

ECOWAS AND THE CHALLENGES OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION: AN ASSESSMENT OF NIGERIA'S HEGEMONIC ROLE

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Abstract

Recently, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) lost three of its founding members, which had devastating implications for the effective performance of the regional institution. The efforts of Nigeria, a major player in the region, to strengthen and provide direction have not yielded the desired results, as the influence of the regional body continues to diminish. Therefore, this study examined Nigeria's role in mitigating the contemporary challenges facing the regional body. The study elicited data from existing sources to better understand the problems. The study found that the lack of a central authority to enforce rules and regulations has hindered the effectiveness of the regional body. Study findings also show that external interference in the politics of the region has weakened the effectiveness of the body. Furthermore, results revealed that Nigeria's domestic challenges have worsened the problems of the regional international institution.

Introduction

Nigeria played a crucial role in the diplomatic negotiations leading to the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975. Nigeria's significance to the organization's continued existence is evident in its contributions to funding, military resources, and leadership development (Okoro, 2005). Since its inception, ECOWAS has faced and overcome a range of political, economic, and security challenges (Linzer, 2020), establishing it as a leading regional international institution globally. Among many, the regional body was instrumental in the restoration of peace and order in some troubled parts of West Africa.

Importantly, the inability of states to deal with domestic problems alone and those that cut across national boundaries gave rise to the idea of cooperation and interdependence among states in the international system. Global cooperation and unity are the key to international peace, security, and prosperity. Therefore, the concept of regional integration is closely intertwined with international relations, particularly in the context of contemporary global politics (Aubyn, 2021; Malangwa, 2021). In this framework, regional integration is often viewed as a mechanism to balance power, allowing weaker states to enhance their capabilities by aligning with stronger nations. Through such alliances, states can reduce their vulnerability to external threats by leveraging the protection and influence of more powerful entities. Onapajo and Babalola (2024) deduced that Nigeria has been

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indispensable to ECOWAS, providing critical leadership and support since the organization's formation. This leadership provision has been fundamental in shaping the direction of regional cooperation and governance in the West African states.

From an economic perspective, states subscribe to regional integration primarily to derive economic benefits and establish common grounds, such as developing a most-favored national status. Powell (2022) posited that bloc economic integration is fundamentally concerned with eliminating tariffs and border barriers and facilitating the free movement of goods and people among member states, which was a key motive for ECOWAS. Regional integration serves multiple functions beyond economics, including the pursuit of political stability, environmental cooperation, cultural ties, and educational and humanitarian support. These varied objectives have led to the establishment of Economic and Monetary Unions, Common Markets, Customs Unions, and Multilateral Free Trade Areas (Hoiye, 2023). Regional integration is thus perceived as a critical remedy for economic isolationism, democratic regression, and security challenges because of its emphasis on collaboration and mutual support.

Moreover, regional integration involves a formal agreement among states to enhance cooperation by establishing regional institutions and regulatory frameworks. In the case of ECOWAS, these institutions are governed by specific rules and regulations that guide their operations. However, one of the major challenges in regional integration is the absence of a centralized authority or enforcement mechanism to ensure compliance with these regulations. Realist scholars often highlight this issue because the lack of enforcement undermines the effectiveness of international agreements. Maersheimer (2001) argued that states are often selective in their adherence to international rules, complying only when such regulations align with their national interests. When conflicts arise between international obligations and domestic priorities, states may choose to disregard the established rules.

The basic assumption underlying regional cooperation is the belief that cooperation can bring greater prosperity than individual action (Godo, 2021). It is a crucial element in the international strategy for development for both developed and developing countries. The United Nations recognized the importance of regional cooperation as a form of developmental strategy, and hence the establishment of special commissions. Malangwa (2021) opines that regional cooperation reflects a level of collective agreement and solidarity among states in a given geopolitical entity in matters of trade, capital, labor flows, foreign direct investment, and integrated policies in the common interest. Such areas may include democracy, environment, climate change, cross-border migration, and international criminal activities.

Kundani (2011) argued for the necessity of a country that will exercise power/leadership that will give direction and advance the cause of the region. For instance, after its reunification in 1990, Germany became a strong force in the unification of European countries. Katzeustein (1997) notes that Germany has transformed its political, institutional, military, and economic might into what is possibly a form of regional hegemony. For example, the outbreak of the Euro crisis and the need for a joint response to ensure the very survival of the European integration project provided an opportunity for Germany and Chancellor Merkel's government to assert clear leadership in defining EU policies and its political evolution, whether in the areas of EMU or the relationship with Russia, among others (Harnish, 2017). Merkel has been considered the *de facto* leader of the European integration project, even though she has often been opposed by other member states. Germany was thus now considered an 'indispensable' member state of the EU, promoting its national interests while holding the EU together, by exercising its power in the EU during the multifaceted crises that plagued Europe in the years after 2009, Harnisch (2017).

The Russia-Crimea conflicts greatly exposed the potential of German power in the EU. Similarly, the United States of America (USA) embraced a leading role in establishing the Organization of the American States (OAS). The international regional organization was formed in 1948 with the fundamental aim of political, economic, and military cooperation among American countries. The United States has demonstrated its leadership in ensuring regional integration and stability through the OAS.

Studies have revealed that both Germany and the United States have exhibited significant leadership and power within their respective spheres of influence (Ferguson, 2003). However, the same cannot be definitively stated for Nigeria in the contemporary context of West Africa. Nigeria's power lies at the intersection of soft and hard power, underpinned by its abundant natural resources, robust military capabilities, and large population. These attributes have conferred Nigeria a dominant status within the West African sub-region. In recent years, ECOWAS, with Nigeria playing a key role, has successfully intervened in political crises in countries such as The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. However, the recurrence of unconstitutional transfers of power in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso raises questions regarding the role of Nigeria in the region. There is an urgent need to reassess Nigeria's capacity and effectiveness in maintaining regional stability within the region. Therefore, this study aims to interrogate how Nigeria, as a major supporter of the regional institution, has fared.

Hegemony: A literature exposition

In his remark, Perry Anderson (2017) on the historical evolution of the concept of "hegemony", begins that few terms are used so widely in the International Relations literature and political science, with so little agreement on its exact meaning, as hegemony. It now suggests that hegemony, like other social science concepts, lacks a universal meaning, but of primary importance concerning the study is the cardinal assumption of the concept.

In international relations parlance, hegemony, according to Kindleberger (1981), can be conceptualized as one state's dominant influence over others; the term "dominance" is typically interpreted to indicate the greatest ascendancy, importance, authority or force in its lexicographic sense. Therefore, hegemony refers to a state of international relations, a circumstance, or an event when one state gains dominance over others and chooses to use that authority to run the global system (Keohane, 1980). According to the terminology of the idea of hegemonic stability, for instance, the hegemon, or preponderant power, controls the global political system by enacting laws that provide order and stability (Kudani, 2011). Therefore, the hegemon administers rewards and penalties to uphold the specified rules. By promising cooperation, co-opting partners and giving communal goods up to the point of their self-interest, compliant conduct is incited.

However, Krippahi (2023) stated that the hegemon also retains the capacity and readiness to use force in response to disobedience. Others give their voluntary cooperation, or acquiescence with the hegemon's aims, in return for benefits, out of fear of punishment, or because of ideological affinity. Hegemony and empire are distinguished by the voluntary cooperation of subjects. When hegemony is in place, it is preferable to consider subordinate elites as partners rather than subjects. Those who believe that the theory of hegemonic stability can be analytically useful argue that during the 19th century, Great Britain was the world's hegemon, and in the two decades that followed the Second World War, the United States took on this role (Kundani, 2011).

Thus, global hegemony is viewed as the rise of a historical bloc or cross-border alliance of classes and forces that control and exercise disproportionate power, support and encourage specific types of political, economic, and social institutions, and have shared ideological beliefs that are thought to be universal. Ultimately, scholars connect concepts of past blocs and hegemony to the creation and operation of global bodies, which are viewed as instruments by which general norms of a world hegemony are expressed (Ferguson, 2003).

In both academic and non-academic literature, the concept of "hegemony" as it pertains to Nigeria's role within ECOWAS is most often framed through the lens of Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). This theory, initially propounded and popularized by economist Charles Kindleberger (1981), posits that a hegemonic leader is a state sufficiently powerful to bear the costs of cooperation and shape the rules governing multilateral institutions. Within this framework, the hegemon maintains order and stability in the international system. International relations scholars, such as Keohane (1980), have further expanded on this theory, arguing that a hegemonic power not only maintains stability but also creates conditions conducive to the development of strong international institutions.

Keohane exposes the central assertion of HST as one in which hegemonic power structures, dominated by a state, are more conducive to the development of strong international regimes, whose roles are relatively precise and well obeyed, which could be a possible description for the current system functioning of the ECOWAS with Nigeria as the dominant state of the bloc.

According to the HST, Kindleberger (1981) argued that for the dominant state to function as a hegemon would guarantee the availability of political and economic benefits for the entire system, as noticeable in Nigeria as the single largest donor to ECOWAS in terms of finance and military. The so-called 'public goods' include the reduction of transaction costs, the establishment of credible commitments, the facilitation of collective action, the creation of focal points, and monitoring. The provision of this hegemonic role would ensure the stability of all states in the system, even as the hegemonic state itself benefits from its predominance in the system, with leadership out of self-interest.

Contemporary regional instability: From a Nigerian perspective

Since its involvement in the political crises in São Tomé and Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria has consistently assumed the role of "big brother" in Africa, serving as the principal financial and troop contributor to the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Lewis, 1996). Onapajo and Babalola (2024) confirmed that Nigeria has been repeatedly called upon to mediate and resolve political conflicts in West Africa. Recognizing its strength in terms of military, population, and financial chest and that its political stability is intrinsically linked to that of its neighboring countries, the Nigerian federal government has strategically prioritized these nations in its foreign policy agenda (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

The Nigerian government began to take a particular interest in the internal affairs of its neighbors to prevent hostile forces from overthrowing governments that were friendly to Nigeria. This scenario, however, informed the Nigerian government of ECOWAS as a platform to strengthen sub-regional democratic growth and consolidation. Nigeria, through ECOWAS, has forced recalcitrant military juntas that took over power from civilians through unconstitutional means to restore power unconditionally (Yusuf, 2021). This action demonstrated the country's leadership role in ensuring regional political stability. In addition, frequent military coups could have a ripple effect in the region, making the autocratic system perhaps enticing other fragile and unstable democratic states in the region.

Undoubtedly, Nigeria has received a global commendation for championing regional democratic stability. For instance, Yusuf (2021) observes that Francophone African countries have repeatedly experienced military takeovers and unlawful changes of government. Regrettably, the attitude of political leaders treated the Constitution with disdain, with an unholy desire for Constitutional amendment to keep themselves perpetually in power against popular support, has served as one of the reasons for the surge in military takeovers. Because of this, Nigeria has remained critical of the unlawful alternation of power in West Africa. For example, in 2016,

Nigeria was instrumental to the restoration of constitutional democracy in the Gambia, when incumbent President Yahaya Jammeh lost in the presidential election of the year but felt reluctant to accept defeat.

Continuing, Malangwa (2021) lamented that the Gambian presidential election of 2016 marked the first transfer of power through popular elections since the country gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1965. Opposition candidate Adama Boro defeated long-term incumbent Yahaya Jammeh. Jammeh initially conceded defeat and congratulated the winner, Adama Boro. In a twist of events, Jammeh announced he was rejecting the election and called for a new election, thereby sparking a constitutional crisis in the country (Malangwa, 2021). The then Nigerian president constituted a high-powered diplomatic delegation to negotiate with Yahaya Jammeh to ensure the unconditional transmission of power to the winner of the presidential election, and the effort yielded the intended result.

In a related development, in March 2020, President Conde of Guinea Conakry pushed through a new constitution that allowed him tenure elongation; expectedly, the military came in December of that year to oust him from office. Similarly, that same year, Ivorian president Alassane Ouattara also secured a controversial third term in office after he won the October 2016 presidential election, which the opposition boycotted. Yusuf (2021) notes that Nigeria played a significant role in both situations, preventing internal political crises in those countries. In summary, illegal tenure elongation has been noted as a way for military takeovers in the West Africa subregion, which Nigeria, through ECOWAS, has strongly opposed.

Historically, West African nations have been among the most politically unstable countries on the African continent (Malangwa, 2021). Many of these governments have demonstrated limited commitment to maintaining electoral systems that permit the coexistence of multiple political parties, a necessary condition for democratic competition. Political parties, by vying for voter support, introduce transparency to otherwise closed political systems, compelling parties to articulate detailed policy platforms. In contrast, under the one-party systems prevalent in many African nations, political abuses, including incarcerations, disappearances, house arrests, forced exiles, and even fatalities, might have been mitigated had alternative political parties been allowed to operate (Bamfo, 2013).

Malangwa (2021) regrets that these hopes were never fulfilled since governments were unable to secure financial support from donors to carry out development programs, which severely damaged public confidence in the government's capacity to address future problems. Leaders sought to maintain their hold on power but were also concerned that voters' low hopes might cost them elections. To this end, they explored ways to destroy political rivalry by removing the clause in the constitution that permitted a multiparty political system.

Hoiye (2023) highlighted expectations in African independent nations for their governments to modernize their countries and improve living standards by providing essential services such as clean water, healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Additionally, governments are expected to address public health concerns, including the spread of infectious diseases. These aspirations were among the driving factors behind the establishment of ECOWAS, which sought to promote economic cooperation and stability across West Africa. Historically, Nigeria has played a pivotal role in providing economic assistance to member states struggling with internal political instability. Political instability, in turn, often precipitates economic crises, underscoring the interconnectedness of governance and economic development within a region.

ECOWAS: a literature review of the mandate

The establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) represents a key trend in the modern world toward regional economic integration. As Anyatonwu (1982) argued, the global movement toward regional economic bodies underscores the reality that no nation, regardless of its resources, can achieve economic

isolationism. In other words, there is a growing consensus among West African states that economic cooperation through regional integration enhances the overall economic stability of the subregion, addresses some of the individual economic challenges faced by member states, and promotes the general welfare of their populations. Despite persistent opposition from political leaders who were reluctant to cede even minimal national sovereignty to a supranational authority, the necessity for regional cooperation eventually led to the formation of ECOWAS. Economically, West Africa remains plagued by widespread poverty, largely attributed to the prevalence of weak institutions that promote corruption and ineptitude. This institutional weakness has stymied efforts to advance regional economic integration, such as the West African Monetary Union, which aims to reduce transaction costs and facilitate cross-border trade and investments. Similarly, the ambitious goal of establishing a continental monetary union by 2023, as outlined in the Abuja Treaty of 1991, remains elusive because of persistent political and economic barriers.

Furthermore, during its formative years, the regional international body promoted economic cooperation and prosperity and addressed persistent cases of poverty and humanitarian challenges. Dominant nations within the sub-region were strongly committed to this motive regarding robust donations and aid to the less fortunate and war-ridden countries (Malangwa, 2023). To meet the burgeoning desire for a happy and prosperous sub-region, trade tariffs were removed, and heads of government deliberately ensured the free movement of goods and services. The fundamental objectives of ECOWAS are not only to build an economic community within its member states but also to improve the living standards of its citizens.

In addition, Nwangwu, Enyiazu, Nwagwu, et al (2019) argued that the region's low level of intraregional trade has persisted. Additionally, throughout the previous 25 years, intraregional commerce in West Africa has been stable, ranging from 11% to 15%.52 %. It follows that ECOWAS has not been able to increase intra-West African commerce. In fact, between 2010 and 2016, 48% of ECOWAS's food exports and 43% of its agricultural exports were taken up by the EU. On the other hand, Eurostat data show that between 2010 and 2017, the share of EU exports traded within the EU ranged from 69% to 85%. The ECOWAS countries suffer from overreliance on China and the EU for imports. For example, civil society organizations in Nigeria accuse Chinese imports of being responsible for the loss of several jobs.

However, the leader of the regional economic bloc said that certain factors have limited the attainment of the set goal of ECOWAS, an internal political crisis occasioned by an unlawful change of government. Unfortunately, the recent development is at variance with the economic goals of ECOWAS. Recently, it was noted that an estimated 20 million people from the subregion needed immediate humanitarian assistance (Stronski, 2023). This occurred immediately after strategic efforts to increase economic prosperity throughout the sub-region were revealed by ECOWAS and other stakeholders. It is often argued that most of the political crisis that have plagued the bloc was a result of poverty and the government's inability to solve the myriad challenges confronting citizens. These unresolved challenges have further challenged the dominant role of Nigeria as a regional institution.

Regional security problem

In general, security is a notion that permeates all aspects of human existence, from the minute micro to the largest macro, national, and worldwide levels. As a result, one can view security from various perspectives, such as national, international, local, and personal. Other forms of security include food, financial, psychological, and physical security. In essence, security refers to the absence of or defense against a specific type of threat, which may be financial, psychological, or physical. In contrast, vulnerability to any of these dangers is implied by insecurity. Ogwu (2008) posited that security is important at all levels, whether personal, national, or regional. Without security, people in a state will find it difficult to engage in productive activities, and the state will find it

difficult to use its resources, both human and material, toward meaningful development and the advancement of the general well-being of the populace.

Ogwu (2008) conceptualized the term ‘the military and physical defense of the state or regime’ to define national security broadly as all factors that contribute to the safety, well-being, and prosperity of a country and its people. The notion of regional security, however, originated from the shared interests that underpin regional cooperation and integration. It is a perception that member states of a certain geopolitical region have shared tangible and intangible interests that, in the event of a threat or actual assault, would, to varying degrees, impact the region’s ability to enjoy peace and carry on with daily activities (Ogwu, 2008). Thus, regional arrangements are concerned with, or formed to maintain, peace and security inside their region, just as individual states are concerned with the preservation of law and order and the maintenance of peace and security within their boundaries. The remainder of this section embraces this expansive definition of regional security, which encompasses all variables that may impact the security, prosperity, and well-being of West African nations and their citizens.

Many regional organizations are established with the broader aim of fostering social, economic, and political development. However, some, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are primarily designed to address regional security concerns or serve as platforms for defense cooperation. These organizations are often compelled to implement security measures to address peace and security-related challenges, as maintaining a stable and peaceful environment is critical to achieving wider development goals (Anyatonwu, 1982). This dynamic is evident in ECOWAS, which, after decades of limited success in advancing economic integration, recognized the need to prioritize peace and security. The institution has acknowledged that these issues were historically overlooked on its agenda, but the growing frequency of crises in the region necessitated a shift in focus. Ogwu (2008) underscored the severe security challenges faced by ECOWAS, ranging from trans-border crimes to the pervasive threat of terrorism, which have significantly hindered the organization’s efforts to promote regional stability.

The idea of regional security has grown in importance in the post-Cold War era as a mechanism for regional integration and organization. Regional security must be taken into consideration at the outset, or some point, of regional integration because economic and political cooperation, development, and security cannot be attained in conflict- and insecurity-ridden environments. In keeping with the spirit of the Charter, the UN has acknowledged that achieving global peace and security is heavily dependent on regional security. Consequently, the UN supports regional organizations’ efforts to address conflict and security issues within their respective regions. For example, the UN has supported autonomous regional security.

With UN approval and the recommendation of an independent regional security network, as it stands, ECOWAS has not fared better in this regard. An assessment of the multilateral security task force seems to have succumbed to the overwhelming power of the terrorist and jihadist groups within the West African corridors, notably Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The failure of the regional body to overcome and neutralize the threat of these non-state actors’ violent groups has become a major reason(s) and argument behind the actions and decisions of the military junta’s claim of holding on to power. Nigeria, the dominant powerhouse in the region, has an ugly tale of internal security threats occasioned by the activities of the Boko-haram terrorist group.

ECOWAS has developed several high-powered collective military joint forces, but with limited success. Akanji (2019) concluded that ECOWAS created the Sahel strategy to address cross-border terrorism and developmental issues in the region. Specifically, ECOWAS showed interest in the problems facing the Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania. However, the ECOWAS Sahel strategy has not been effective, as terrorist threats in the region have persisted. As a result, the Group of Five Sahel States (the G5 Sahel) formed

the G5 Sahel Force, also called *Force conjointe du G5 Sahel*, or simply "FC-G5S," a cross-border joint military force endorsed by the UN and the AU to combat transnational organized crime and terrorism. This security initiative was devised by the five countries of the Sahel as a way of thinking outside the box and proposing solutions to their unabating security problems. The West African sub-region has remained one of the most significant security complexes in Africa since the 1990s, constituting major challenges to realizing the objectives of ECOWAS.

Failed sanction and final exit of the three Sahel states

Apart from the security and economic crisis that is plaguing the region, the stability of regional integration has been further jeopardized by recent military coups in three West African countries. In July 2023, Niger experienced a coup, following similar disruptions of democratic governance in Burkina Faso in 2022 and Mali in 2020. In response to these unconstitutional seizures of power, ECOWAS swiftly issued a directive demanding immediate restoration of civilian rule in the affected francophone countries (Malangwa, 2021). To enforce this mandate, ECOWAS, under the leadership of Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, imposed a series of economic and diplomatic sanctions designed to pressure the juntas into compliance with democratic principles. Despite these punitive measures, the military leaders remained defiant with devastating consequences for their citizens, who now face severe hardship, poverty, and widespread malnutrition as a direct result of the junta's actions.

Similarly, more crucially, significant political decisions have been made at the regional level, but when it comes to implementing decisions decided upon regionally at the national level, there is a noticeable lack of political will. There is a notable difference between national implementation and localized rhetoric. National governments are still in charge of conducting the policies that regional organizations mostly deal with. Nonetheless, many member states simultaneously advocate for regional integration and are hypocritically clinging to their national sovereignty. The harmonization of national laws and policies within a supranational framework is hampered by this paradox.

Furthermore, in West Africa, there is often a lack of consistency between election seasons. In an attempt to carve out individuality and set their governments apart from those of their predecessors, recently elected politicians frequently resign from posts that have already been created. As a result, national legislation, regulations, and procedures frequently do not complement regional practices, and there is a general lack of enforcement and consistency. This situation has thus been linked to several factors, including a lack of institutional capacity at the regional level, strong institutional linkages at the national level, genuine political commitment to the regional integration process, and a lack of mechanisms for prioritizing policies.

Nigeria, a supposedly hegemon of the bloc, was unable to sway the juntas to reconsider their stand and see reasons for democratic governance for the bloc's political stability. After the deployment of sanctions, mainly suspension from ECOWAS, border closure, and cutting off electricity supply to the neighboring country of Niger, among others, the military warlords remained undeterred (Krippahi, 2023).

The crisis deepened when Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger unexpectedly announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS, despite their status as founding members of the organization. This decision has significantly challenged Nigeria's hegemonic role and influence within the region (Aubyn, 2022). The withdrawal of these states highlights the declining leadership of Nigeria within ECOWAS, a nation that prides itself as the "Giant of Africa." Nigeria now appears to struggle to maintain its leadership position and manage the democratic backsliding occurring across the sub-region.

Nigeria is known to be a formidable pillar in West Africa in terms of military support to troubled states and the granting of economic aid and incentives to economically challenged countries. For instance, the formation of the

Ecogas Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in the early 1990s was championed by the Nigerian government. The group recorded many successes within the bloc as it resolved internal political instability in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Nigeria, the largest contributor to ECOMOG in terms of finance and military personnel, stamped its feet on the ground to ensure bloc stability. Order was eventually restored to the troubled West African countries, kudos to the support that came mostly from Nigeria and other member states.

In defence of their decision to withdraw from ECOWAS, the three governments said it was informed by the fact that the bloc had shifted from its foundational ethos and pro-Africanism. The three military rulers further argued that ECOWAS was strongly under the control and influence of international powers, betraying its founding principles, and had become a threat to member states and people. The bloc failed to help them tackle jihadist violence in their countries (Malangwa, 2023).

Malangwa (2023) argued that the gaps identified by the three military rulers still put the leadership role of Nigeria in the region into question. Despite the insistence of ECOWAS to pacify the countries on the necessity to return to democratic rule, all the admonitions fell on deaf ears. The three military leaders contended that they wanted to restore security before organizing elections as they struggled to contain jihadist insurgencies linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Burkina Faso military ruler Capt. Ibrahim Traore pledged to restore the country to a civilian government after seizing power nearly two years ago. In a twist of events, he flagrantly announced in May 2024 that he would extend his rule for another five years after a national consultation meeting in the West African country's capital city, Ouagadougou, thereby making negotiation and dialogue futile.

The Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) that the three military leaders created in November 2023 was seen by both local and international observers as an attempt to legalize their military government, seek security collaborations, and become increasingly autonomous of ECOWAS. The three countries have severed ties with France and turned to Russia for military, economic, and technological support. The recent final withdrawal of the states from ECOWAS has further put to question the leadership role of Nigeria in maintaining unity and stability within the West Africa corridor. This, however, is without prejudice to the age-long support given to the regional international institution by the Nigerian government.

Conclusion

This study examined Nigeria's leadership role in stabilizing ECOWAS while acknowledging the region's continued struggles with democratic backsliding and security issues. Findings reveal that close to two-thirds of ECOWAS member states are classified as less than fully democratic, with high levels of political corruption worsening governance effectiveness.

Due to Nigeria's internal security challenges, ECOWAS's ability to manage conflict has been severely weakened. Without the logistical and financial capacity to deploy military forces, ECOWAS is ineffective in managing regional crises. Political stability is crucial for economic prosperity; thus, this study recommends strengthening of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to prevent unconstitutional power changes. Nigeria must also take proactive measures to resolve its domestic security problems and ensure and stand above board politically for the purpose of maintaining its leadership role within the region.

By addressing these internal challenges, Nigeria can provide the required leadership necessary to uphold ECOWAS's foundational goals and ensure political and economic stability across West Africa.

Declaration of interest:

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The authors are solely responsible for the content and writing of this paper.

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