://irpj.euclid.int>

⁵ ECOWAS Revised Treaty (1993). Article 3(1) & (2)

⁶ *Ibid* Article 26

⁷ R. Omeni, *West-Africa's Watchdog: ECOWAS' Effectiveness in Question*. 8/8/2024 <https://africanleadershipmagazine.com>

⁸ P. Kazahchiang. *ECOWAS @ 50: Promise, Pitfalls and the Future*. 30/5/2025 <https://www.cddwestafrica.org>

⁹ M. Chambas, *op.cit.* p.9

ECOWAS Environmental Policy was established to foster sustainable resource management.¹⁰ ECOWAS adopted vision 2050 in December 2021 targeted at addressing persistent socio-economic inequalities and to promote inclusivity, sustainability and regional development.¹¹ ECOWAS Protocol on Education and Training was designed to promote access to good education and eliminate immigration intricacies to facilitate easy migration of students and workers within the sub-region for studies, teaching, research and allied educational objectives for the service of the region.¹²

4. Economic Action Strategies and Programmes

Economically, ECOWAS has attempted to foster collective progress by facilitating trade partnership and inclusive developmental projects. ECOWAS effort towards regional economic integration has reflected in its attempts at trade policy harmonization.¹³ The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol has facilitated the movement of over 400 million citizens while the Trade Liberalization Scheme and the Common External Tariff support regional trade. The West African Power Pool being developed is designed to link member states to a regional electricity grid. Meanwhile, the off-grid renewable energy initiative is promoted through the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency (ECREEE) in Cape Verde.¹⁴ The 500-million-dollar Flagship West Africa Gas Pipeline Project that will supply clan Nigerian gas to Benin, Togo, Ghana and beyond is a public/private partnership, as the required funds were provided by Chevron-Shell Led Consortium while government provided investment enabling environment. The proposed creation of regional airline and shipping lines (ECOAIR and ECOMARINE) has been approved. The vision to modernize and expand regional telecommunication services for accelerated efficiency, minimized tariff and supply of cellular phones with affordable roaming facilities has commenced.¹⁵ In June 2007, the Head of States approved a Strategic Vision that was adopted by the ECOWAS Commission which comprised of infrastructural development, agriculture, trade, market accessibility, poverty alleviation, peace and security.¹⁶

5. Political Strategies and Impact in the Region

In recognition of the indisputable importance of political stability and security on regional economic development, ECOWAS adopted various Protocols, Policies and Regulations to foster political stability and security in West Africa. On the basis of these strategies, the Commission, through its organs and institutions intervened in member states at various times over the years during their political conflicts, civil unrest, war and security breakdown. The bloc recorded notable results in this regard to the extent that ECOWAS became perceived by some as a political, rather than an economic organization. In 2001, ECOWAS adopted the Additional Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, setting out principles to promote democracy and political stability including regular elections, respect for term limits and a commitment to combating unconstitutional power transition.¹⁷ In 1999, ECOWAS adopted the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. These instruments are designed to constitute a comprehensive legal framework for challenging threats to peace and security and addressing conflicts.¹⁸ Fortified by these Protocols, ECOWAS consolidated on the policy of “Zero Tolerance” towards unconstitutional

¹⁰ F. Anderson, *op.cit*

¹¹ P. Kazahchiang, *op.cit*.

¹² M. Chambas, *op.cit*. p.7

¹³ P. Kazahchiang, *op. cit*.

¹⁴ K. Igbobor. *ECOWAS @ 50: Our Focus Remains Peace, Security and Prosperity*. 28/5/2025
<https://africarenewal.un.org>

¹⁵ M. Chambas, *op. cit*. p.9

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ P. Kazahchiang, *op. cit*

¹⁸ M. Chambas, *op. cit*. p.5

and forceful usurpation of power with determination to promote credible, transparent, free and fair electoral process in the region. Accordingly, the bloc proactively resisted military coup in Guinea-Bissau in 2003 and took steps to facilitate succession in Togo in compliance with the constitution following the death of President Gnassingbe Eyadema in 2005.¹⁹ The Declaration of Political Principles (Abuja, Nigeria 1991) outlined principles for mediation, respect for human rights, political pluralism and democracy.²⁰

On 2nd December 2016, following the Gambian Presidential elections, the then President Yahya Jammeh initially conceded defeat to the winner Adama Barrow whom he congratulated while commending the electoral process which he described as free and transparent and vowed not to contest the election result.²¹ Same day, the African Union, ECOWAS and United Nations endorsed the election result describing it as peaceful, free and transparent. On 9th December 2016, Jammeh changed his mind and decided he would contest the elections on grounds of alleged serious and unacceptable electoral abnormalities as revealed by electoral officials. He withdrew his earlier concession.²² In response, ECOWAS, led by President Buhari of Nigeria proceeded to Gambia to persuade Jammeh to relinquish power as scheduled, offering him asylum in Nigeria to facilitate negotiations.²³ Meanwhile, air, naval and ground troops from several ECOWAS states were already actively engaged in contingent strategizing and operational preparations. In January 2017, ECOWAS issued an ultimatum to Jammeh, asking him to exit by midnight of 19th January or face the consequences of refusal.²⁴ When ECOWAS delegates' effort to persuade Jammeh to cede powers to Barrow proved abortive, a coalition of military forces from Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana invaded Gambia on 19th January 2017 to compel him to vacate. On 21st January 2017, Jammeh surrendered presidential powers to Barrow and went into exile in Equatorial Guinea.²⁵

ECOWAS mediated in the 2017 Liberian electoral dispute to ensure peaceful resolution through dialogue.²⁶ Also, during the extraordinary session held on 7th December 2010, ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government condemned the unfolding post-election insecurity in Ivory Coast. ECOWAS recognized Alassane Outtara as the elected President of Ivory Coast and called on Laurent Gbagbo to respect the democratic process. ECOWAS suspended Ivory Coast from all its decision-making bodies pursuant to Article 45 of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.²⁷ When Gbagbo became reluctant to relinquish power and in view of the deteriorating security and political situation, ECOWAS Heads of State met in Abuja on 24th December 2010 to endorse sanctions against Gbagbo, including travel ban, financial asset freezes, etc. They equally agreed to dispatch a special high-level delegation to the country to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. They threatened the use of force in the event of his failure to surrender powers on the 3rd of January 2011.²⁸

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.6

²⁰ B. Ndiaye, *op. cit*

²¹ *African Union Criticize Gambian President over Rejected Result.* VOA News. 10/12/2016

²² P. William. *A New African Model of Coercion? Assessing the ECOWAS Mission in the Gambia.* 16/3/2017 <https://theglobalobservatory.org>

²³ *Gambia Dispute: African Union will not Recognize President Jammeh.* BBC News. 13/1/2017 www.bbc.co.uk

²⁴ P. William, *op. cit*

²⁵ *2016-2017 Gambia Constitutional Crisis.* 9/12/2016-21/1/2017 <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

²⁶ R. Omeni, *op. cit*

²⁷ J. Abatan. *Challenges Facing the African Union in the Implementation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P): A Case Study of the 2010-2011 Intervention in Cote d'Ivoire.* Pretoria: University of Pretoria. 2015

²⁸ *ibid*

ECOWAS intervention effort can also be identified when sanctions were imposed on Niger after a military coup in 2023²⁹ although the intervention proved to be counter-productive as it ultimately culminated in the exit of the Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS.

6. Security Architecture and Interventions

ECOWAS leaders recognize the nexus between peace, security and economic development. Consequently, although peace and security were not explicitly provided for in the founding treaty, ECOWAS members recognized the importance of having security and defense Protocols. This culminated in the adoption of the Protocol on Non-Aggression (Lagos, 1978) and Protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defense (Freetown, 1981). These Protocols established principles that are central to ECOWAS' conflict prevention, management and resolution approach. Respect for territorial integrity, protection against external aggression, amicable dispute settlement, collective security and intervention in inter-state conflicts were emphasized in the Protocols.³⁰

In response to the civil wars in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991), ECOWAS developed a comprehensive mechanism to address the challenges by introducing the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. The Protocol was to be implemented in cases of humanitarian crisis, overthrow of democratically elected government and other significant threats to regional peace and security.³¹

Article 58 of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty 1993 stipulates that “member states undertake to work to safeguard and consolidate relations conducive to the maintenance of peace, stability and security within the region.” ECOWAS has consolidated its security apparatus including the establishment of ECOWAS Standby Force. ECOWAS has encouraged regional cooperation on counter-terrorism and transnational organized crimes. In 2019, ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy, designed to prevent and combat terrorism in the region, was launched. ECOWAS also established the ECOWAS Early Warning System, to provide early warning and response to security threats within the region.³² The ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) is charged with quelling civil unrest and prevention of violence escalation in the region.³³ ECOWAS is acting with the Standby Force to implement a Comprehensive Action Plan to address hybrid threats like terrorism in the region.³⁴ A pivotal period of ECOWAS Peacekeeping Mission was the 1990s where ECOMOG force was deployed on peacekeeping mission to Liberia during the civil war in 1990. This was its first major military intervention targeted at restoring order and stability. This was followed by intervention in the Sierra Leonean civil war in 1997. These interventions projected ECOWAS capacity for regional intervention, conflicts resolution and contribution to post-conflict reconstruction.³⁵

The bloc has assertively taken stance against unconstitutional change of government and sit-tight to power through interventions.³⁶ In January 2017, following ECOWAS intervention in Gambia, leading to former President Jammeh's exit as President, 4,000 ECOWAS troops remained in Gambia to maintain peace, order and security in preparation for Adama Barrow's return to consolidate his

²⁹ P. Kazahchiang, *op. cit*

³⁰ B. Ndiaye, *op. cit*

³¹ *ibid*

³² Light Ray Media, *op. cit*

³³ R. Omeni, *op. cit*

³⁴ K. Igbobor, *op. cit*

³⁵ P. Kazahchiang, *op. cit*

³⁶ *ibid*

Presidency. Five days later, Barrow returned to the country and requested the ECOWAS troops (now numbering 2,500) to remain in the country for at least 6 months to assist him establish order firmly.³⁷

7. Some Socio-Economic Impacts and Achievements

According to the ECOWAS Commission, the organization has achieved significant milestones including the establishment of Single Customs Union, the implementation of Regional Trade Liberalization Scheme and the development of a Regional Infrastructural Development Plan.³⁸ Over the past five decades, ECOWAS has promoted regional trade and trade barriers elimination, political stability, conflicts resolution, democratic governance and peacekeeping interventions.³⁹ ECOWAS had reflected the symbol of regional unity, stability and integration in the past. For many years, ECOWAS served as a foundation for regional cohesion, promoting economic synergy, military collaboration, peace and stability. ECOWAS had earlier achieved outstanding success in facilitating trade, movement of goods and persons, conflicts management interventions, military operations and resolutions.⁴⁰ The Trans West African Highway and the West African Power Pool were designed to foster economic acceleration and integration.⁴¹ ECOWAS has expressed the understanding of the need for collaborative effort to address the problems of desertification, coastal erosion, extreme weather conditions induced by climate change and food insecurity.⁴²

Statistics has indicated that Africa's economies are currently growing by an average of 4 to 4.5% per annum over the last decade which indicates progress in the continent's fortunes. ECOWAS states provide 80% of EU cocoa imports, 15% of rubber imports and 10% of fish imports, although West-Africa accounts for only 1.2% of overall EU trade. 81% of ECOWAS imports from EU are composed of manufactured products while raw materials, agriculture and fish constitute 90% of her exports to the EU market. Meanwhile, intra-ECOWAS trade is estimated to be only between 8.5% and 14% composed mainly of livestock and crude oil products, beers, cooking oil and building materials.⁴³ However, while the bloc has achieved progress in facilitating regional commercial and economic collaborations, tangible benefits for ordinary citizens and private individuals remains minimal.⁴⁴ Individuals in West Africa are producing less wealth than they did decades ago, meanwhile, the population has tripled, devoid of corresponding acceleration in productivity. This signifies a decline in GDP.⁴⁵

8. Challenges and Limitations of ECOWAS

Economic Challenges

ECOWAS countries are generally plagued with underdevelopment and poor infrastructural amenities. Reliable and sustainable energy, good road networks and other critical infrastructures necessarily required for industrialization are generally epileptic in the region. The corollary of this is low productivity which automatically cripples regional trade and commerce. ECOWAS intra-community

³⁷ *ECOWAS Military Intervention in Gambia*. 19/1/2017 <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

³⁸ Light Ray Media, *op. cit*

³⁹ P. Kazahchiang, *op. cit*

⁴⁰ K. Avoulete. *Will ECOWAS Survive Until 2030?* 22/5/2025 <https://www.fpri.org>

⁴¹ R. Omeni, *op. cit*

⁴² F. Anderson. *Op. cit*

⁴³ M. Chambers, *op. cit*. p.10

⁴⁴ F. Anderson, *op. cit*

⁴⁵ M. Chambers, *op. cit*. p.10

trade is below 20% whereas it is around 60-70% in the EU.⁴⁶ The Free Movement Protocol which is a fundamental pillar designed to facilitate seamless movement for work and residential purposes anywhere in the region seem to operate in theory. The practical actualization of the regional Trade Liberalization Scheme is still more of a concept than a reality. In practice, high tariffs and unofficial fees payment appears to be the order of the day. Corruption at border posts, inconsistent implementation of migration policies and security concerns undermines the holistic realization of this policy. For instance, the numerous police and military checkpoints along major trade routes like the Lagos-Abidjan corridor suggests that seamless mobility is still a mirage. Many travelers and business operators report border extortion and harassment, making regional mobility of goods and services very expensive.⁴⁷ Many Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) struggle to navigate this bottleneck, thereby constricting their regional trade expansion capacity.

Job creation, economic empowerment and employment are some of the major challenges confronting ECOWAS. While regional policies precipitate macroeconomic improvement and stability, they are yet to sufficiently translate into employment and job opportunities. Unemployment remains astronomical across member countries resulting in migration escalation, economic vulnerability and sometimes civil unrest. Lack of industrialization and low investment in the technology sector have hampered career prospects for many youths, thereby compelling them to prospect for opportunities outside the region.⁴⁸ Agriculture and food production have been adversely affected by temperature and climate change, unpredictable rainfall density, flood, erosion and soil degradation, resulting in harvest depreciation, food crisis and deceleration in export community across the region.

ECOWAS members are limited by the challenge of economic diversification. According to the World Bank, majority of ECOWAS states operate a mono-economy substantially sustained by single commodity, making them vulnerable to fluctuation in global commodity price, inflation, fragile balance of trade and general economic volatility. This also cripples their economy, hinders projects funding capabilities and frustrates programs that are designed to galvanize the achievement of the organizational objectives.⁴⁹ Dichotomy in member states national economic policies has undermined trade accomplishments in the region. Example is the closure of the Nigerian-Benin land border, leading to regional market integration crisis. Lack of commitment by member states towards funding the organization is a major problem.⁵⁰ In some instances, foreign influence particularly from global powers and international organizations has determined ECOWAS economic trajectory. The influence of the EU, US, China, former colonial masters and their economic affinity with ECOWAS members affects the organization's capacity to prosecute independent regional agenda.⁵¹ Divergent colonial heritage and antecedents from France, Britain and Portugal has produced disharmonized economic policies and programs. For example, the CFA Franc used by former French colonies remains a point of contention particularly among the Anglophone countries that have historically been wary of French influence in West African affairs.⁵²

While the EU has a common currency (EURO) and an established custom union, ECOWAS proposed common currency (ECO) is inhibited due to macroeconomic instability and reservations from some

⁴⁶ K. Igbohor, *op. cit*

⁴⁷ F. Anderson, *op. cit*

⁴⁸ *ibid*

⁴⁹ Light Ray Media, *op. cit*

⁵⁰ R. Omeni, *op. cit*

⁵¹ P. Kazakchiang, *op. cit*

⁵² *ibid*

member states.⁵³ Corruption, financial mismanagement, resource misappropriation and frail institutional oversight are also among the factors undermining the organization. Others include natural and human resource endowment disparity and the lack of commitment towards the implementation of the regional economic blueprint. Disunity, polarized economic orientation and conflicting foreign policy alignments has created ideological deadlocks in ECOWAS. Francophone West African states retain formidable and seeming inextricable economic bond with France which sometimes conflict with ECOWAS objectives.⁵⁴

Political Challenges

The milestones recorded by ECOWAS are not without political debacles. Domestic political conflicts, military coup, the paradox of adherence to democratic ideologies, regional political disharmony and the disintegration of some countries from the bloc are among the political crisis bedeviling ECOWAS. For instance, in 2000 Mauritania withdrew from ECOWAS due to political and economic discrepancies and their preferred alliance with the Arab Maghreb Union. In 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger departed from ECOWAS on political and security considerations believing that their national sovereignty, economic interest and political posterity is better guaranteed outside ECOWAS.⁵⁵

ECOWAS major decision-making process is concentrated in the Authority of Heads of States and Government thereby sidelining other organs of the union like the Council of Ministers, ECOWAS parliament, ECOWAS Court, etc. By implication, critical decisions affecting regional economy, security and political stability are made without proper consultations. This is at the detriment of achieving the “ECOWAS of the People” vision, greater citizens’ participation and accountability. ECOWAS court faces the challenge of adherence to and enforcement of court judgment by member states. For instance, Nigeria failed to comply with the ruling involving the closure of opposition parties in 2019.⁵⁶

ECOWAS is challenged with technical deficiency in international diplomacy. The bloc is guilty of lopsided advocacy and adherence to democratic values and good governance principles. While ECOWAS rejected, imposed sanctions and threatened military action against the Junta in Niger, in many other instances, it accorded tacit and implicit encouragement to the violation of fundamental principles of democracy including rigging and fraudulent manipulation of electoral processes, illegal tenure elongation, sit-tight to power syndrome, sporadic constitutional amendment or replacement to legalize the protraction of their stay in political office and unconstitutional power transition. For example, the bloc took no steps to censure the recent spontaneous constitutional amendment in Togo which transfers the process of presidential elections from general polls (Universal Suffrage) to the legislature that is dominated by the ruling party, thereby consolidating the president’s resolve to elongate his stay in office indefinitely.⁵⁷

In Ivory Coast, the exclusion of prominent opposition figures like Charles Ble Goude, President of the Pan-African Congress for Justice and Equality of People and Tidjane Thiam, President of the

⁵³ F. Anderson, *op. cit*

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ P. Kazakchiang, *op. cit*

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ K. Avoulete, *op. cit*

Democratic Party of Cote d' Ivoire from the presidential elections in the country without intervention and resistance from ECOWAS reveals the organization's political fragility and frail loyalty to democratic norms. It also constitutes a threat to Ivorian's feeble democratic foundation as the country suffered post-election conflicts and outbreak of war in 2002 and 2011.⁵⁸ This institutional compromise made the organization to be perceived as a shelter for unscrupulous political elements. Also, the former Ivorian constitution through which President Alassane Ouattara of Ivory Coast came into power in 2011 placed a maximum age limit of 75 years for the country's presidents. However, in 2016, President Ouattara who was 74 years old then succeeded in getting the parliament to approve a constitutional amendment which eliminated the clause placing age limit for presidents. This change was described by civil society as undemocratic as opponents claim that the move will help retain Ouattara in power.⁵⁹ At the expiration of his second term in 2020, he sought a third term in office which he got till 2025. At the age of 83, he has now contested again and won for a fourth term in office as president. His fourth term victory is attributed to his overwhelming influence on the states' institutions.⁶⁰ Ouattara justifies his resolve to perpetrate his hold on power on grounds of alleged unprecedented security and economic challenges facing the country that requires experience and maturity to handle. This development did not elicit any censure or resistance from ECOWAS which further highlights the institutional weakness of the regional bloc and the frailty of the domestic political institutions of ECOWAS members.

Just like President Ouattar, President Alpha Conde of Guinea had changed Guinea's constitution to facilitate the elongation of his tenure which would have been illegal under the former constitution. This political manipulation was however disrupted by a military coup which ousted him from office in 2021. The development attracted the suspension of Guinea from ECOWAS membership and a rather unfortunate demand by ECOWAS for the reinstatement of President Conde, which was never headed.⁶¹

ECOWAS has also shown deficiency in maintaining regional cohesion and harmony. On 26th January 2025, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger formally renounced their membership of ECOWAS, accusing the organization of imposing inhuman punitive sanctions, issuing threat of invasion, lack of anti-terrorism collaboration and demonstration of overreaching tendencies. Their subsequent formation of the Liptako-Gourma Alliance⁶² or the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) spearheaded by military junta was inspired by the frustrations from the perceived failure of ECOWAS as the bloc is regarded as an obstacle rather than a reliable fraternity. The Sahelian states' preferred alignment with foreign partners like Russia and Turkey indicates their inclination to forge a new pathway for their political sovereignty and economic survival.⁶³ In addition to the mismanagement of the Malian 2020, Burkina Faso 2022 and the Niger 2023 coups, ECOWAS also appears incapable of handling complex and dynamic political intricacies within member states which ultimately undermines regional political stability.

ECOWAS has just recorded a more recent coup in Guinea-Bissau. After the country's presidential election held on 23rd November 2025, the incumbent President Umaro Sissoco Embalo who contested

⁵⁸ *ibid*

⁵⁹ BBC News. *Ivory Coast Parliament Approves New Constitution Draft*. 11/10/2016 www.bbc.com

⁶⁰ LethbridgeNews. *Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara Reelected to Forth Term, Early Results Show*. 27/10/2025 www.lethbridgehews.com

⁶¹ S. Samb. *West African Regional Bloc Suspends Guinea After Coup*. 9/9/2021. www.reuters.com

⁶² P. Kazakchiang, *op. cit*

⁶³ K. Avoulete, *op. cit*

alongside with Fernando Dias de Coasta both claimed electoral victory on 25th November while asserting that there will be no need for a second round. While the official election result was expected on 27th November, a group of military officers on 26th November deposed the sitting president. They announced the seizure of power and the suspension of the electoral process. They also announced the closure of air and land borders and imposed nationwide curfew. The military junta officially announced the formation of “The High Military Command for the Restoration of Order”, while expressing their decision to remain in power till further notice. In reaction, the Chairman of ECOWAS, Julius Maada Bio issued a statement unequivocally condemning the coup, calling it a “grave violation of Guinea-Bissau’s Constitutional Order” and warned that it constitutes a threat to regional stability.⁶⁴ This further reveal’s ECOWAS inability to instill democratic principles and resist unconstitutional change in government in the region.

The organization has equally been castigated for irresponsiveness to human rights violations. The ensuing human rights abuses in the Nigerian 2020 ENDSARS protest and the protest in Ghana and Senegal are instances where ECOWAS’ commitment to the rule of law, democratic values, fundamental and civil rights protection was questioned.⁶⁵ ECOWAS members struggle with implementing decisions due to national sovereignty concerns, domestic economic polarity and influence from foreign partners in developed countries. The organization is undermined by slow decision-making, bureaucratic bottleneck and the lack of political will by members to implement ratified treaties and policies due to sovereignty considerations and conflicting national interests.⁶⁶ ECOWAS suffers from disunity, polarized alignments and lack of cooperation from member towards the implementation of its resolutions. For instance, after the Ivorian Presidential election of 2010 and the ensuing political conflict in 2011, Ghana recognized incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo as winner against the position of ECOWAS which favoured the declared winner Alassane Outtara, for which reason Ghana refused to contribute troops for peacekeeping mission and the restoration of democratic order, while relying on the pretext that her military was overstretched as 500 soldiers were already on UN Mission in Ivory Coast.⁶⁷ This was further complicated by UN’s declaration against the deployment of force to unseat Gbagbo.⁶⁸ Several ECOWAS members also disassociated themselves from the threat of force for fear that military intervention could jeopardize the safety of their citizens in Ivory Coast and considering that military enforcement of election result could establish an unfavourable precedent in a region where the democratic process of presidential elections in many countries in questionable.⁶⁹

Security Challenges

Security threat is currently a major challenge in the ECOWAS region. The Sahel region which includes several ECOWAS countries is now one of the most insecure regions in the world. Terrorism, insurgency and transnational organized crimes pose significant danger to ECOWAS regional

⁶⁴ M. Hallam. *West-Africa Bloc ECOWAS Condemns Guinea-Bissau Coup*. 27/11/2025. www.dw.com

⁶⁵ R. Omeni, *op. cit*

⁶⁶ F. Anderson, *op. cit*

⁶⁷ C. Twala, *et.al. The Role of Regional Continental and International Organizations in Solving the Ivorian Crisis: Gains and Challenges*. 2014. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Science*. Vol. 5, No.27

⁶⁸ K. Apuuli, *The African Union’s Notion of African Solution to African Problems and the Crisis in Cote d’Ivoire* (2010-2011) and Libya (2011). Accessed 10/11/2015 www.ajol.info

⁶⁹ G. Yabi, *Keeping the Peace in Electoral Conflicts: The Role of ECOWAS, UNOCI and the International Community in Ivory Coast*. Oct. 2012 www.zif_berlin.org

security.⁷⁰ Lack of anti-terrorism collaboration is one of the reasons cited by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger for their withdrawal from ECOWAS. The establishment of the ASS by these three countries further poses fresh security threat to ECOWAS. A region that once enjoyed collective security with mutual trust and solidarity now has two lateral and mutually antagonistic blocs with parallel political ideologies. This can potentially culminate in political conflicts, insecurity aggravation, humanitarian crises, economic disintegration,⁷¹ social tension, hostilities and aggressions. The emergence of ASS is a significant threat to the existence and survival of ECOWAS.⁷² The development undermines the relevance of the union, punctures its capacity to maintain regional cohesion and affinity as well as inspires the propensity for similar disintegrations from other member states.

The civil war in Liberia 1989 and Sierra Leone 1991 led to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, increase of refugees, infiltration of rebels across borders, widespread humanitarian crisis and insecurity in West Africa.⁷³ Nigeria that has been the economic and military backbone of ECOWAS is currently experiencing unprecedented security challenges with the resurgence of various armed groups including ISWAP insurgents, Boko Haram terrorists, bandits, Lakurawa militants, Fulani herders etc. These criminals perpetrate trans-boundary and trans-national terrorism. They leverage on local support and international collaborations for sponsorship and supply of ammunitions. Their strategies include carnage, arson, damage to property, abduction, ransom extortion, etc. Their targeted attacks and killing of Christians who are among their victims led to the re-designation of Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” by the US President, Donald Trump on 31st October 2025.⁷⁴ Some of these terrorist groups like ISWAP and Boko Haram also operate in other West African countries like Niger, Mali Burkina Faso. This does not only undermine Nigeria’s capacity to maintain full support for ECOWAS; it also constitutes huge security threat to ECOWAS as such criminal network and operations may continue to spread across the region.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

ECOWAS has encountered difficulties while striving to achieve its goal of ‘ECOWAS of the People: Peace and Prosperity to All’ by 2050.⁷⁵ International organizations are a reflection of the internal dynamics and capacity of their members. Just like other regional institutions, ECOWAS can only be as formidable or as feeble as its component member countries. The capacity of ECOWAS to achieve its objectives and maintain its relevance is predicated on the domestic economic and political potency of ECOWAS members and the extent of their commitment to the success of the union. As long as there is prevalence of failure of governance, economic defectiveness, low productivity, infrastructural decay, lack of commitment to democratic principles, lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law, weak institutional framework, political instability, corruption, insecurity, poverty and general socio-economic underdevelopment within ECOWAS countries, achieving the collective objectives of ECOWAS will remain a mirage. It is an undisputed phenomenon that ECOWAS has robust objectives that has the potentiality of triggering economic revolution and socio-political development and integration of West Africa. However, the realization of these objectives appears elusive. The vitality of ECOWAS is predicated on the viability of its component units comprising of sovereign states.

⁷⁰ Light Ray Media, *op. cit*

⁷¹ B. Ndiaye, *op. cit*

⁷² K. Avoulete, *op. cit*

⁷³ B. Ndiaye, *op. cit*

⁷⁴ O. Amaize, *With Trump’s Threat of Military Intervention in Nigeria, Tinubu Faces a Delicate Balancing Act*. 5/11/2025 www.atlanticcouncil.org

⁷⁵ F. Anderson, *op. cit*

To derive optimal result in the achievement of its collective objectives and policies, ECOWAS members must establish and maintain vibrant national institutional framework that are actively superior to the citizens and are not susceptible to the whims and caprices of individuals in their countries. They must develop national wealth and promote economic prosperity by harnessing their national economic resources efficiently, judiciously and equitably to improve their national economic welfare and boost their financial capacity to support and promote the agenda and goals of ECOWAS. They must build vibrant infrastructural base, support productivity, industrialization, job creation and employment.

The prevalence of coup and military takeover of government in the region is predominantly a natural consequence of bad governance, failure of democracy and weak institutions, rigging and manipulation of electoral processes, sit-tight to power syndrome, impulsive constitutional change or amendment to facilitate protracted hold on power, unconstitutional power transition and illegal tenure elongation. Consequently, ECOWAS states must give priority to good governance and political stability by providing optimum democratic dividends to the people. They must demonstrate unreserved commitment to uphold and protect democratic principles, the rule of law, guarantee of human rights and the conduct of free, credible and transparent elections. They must eradicate corruption, eliminate insecurity and alleviate poverty.

At the regional level, ECOWAS members must exhibit maximum commitment and deploy the requisite political will towards the implementation of ECOWAS collective objectives, policies and programmes. They must demonstrate loyalty and solidarity to regional economic collaboration and socio-political advancement devoid of the corrosive influence of foreign or colonial affiliation and national parochial interests. They must show accountability and responsibility in the management of the affairs of the organization. They must prioritize regional development and integration.

The disintegration of some countries from the regional bloc is the natural corollary of gross deficiency in international relations, poor cordiality, cooperation and coordination by members and insensitivity to the peculiar plights of disintegrating countries by ECOWAS. For instance, following the 2023 military takeover of government in Niger, ECOWAS reacted by imposing sanctions against Niger while issuing an ultimatum prescribing specific time frame within which power must be returned to the deposed president Mohamed Bazoum. ECOWAS further threatened military operations to restore democratic order in the country in the event of failure of the junta to comply. However, such response by ECOWAS was regarded by the junta in Niger as an absolute insensitivity to the internal unique challenges of the country. This prompted a solidarity reaction from Mali and Burkina Faso who pledged to support and defend Niger against any military onslaught from ECOWAS. ECOWAS responded by suspending the three countries from the bloc. The suspension culminated in the formal disintegration of the three countries from ECOWAS in January 2025 and the formation of a new bloc, the ASS, which is now a political and security threat to ECOWAS.

Consequently, ECOWAS must build capacity for international diplomacy and dialogue engagement. The organization must also develop mediation intelligence and negotiations dexterity. This will boost its efficiency in conflicts management, peace building and disputes resolution. The pursuit of ECOWAS common vision must be treated by its member states as a collective responsibility irrespective of divergent orientations, sovereignty concerns and national sentiments.