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Regional Responses to Democratic Backsliding and Military Coups in West Africa.

Peter Luke Oyigebe[1]*, Hassan Garba Inuwa[1] and Abuh Mary Iyeh[1]

[1] Department of Political Science, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria; peter.oyigebe@fulokoja.edu.ng; https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4904-1962
[2] Department of Political Science, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria; hassan.inuwa@fulokoja.edu.ng

* Correspondence: peter.oyigebe@fulokoja.edu.ng

Abstract

West Africa has become the continent's main site of unconstitutional changes of government, yet regional responses to democratic backsliding and military coups remain uneven and weakly theorized. This study examines how the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), working with the African Union (AU), has responded to democratic backsliding and military coups, how consistent those responses have been, and how far they address both the democratic roots of the crises and their regional security consequences. It uses qualitative documentary analysis of official communiqués, institutional reports, scholarly literature and news analyses covering 2019 to early 2026, comparing Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger, with The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau and Niger's 2010 coup as supplementary contrasts. Democratic Peace Theory and Regional Security Complex Theory are combined in a single framework with explicit indicators. The findings show that ECOWAS is stronger on norms than on consistency. It answers coups with suspension, mediation and sanctions but has said little about gradual constitutional manipulation by civilian incumbents; the severity of its measures varied across cases; no coup in the four core cases was reversed; and the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in January 2025 exposed the limits of its leverage. The study contributes an operationalized, integrated framework and a comparative account linking domestic democratic erosion to regional security spillover. It identifies early warning, targeted sanctions and even-handed norm enforcement as priorities.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; military coups; unconstitutional change of government; ECOWAS; Democratic Peace Theory; Regional Security Complex Theory; West Africa

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century West Africa has experienced significant democratic advances. The wave of multiparty transitions that began in the early 1990s produced competitive elections, independent media and the growing influence of regional institutions in promoting democratic norms (Diamond, 2015). In the past decade, however, these gains have come under sustained pressure. Military coups and constitutional manipulations have re-emerged across the Sahel and the wider sub-region, raising serious questions about the durability of democratic rule and the capacity of regional organizations to defend it.

Mali experienced successful military takeovers in August 2020 and May 2021. Guinea followed in September 2021. Burkina Faso recorded two coups within nine months in 2022, and Niger joined the list in July 2023. In November 2025 soldiers also seized power in Guinea-Bissau, days after a general election. These events form part of a broader continental pattern in which West Africa accounts for a disproportionate share of successful coups (Melly, 2023). ECOWAS, established in 1975 primarily for economic integration, has progressively expanded its mandate to include peace, security and the defense of democratic governance. Through instruments such as the 1991 Declaration of Political Principles, the 1999 Mechanism Protocol and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, it has positioned itself as a principal guardian of constitutional order in the sub-region (Adebajo, 2002).

The recent wave of coups has tested the credibility, coherence and political will of ECOWAS more severely than any previous crisis. Sanctions, diplomatic pressure and the threat of force have produced uneven results. Military authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger consolidated power, diversified their external partnerships, formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and withdrew from ECOWAS with effect from 29 January 2025 (AFP, 2025).

ECOWAS responses to coups, its role as a regional security regulator and democratic backsliding have each received considerable scholarly attention, including studies of earlier crises in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and The Gambia, and more recent work on the coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger. Two gaps remain. First, the democratic dimension (defense of constitutional rule) and the security dimension (regional spread of instability) are seldom analyzed within one framework. Second, gradual backsliding and military coups are often treated as interchangeable, although a regional body may have very different reasons and capacities for responding to each. The research problem is that ECOWAS possesses an extensive normative framework yet an inconsistent record of enforcement, and the reasons for that inconsistency have not been systematically explained.

The aim of the study is to analyze how regional institutions, principally ECOWAS with the AU, have responded to democratic backsliding and military coups in West Africa, and to assess how far those responses address both the immediate unconstitutional change of government and its wider regional security implications. It is guided by three research questions: What forms of response have ECOWAS and the AU adopted toward democratic backsliding and military coups in West Africa since 2020, and what rationale lay behind them; To what extent have those responses been consistent, both across coup cases and between gradual backsliding and outright military seizure of power? How far have the responses addressed the democratic conditions that preceded the coups and the regional security spillover that followed them?

The article adds to existing knowledge in three ways. First, it integrates the democratic and security dimensions of regional response. Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) explains why constitutional governance and civilian control matter, and Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) explains why domestic breakdown becomes a regional concern; both are translated into observable indicators (Section 4). Second, it offers a systematic comparison of regional responses across four coup cases and three supplementary episodes, extending the evidence to the Sahel states' exit from ECOWAS in January 2025, the Guinea transition of 2025–26 and the Guinea-Bissau coup of November 2025. Third, it distinguishes the regional response to backsliding from the response to coups and shows that the two have differed markedly.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Democratic backsliding

Bermeo (2016) defines democratic backsliding as the gradual weakening of democratic institutions through executive aggrandizement, manipulation of constitutional rules and the erosion of civil liberties. Unlike sudden collapse or classic military coups, the process is frequently incremental and occurs under the formal cover of elections and constitutional amendment. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) argue that democracies decline when elected leaders undermine institutional checks, weaken opposition forces and disregard the informal norms of mutual tolerance and forbearance. Lührmann and Lindberg (2019) similarly describe a deliberate decline in the quality of democracy engineered by incumbents who remain within the electoral framework while hollowing out its substance. In this paper, backsliding denotes *gradual, typically legalistic erosion led by incumbents who retain formal office*.

Military coups and unconstitutional change of government

A military coup is the illegal, sudden and unconstitutional seizure of political power by the armed forces or a faction thereof, typically through the occupation of key state institutions rather than through electoral processes (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Perlmutter

(1977) emphasizes that such interventions occur when the military moves beyond its professional defense role to become the principal holder of political authority. Since 2020 the military has frequently justified successful coups in Africa as corrective responses to insecurity, corruption and governance failure, even though the juntas have often struggled to deliver rapid improvement in those domains (Melly, 2023). In regional law the wider category is the unconstitutional change of government (UCG). The AU's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance treats not only coups but also constitutional amendments that infringe the principles of democratic change of government as UCGs.

Why the distinction matters

Backsliding can create the conditions for a coup, as in Niger in 2010 and Guinea in 2021, but the two differ in tempo, actor and legal form, and these differences shape what a regional organization can do (Table 1).

Table 1. Democratic backsliding and military coups compared

Feature	Democratic backsliding	Military coup
Tempo	Gradual, cumulative	Sudden, discrete event
Principal actor	Elected incumbent, often using legal or quasi-legal means	Armed forces or a faction of them
Visibility to regional norms	Ambiguous; each step may be defensible as a domestic legal act	Unambiguous breach; clear trigger for the Protocol
Typical regional tools	Observation, quiet diplomacy, election monitoring, preventive mediation	Suspension, sanctions, mediation, transition timetables, threat of force
Main difficulty for the regional body	Sovereignty concerns; peer reluctance to criticize fellow incumbents	Cost and credibility of enforcement; effect of sanctions on civilians

Source: authors' synthesis, drawing on Bermeo (2016), Powell and Thyne (2011) and the ECOWAS (2001) and AU (2007) instruments.

Regional response

Regional response refers to the collective diplomatic, political, legal, economic and security measures adopted by regional organizations to prevent, contain or reverse an

unconstitutional change of government. Buzan and Wæver (2003) locate such responses within the logic of regional security complexes, arguing that neighboring states are more likely to cooperate against threats that travel easily across short distances. Fawcett (2013) and Acharya (2014) stress that effective regional responses depend on shared norms, collective identity and a degree of regional ownership. For analysis, this paper distinguishes eight forms of response: (i) diplomatic engagement; (ii) mediation; (iii) suspension from regional institutions; (iv) economic and targeted sanctions; (v) political pressure and condemnation; (vi) threat or consideration of military intervention; (vii) negotiation of transition timetables; and (viii) cooperation with the AU and other international actors.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative documentary design with a comparative multiple-case structure. It is not a formal systematic review: the evidence is documentary, the cases are a small purposive set, and the aim is analytical explanation rather than statistical aggregation. The design is suited to the research questions for three reasons. The questions ask *how* and *why* regional bodies respond, which requires interpreting decisions, communiqués and expert analysis rather than measuring variables. The episodes are recent and politically sensitive, so official records and published analyses are the most reliable evidence available. And a comparative structure is needed to answer RQ2, which concerns consistency across cases and across forms of democratic disruption. Earlier work on individual coups, such as studies of ECOWAS's response to the 2021 Guinean coup, has applied descriptive and historical analysis of secondary sources within single cases. This study adds cross-case comparison organized by a theory-derived coding frame.

The period covered is 2019 to early 2026, with background material from 1990. The core cases are Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023). Each involved a successful military seizure of power in a state that was an ECOWAS member at the time, and together they vary in the severity of ECOWAS measures and in outcomes. They are treated as comparative cases and not merely as illustrations of one regional pattern. Three supplementary episodes provide contrast: Niger's 2010 coup, which followed a presidential term extension; The Gambia (2016–17), an electoral-defeat crisis rather than a coup; and Guinea-Bissau (2025), the most recent coup.

For clarity of data, three types of source were used: (1) primary regional instruments and decisions, namely official ECOWAS and AU communiqués and protocols; (2) institutional and scholarly sources, namely peer-reviewed journal articles and books and reports from the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies; and (3) **r**eputable news and wire analyses, used mainly for dates and decisions and cross-checked against official statements where possible. The literature was organized thematically around four clusters: conceptual definitions,

theoretical frameworks, drivers of coups, and regional institutional responses. Evidence was then coded against the indicators in Table 2 and the eight response forms in Section 2.4. Each case was first analyzed individually (trigger, democratic indicators, security indicators, response, outcome), and cross-case pattern matching was then used to identify similarities and differences in the intensity, timing and results of ECOWAS action. The core cases were compared with the supplementary episodes to test whether responses to backsliding differ from responses to coups.

No primary interviews were conducted, so the analysis rests on publicly available documentary evidence and cannot capture the internal deliberations of ECOWAS or the junta governments. The small number of cases limits generalization, and the selection of coup cases means the study cannot explain why coups did *not* occur elsewhere. Several episodes are recent and still evolving, and later developments may alter the assessment of outcomes. These limitations are acknowledged; the combination of official records and recent scholarly commentary nonetheless provides an adequate basis for the arguments advanced.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The two theories are used as complementary lenses rather than as separate background discussions. DPT is used to examine the domestic democratic side of the problem and RSCT the regional security side. Each is reduced to specific concepts that guide the reading of evidence.

Democratic Peace Theory

Democratic Peace Theory, with intellectual roots in Kant and modern elaborations by Doyle (1983) and Russett (1993), holds that constitutional, accountable and rights-respecting political systems resolve disputes peacefully. Doyle links this to constitutional government and respect for individual rights; Russett argues that democratic institutions and norms of peaceful competition constrain political violence; and Huntington (1991) adds that democratic consolidation depends on civilian control of the military. The theory's best-known claim, that democracies rarely fight one another, concerns relations *between* states, and this paper does not test it. It uses instead the institutional and normative strand of the theory, which concerns what democratic institutions do domestically, to ask whether democratic erosion, constitutional rupture and military intervention weaken the foundations of peaceful political relations in the region. Seven analytical dimensions follow: democratic institutional stability; constitutional political transitions; democratic norms; civilian control of political authority; legitimacy of governments; the form of any unconstitutional change of government; and the regional consequences of democratic breakdown.

The theory has limits in this setting. It is a normative-institutional lens and not a predictive model of coups, and the evidence in Section 7 shows that some juntas enjoyed substantial popular support because elected governments had failed on security and welfare. Legitimacy (D5) is therefore treated as an empirical question and not as a given.

Regional Security Complex Theory

Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that, because threats travel more easily over short distances, security is best analyzed at the level of regional security complexes: groups of states whose security concerns are so interlinked that they cannot sensibly be analyzed apart. In West Africa, domestic crises, terrorism, insurgency and weak institutions spill across borders and generate regional responses. The absence of a clear regional hegemon, divergent national interests, limited institutional capacity and the growing influence of external powers constrain collective action. The complex is often described as weakly structured; that classification is debated and is used here as a working description. The theory is operationalized through six dimensions: security interdependence among states; threat diffusion and spillover across borders; patterns of amity and enmity; regional perceptions of insecurity; the role of regional institutions, chiefly ECOWAS; and the influence of external actors.

Neither theory alone is sufficient. DPT can explain why constitutional rule and civilian control matter but says little about how a coup in one state becomes another state's problem. RSCT explains regional spillover and institutional response but is silent on why the domestic political order that produces the spillover deteriorates in the first place. The two are therefore linked in a single causal chain, which also organizes the case analysis:

Democratic backsliding → weakening of democratic institutions → unconstitutional change or military intervention → domestic political instability → regional security spillover → ECOWAS/regional response.

The first four links are read through DPT indicators (D1–D6), and the last two through RSCT indicators (R1–R6) together with D7. The analytical question is whether the regional response acts on the earlier links of the chain or only on the visible event in the middle.

Table 2. Operationalization of the framework

Code	Dimension	Indicator (what is looked for)	Evidence examined
D1	Democratic institutional stability	Functioning legislature, judiciary and electoral body; respect for term limits	Pre-coup institutional record; disputes over courts or parliament

Code	Dimension	Indicator (what is looked for)	Evidence examined
D2	Constitutional transitions	Elections held and accepted; constitutional amendments and referendums	Electoral disputes; term-extension episodes; transition charters
D3	Democratic norms	Civil liberties, press and party freedom, protest rights	Rights reports; bans on parties or demonstrations
D4	Civilian control	Military role in politics; subordination of security forces	Identity of coup leaders; counter-coups; transition leadership
D5	Legitimacy of government	Public support or discontent; performance on security and welfare	Popular reaction; stated justifications of juntas
D6	Form of UCG	Coup, coup within a coup, or constitutional manipulation	Mode of power seizure or retention
D7	Regional consequences of breakdown	Isolation, sanctions, diffusion of coups, loss of cooperation	ECOWAS and AU measures; later coups in neighbors
R1	Security interdependence	Shared threats and mutual dependence among states	Joint operations; shared insurgent threats
R2	Threat diffusion and spillover	Cross-border movement of armed groups, refugees, trade shocks	Border security incidents; effects of closures
R3	Amity and enmity	Alignments and rivalries among regional states	Bloc formation; statements on intervention
R4	Perceptions of insecurity	How governments and publics define threats	Junta and ECOWAS framing of the crisis

Code	Dimension	Indicator (what is looked for)	Evidence examined
R5	Regional institutions	Capacity, cohesion and credibility of ECOWAS and the AU	Decisions taken, implemented or abandoned
R6	External actors	Influence of outside powers on regional choices	Role of France, Russia and others; foreign partnerships

Source: authors' construction from Doyle (1983), Russett (1993), Huntington (1991) and Buzan and Wæver (2003).

CAUSES OF THE RESURGENCE OF MILITARY COUPS

Scholars working in the democratization and civil–military literature identify several recurring structural drivers; the relevant DPT dimension is indicated in brackets. Weak political institutions leave states vulnerable to military intervention when civilian regimes cannot manage political participation or deliver basic public goods (Huntington, 1968; D1). Poor governance and corruption erode public legitimacy and let the military present itself as a corrective force (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982; D5). Economic crisis, unemployment and inequality further undermine civilian governments (Ake, 1996; D5). Disputed elections and constitutional manipulation weaken confidence in electoral processes (Bermeo, 2016; D2). Elite rivalry and ethnic polarization intensify instability (Decalo, 1990), colonial legacies of centralized and weakly institutionalized states continue to shape politics (Ayittey, 1998), and the failure of democratic consolidation, where formal multiparty systems coexist with personalized rule, gives the military ready justifications (Joseph, 1997; D1).

In the contemporary Sahel these structural weaknesses have been compounded by proximate factors. Jihadist insurgencies linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have expanded dramatically since the early 2010s, overwhelming national armies and generating deep public frustration (Thurston, 2020; D5, R4). External security partnerships, particularly with France, have been widely perceived as ineffective or counterproductive (R6). Constitutional manoeuvres by civilian incumbents, most notably Alpha Condé's third-term project in Guinea, further eroded the legitimacy of electoral politics (D2). Military actors have capitalized on this discontent, at least in the short term, by framing their interventions as responses to insecurity and elite failure. Taken together, the literature suggests that recent coups owe less to a failure of democracy as an idea than to the failure of particular elected governments to deliver security and basic governance. That matters for judging whether the usual regional remedies address the actual causes.

ECOWAS NORMS AND FORMS OF RESPONSE

Normative and institutional architecture

ECOWAS was created in 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos. Security concerns followed with the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression and the 1981 Protocol on Mutual Assistance on Defence, and the Liberian civil war from 1989 pushed the organization into collective security action. The 1999 Mechanism Protocol established the Mediation and Security Council, and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance set constitutional convergence principles and prohibited accession to or retention of power by unconstitutional means, with provision for sanctions. The AU's 2007 Charter adds a continental layer. The legal framework is therefore extensive; the question pursued here is how it is applied.

Typology of responses in practice

ECOWAS has developed a relatively elaborate repertoire for responding to unconstitutional changes of government: immediate suspension of membership, targeted and comprehensive economic sanctions, mediation missions, demands for short transition timetables and, in extreme cases, the threat or use of force. The 2017 intervention in The Gambia remains the clearest example of regional pressure restoring constitutional order. Table 3 applies the eight response forms to the five coup cases and shows that suspension and mediation are near-universal, while sanctions, the threat of force and the handling of transition timetables vary widely.

Table 3. Forms of regional response by case

Response form	Mali (2020/21)	Guinea (2021)	Burkina Faso (2022)	Niger (2023)	Guinea-Bissau (2025)
Diplomacy / mediation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (delegations rebuffed)	Yes (high-level mission mandated)
Suspension from ECOWAS bodies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Response form	Mali (2020/21)	Guinea (2021)	Burkina Faso (2022)	Niger (2023)	Guinea-Bissau (2025)
Economic or targeted sanctions	Yes; severe in 2022	Targeted (travel bans, asset freezes); eased 2024	Suspension; no general economic sanctions	Yes; most severe	Threatened (targeted)
Threat of military intervention	No	No	No	Yes; standby force ordered, not used	No
Transition timetable negotiated	Yes; repeatedly extended	Yes; completed by election	Yes; later extended	Attempts failed	Not settled
AU involvement	Suspended	Suspended; lifted Jan 2026	Suspended	Suspended	Condemned
Outcome for the coup	Not reversed; exit from ECOWAS	Not reversed; coup leader elected; reinstated Jan 2026	Not reversed; exit from ECOWAS	Not reversed; sanctions lifted Feb 2024; exit	Not reversed, coup leader still remain in power

Sources: ECOWAS and AU communiqués as reported in VON (2025), Amani Africa (2025), AFP (2025) and Africanews (2026a, 2026b); International Crisis Group and Africa Center for Strategic Studies analyses. Entries on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger sanctions and timetables reflect public ECOWAS decisions of 2020–24 and should be checked against the communiqués.

The pattern is one of initial firmness followed by pragmatic adjustment. Comprehensive sanctions often imposed heavy costs on ordinary populations while military authorities consolidated control and sought alternative partners, notably Russia. The threat of force in Niger was not carried out, and by early 2024 ECOWAS had begun lifting many of the measures to reopen dialogue. This trajectory shows both the organization's normative

commitment to constitutional order and the limits of its coercive capacity when confronted with determined juntas enjoying domestic and external support.

COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

Each case is read along the causal chain in Section 4.3: the democratic conditions and trigger (D indicators), the regional security dimension (R indicators), and the ECOWAS response and outcome. Table 4 summarizes the core cases.

Table 4. Comparative overview of the four core cases

Dimension	Mali	Guinea	Burkina Faso	Niger
Primary trigger	Insecurity, corruption, disputed politics (D2, D5)	Constitutional third-term controversy (D2, D6)	Jihadist insecurity (D5)	Governance and security grievances (D5)
Civilian control (D4)	Coup within a coup, 2021	Special-forces leader became president	Counter-coup within 2022	Presidential guard commander took power
External pivot (R6)	France out; Russia in	Balanced diplomacy	France out; Russia closer	France out; AES and Russia
ECOWAS stance	Hard, then pragmatic	Suspension, targeted measures, mediation	Suspension and pressure	Threat of force, then dialogue
Outcome (early 2026)	Junta entrenched; left ECOWAS	Election won by coup leader; reintegrated	Junta entrenched; left ECOWAS	Junta entrenched; left ECOWAS

Source: authors' compilation from secondary sources and the communiqués cited in Table 3.

Core cases

Mali (2020 and 2021)

Democratic conditions. In August 2020 officers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, whose second term was marked by disputed elections, protests and perceptions of corruption (D2, D5). The coup was widely welcomed by segments of a population frustrated with insecurity. In May 2021 Goïta removed the civilian transitional president and made himself interim president, showing that civilian control (D4) had not been restored. *Regional security.* Mali lies at the center of the Sahelian crisis, and insurgent and communal violence there threatens Burkina Faso, Niger and coastal states (R1, R2). After the coups relations with France deteriorated, French troops withdrew, and the junta deepened cooperation with Russia (R6). *Response and outcome.* ECOWAS imposed some of its harshest measures, including border closures and financial restrictions, and again in January 2022 when the junta proposed a lengthy transition. The junta weathered the pressure, sanctions were lifted in mid-2022 after a shorter timetable was published, and the promised handover did not follow. In 2025 the junta dissolved political parties and granted Goïta a renewable five-year mandate. Sanctions thus secured a timetable but not a transition (R5), and their cost to civilians allowed the junta to question ECOWAS's legitimacy.

Guinea (2021)

Democratic conditions. Guinea is the clearest case of backsliding preceding a coup. President Alpha Condé, Guinea's first freely elected president, pursued a third term after constitutional change and was ousted in September 2021 by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya amid protests over extended mandates (D2, D6; African Leadership Magazine, 2026). ECOWAS had been criticized for staying silent about third-term bids in Guinea and elsewhere (News Central TV, 2021). *Response and outcome.* ECOWAS suspended Guinea within days, sent mediation missions, imposed travel bans and asset freezes, and negotiated a transition, easing some sanctions in February 2024. A constitutional referendum followed on 21 September 2025 and a presidential election on 28 December 2025, which Doumbouya won with more than 86 percent of the vote. The AU lifted Guinea's suspension on 22 January 2026, and ECOWAS lifted all residual sanctions and reinstated Guinea on 28 January 2026 (African Leadership Magazine, 2026; Africanews, 2026a). Guinea is the only core case in which the transition ended in an election. Yet the winner was the coup leader, civil society and opposition candidates disputed the poll, and Doumbouya has been reported to have curtailed civil liberties, banned protests and pushed rivals into trial or exile (Africanews, 2026a, 2026b). The standard ECOWAS applied was therefore procedural (D2), and the quality of democracy (D3) weighed less in its judgment.

Burkina Faso (2022)

Democratic conditions. Burkina Faso had two coups in 2022: in January Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba removed President Roch Kaboré, and in September Captain

Ibrahim Traoré removed Damiba, both citing failure to contain jihadist violence. The trigger was performance on security (D5) and not a disputed election or constitutional manipulation, and the counter-coup shows the instability of military rule itself (D4). *Regional security.* Burkina Faso is a front-line state in the Sahel insurgency (R1, R2). The junta reduced cooperation with France, drew closer to Russia and to the other military-led governments (R3, R6), and with Mali and Niger signed the 2023 mutual-defense charter that founded the AES. *Response and outcome.* ECOWAS suspended Burkina Faso, mediated and negotiated a timetable but did not apply general economic sanctions. This milder treatment, compared with Mali and Niger, is itself evidence of inconsistency (Section 8.1). The junta later extended its timetable, and Burkina Faso left ECOWAS in January 2025.

Niger (2010 and 2023)

2010: backsliding followed by a coup. President Mamadou Tandja, in office since 1999, used a referendum to extend his term and remove term limits, sidelining institutions, civil society and the opposition (D1, D2, D3). The February 2010 coup against him shows civilian institutional erosion preceding military intervention, and the danger that a coup may be welcomed because the displaced government had itself hollowed out democracy. *2023: a coup against an elected government.* In July 2023 General Abdourahamane Tchiani, who commanded the presidential guard, overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, who had taken office in Niger's first peaceful transfer between elected presidents (D4, D6). ECOWAS imposed the most far-reaching package of any case, including border closures and financial measures, issued an ultimatum and ordered activation of its standby force, the only case in which force was seriously threatened. It did not act. Divisions among members, opposition within Nigeria and statements by Mali and Burkina Faso that intervention would be treated as an act of war illustrate amity–enmity patterns (R3) and the limits of institutional cohesion (R5). The junta expelled French forces and joined the AES (R6). ECOWAS later lifted sanctions without the coup having been reversed, and Niger left the organization in January 2025 (AFP, 2025).

The Gambia (2016–17) was an electoral-defeat crisis, not a coup: the losing incumbent, Yahya Jammeh, refused to concede. ECOWAS combined diplomacy, an ultimatum and a credible military threat, and he left office. Observers regard it as ECOWAS's firmest and most successful response to a democratic breach (Amani Africa, 2025). It shows that the organization can enforce a democratic outcome when the incumbent lacks domestic backing, a neighboring state is willing and capable, and the demand is simple. **Guinea-Bissau (2025):** on 26 November 2025, three days after general elections, soldiers seized power and halted the announcement of results. ECOWAS suspended Guinea-Bissau from all decision-making bodies, demanded release of the election results, mandated a high-level mediation mission and reserved the right to apply sanctions (VON, 2025). Analysts

judged that, although the first reaction echoed the firm Gambian response, ECOWAS was unable to follow through (Amani Africa, 2025).

Four patterns emerge. First, the intensity of the response varies without a clear rule: Niger drew the harshest measures, Burkina Faso the mildest, and Mali and Guinea an intermediate, shifting mix, although the 2001 Protocol provides for a graduated, rule-based reaction. Second, the common demand is a transition of about two years, and juntas extended or abandoned these timetables in Mali and Burkina Faso. Third, no coup in the four core cases was reversed; Guinea alone returned to elected rule, through the candidacy of its coup leader. Fourth, three of the four core cases ended in exit from ECOWAS and a rival alignment, the AES, with consequences for border security, trade and counter-insurgency cooperation (R1–R3).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Consistency across coup cases

The evidence shows inconsistency in severity, in timing and in follow-through on ultimatums. Part of the explanation lies in RSCT dimensions R3 and R5: the willingness of key members, above all Nigeria, to bear the costs of enforcement, alignments among states, and the cohesion of the organization all vary from case to case. Part lies in the nature of the trigger. Where a coup followed insecurity and had visible popular support, as in Burkina Faso, a plausible reading is that ECOWAS judged heavy sanctions would be counterproductive; where it overthrew a recently and peacefully elected president, as in Niger, the case for firmness was stronger, yet the cost of force proved prohibitive. The resulting selectivity is what feeds perceptions of inconsistent application (Obi, 2020).

Backsliding versus coups

The comparison supports the distinction in Table 1. ECOWAS has an automatic repertoire for coups (suspension, mediation, sanctions and a timetable) but no equivalent for gradual backsliding. Term-extension and third-term maneuvers, such as those preceding the coups in Niger in 2010 and Guinea in 2021, drew little regional sanction at the time, and the region's silence was criticized (News Central TV, 2021). Peer reluctance and sovereignty concerns are plausible reasons, as is the fact that many member governments themselves show weak democratic performance, which makes collective enforcement vulnerable to charges of double standards. The Gambia is the exception, but it involved an overt refusal to accept an election result, a far less ambiguous breach than incremental constitutional engineering. Regional enforcement is thus tied to the visible event in the middle of the causal chain and not to the earlier links.

Do the responses address root causes and spillover

Suspension and sanctions address the *form* of the breach (D6) but not the conditions that preceded it (D1, D2, D5). Section 5 suggests insecurity and governance failure drive many recent coups, yet sanctions can aggravate hardship, and juntas have used them to challenge ECOWAS's legitimacy. On the security side, sanctions and border closures disrupt trade and cross-border cooperation (R2) in the states that most need joint counter-insurgency effort. The AES exit and the juntas' turn to alternative partners (R6) suggest the regional response may have intensified the fragmentation it sought to prevent. Guinea shows that the democratic dimension can be addressed in procedural terms, but also that procedure alone may legitimize a coup leader.

Structural constraints

Several constraints limit ECOWAS effectiveness, and the cases bear them out. Resource scarcity and dependence on external funding reduce operational autonomy and make sustained mediation or peace-support operations hard to finance (R5). Divergent national interests and limited political will produce lowest-common-denominator decisions. Sovereignty continues to restrain decisive intervention even when protocols authorize it. Anti-French and anti-regional sentiment have been mobilized by juntas to portray ECOWAS as an instrument of external interests. Persistent insecurity creates public demand for strong leadership that civilian governments have struggled to satisfy. Finally, competition among Russia, China, Western actors and others gives military regimes alternative sources of support and reduces the leverage of regional sanctions (Melly, 2023; Ero, 2023).

Theoretical reflection

The two theories explain different parts of the record. DPT's institutional lens explains why ECOWAS frames coups as a breach and why restoring constitutional order is its stated aim, and it exposes the gap between procedural and substantive democracy in Guinea. Its weakness, visible in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, is that it presumes elected governments are broadly legitimate, whereas publics often tolerated or welcomed the military. RSCT explains why domestic breakdown becomes a regional issue, why responses are shaped by alignments and external actors, and why the Sahel exit can be read as fragmentation of an already weakly structured complex. Its weakness is that it says little about the domestic roots of instability. Used together, they show the regional response acting on the middle of the causal chain while earlier and later links remain largely unaddressed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations follow from the findings and are linked to the research questions.

- **Enforce the norms consistently.** ECOWAS should prioritize predictable enforcement of its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, reducing the perception of selective application that undermines its legitimacy (Obi, 2020), and should publish the criteria governing the choice of measures.
- **Move from reaction to prevention.** Strengthen early warning and preventive diplomacy, including closer monitoring of constitutional manipulation, electoral crises and deteriorating civil–military relations (Aning & Bah, 2020).
- **Target sanctions.** Apply pressure primarily to coup leaders and their immediate networks rather than to ordinary citizens whose hardship juntas exploit for propaganda (Ero, 2023), with graduated steps set in advance.
- **Judge transitions by substance as well as procedure.** Tie the lifting of sanctions to credible, inclusive elections and basic civil liberties and not only to the holding of a vote, in light of the Guinea experience.
- **Address root causes.** Member states must tackle corruption, youth unemployment, insecurity and weak service delivery if regional norms are to regain legitimacy among citizens (Williams, 2022).
- **Keep channels open with the AES states.** Preserve free movement, trade and counter-terrorism cooperation so that the political dispute does not erode security interdependence.
- **Build capacity and coordination.** Invest in ECOWAS capacity so it depends less on external donors, and deepen coordination with the AU and the United Nations to strengthen legitimacy and leverage (Adebajo, 2010).
- **Build democratic institutions.** Independent judiciaries, professional security sectors under effective civilian control and credible electoral bodies remain the most durable safeguard against military intervention.

CONCLUSION

This study asked how ECOWAS and the AU have responded to democratic backsliding and military coups in West Africa, how consistent those responses have been, and how far they address the democratic roots and regional security consequences of the crises. On RQ1, the repertoire is broad (diplomacy, mediation, suspension, sanctions, timetables, AU coordination and, once, the threat of force), but only suspension and mediation were applied in every case. On RQ2, consistency is limited: the severity of measures differs without a clear rule, and ECOWAS has a developed repertoire for coups but almost none for gradual backsliding, even though backsliding preceded the coups in Niger (2010) and Guinea (2021). On RQ3, the responses address the form of the breach more than its

causes: none of the four core coups was reversed, sanctions may have deepened civilian hardship and regional fragmentation, and three of the four governments left the organization.

The study contributes an operationalized framework combining DPT and RSCT and a systematic comparison linking domestic democratic erosion to regional security spillover. Its conclusions are bounded by reliance on documentary sources, the small number of cases and the fact that some episodes, notably Guinea-Bissau, were still unfolding. Future research could add interviews with regional officials, extend the comparison to failed or averted coups, and test whether the preventive tools recommended here would have altered outcomes. Restoring constitutional order will require more than sanctions and communiqués: it demands renewed domestic commitment to accountable governance, stronger regional institutions capable of consistent action, and a realistic appreciation of the security environment in which West African states operate.

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