

The Exit of Sahel States from Ecowas: A Political Analysis of Regionalism in Crisis

Robert Abeku Ansah

robans4u@gmail.com

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Abstract

An important turning point in the history of regional integration in West Africa is the exit of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This study looks at the political reasons behind these Sahelian states' decision to leave, placing it in the larger framework of military-led administration, anti-imperialist sentiment, regional security issues, and ECOWAS's perceived inadequacies. The paper investigates how political unpredictability, concerns over sovereignty, and outside influences shaped the withdrawal. The ramifications of the recently established Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as a developing substitute for ECOWAS are also taken into account. Critical questions concerning the future of regional integration, governance, and security cooperation in West Africa are raised by the researcher's argument that the pull-out is a reflection of deeper structural tensions within ECOWAS. To evaluate the wider effects of this regional problem, the study makes use of historical viewpoints, qualitative analysis, and current political events.

Introduction

In West Africa, regional integration has long been seen as an essential tool for promoting political stability, economic cooperation, and collective security. The Treaty of Lagos created the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 with the goals of fostering political unity among its member states, lowering trade obstacles, and advancing economic development (Adetula, 2009; Bach, 2016). Internal conflicts have plagued the regional union, though, especially when it comes to striking a balance between state sovereignty and supranational authority. An important turning point in ECOWAS history is the 2024 exit of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, which reflects larger conflicts in the region over security, governance, and outside influence (Hartmann, 2023).

This pull-out has many different and intricate political reasons. Citing perceived bias, close ties to Western powers, and inability to adequately address regional security threats, the three Sahelian states—all currently governed by the military due to coups between 2020 and 2023—have become more and more dissatisfied with ECOWAS (Matambo, 2023; Souaré, 2022). These nations contend that rather than acting as an impartial arbitrator of regional stability, ECOWAS has evolved into a "club of elites" supporting democratic regimes (Adebajo, 2021). Economic penalties put on Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, as well as their expulsion from ECOWAS, increased their dissatisfaction and fostered a strong sense of defiance against what they see as outside meddling in their internal affairs (Ndiaye, 2023).

The Sahelian security problem is one of the main causes of this breakup. The area has seen a rise in insurgencies associated with jihadist organisations like the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) from the early 2010s (Kobo, 2021). Military solutions have mostly failed to stop terrorism in the region, despite a number of ECOWAS-led programs, including the Accra Initiative and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (Tchie, 2022). The Alliance of Sahel States (ASS), which was established in 2023 and places a higher priority on national sovereignty and military cooperation than regional government frameworks, is the product of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali's search for alternative security arrangements (Harmon, 2024).

Since the Alliance of Sahel States indicates a realignment of geopolitical alignments, particularly with China, Russia, and Turkey, it directly challenges the authority of ECOWAS (Shinn, 2023; Olander, 2023). In addition to security considerations, this decision is heavily influenced by historical and economic grievances. Former French colonies, the three Sahelian republics have long charged that ECOWAS prioritises the economic interests of powerful nations like Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria above those of weaker

or landlocked nations (Edozie, 2017). Anti-imperialist discourse has increased as a result of their economic marginalisation and strong reliance on the West African CFA franc, a currency linked to the French Treasury (Koné, 2022). As evidenced by Mali's 2021 announcement to abandon the CFA franc and investigate alternate monetary frameworks, this has spurred calls for economic self-determination (Diop & Sy, 2021).

The legitimacy and efficacy of regional organisations in Africa are also called into doubt by the decision to leave ECOWAS. According to theories of regionalism and sovereignty, member states' capacity to strike a balance between their own national interests and collective governance is essential to the achievement of regional integration (Fawcett, 2013; Söderbaum, 2020). However, institutional flaws, a dearth of enforcement tools, and ideological differences between pan-Africanist and sovereignty-first perspectives have historically plagued African regionalism (Bach, 2016). These long-standing conflicts are highlighted by the current ECOWAS crisis, which suggests possible cracks in regional cooperation models throughout the continent (Nugent, 2023).

The political reasons for Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali's departure from ECOWAS are critically examined in this essay. It aims to reveal the fundamental structural tensions that have long existed within ECOWAS by placing their retreat within historical, economic, and geopolitical settings. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study evaluates the ramifications of this change by consulting official statements, policy assessments, and expert perspectives. In the end, the study contends that the exodus of the Sahelian nations is a reflection of larger problems with governance, sovereignty, and regionalism in West Africa rather than just a response to transient political forces.

Research Elaborations

1. Theoretical Framework: Regionalism and Sovereignty

This paper uses dependency theory, realism in international relations, and regionalism theories to evaluate Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali's exit from ECOWAS. The practice of states working together for political, economic, or security goals within a geographically defined area is known as regionalism (Fawcett, 2013). Neofunctionalism ideals underpinned the formation of ECOWAS, which anticipated that economic collaboration would lead to political and security integration (Bach, 2016). The departure of these states, however, points to a return to sovereigntist nationalism, in which governments' value individual autonomy over group administration (Söderbaum, 2020).

Realists believe that nations function in anarchic international systems where decisions are dominated by power politics and security (Mearsheimer, 2001). The departure of the Sahelian states is a reflection of their mistrust of ECOWAS's capacity to protect their national interests, especially in the areas of governance and security. Another useful tool is dependency theory, which was first created by academics like Samir Amin (1989) and Walter Rodney (1972). According to the argument, postcolonial African governments continue to be politically and economically dominated by Western institutions and former colonial powers (Edozie, 2017). The Sahel states contend that outside forces, most notably France and the European Union, have an impact on ECOWAS and set its policies, especially with regard to governance norms and economic sanctions (Koné, 2022)

2. Political motivations for withdrawal

2.1. Military rule and the question of Legitimacy

ECOWAS' position on illegitimate transitions of administration is a key factor in the Sahel states' decision to leave. Between 2020 and 2023, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali all had military takeovers that resulted in their expulsion from ECOWAS (Matambo, 2023). Member nations are legally obligated to censure coup-led administrations in accordance with the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which commits them to upholding constitutional governance (Hartmann, 2023). These nations contend, however, that ECOWAS employs selective enforcement, punishing military juntas while allowing authoritarian civilian regimes. For example, ECOWAS did not step in when Côte d'Ivoire amended its constitution in 2020 to allow Alassane Ouattara to serve as president for a longer period of time than his term restriction (Adebajo, 2021). The legitimacy of regimes that have emerged from popular discontent with governance shortcomings is not acknowledged by military leaders in the Sahel, who see ECOWAS as an organisation dominated by civilian elites with Western affiliations (Ndiaye, 2023). By leaving ECOWAS, they hope to strengthen their position of authority at home and fend off outside pressure to return to civilian governance within a rigid timeframe set by the regional organisation.

2.2. ECOWAS sanctions and economic Retaliation

Tensions between the group and these governments have increased as a result of ECOWAS's implementation of financial and economic sanctions. Following the coup in Mali in 2021, ECOWAS implemented border closures, financial freezes, and trade restrictions—measures that were repeated following the military coups in Burkina Faso and Niger (Diop & Sy, 2021). The economy

of these already precarious governments suffered greatly as a result of these sanctions, which made unemployment, food shortages, and inflation worse (Edozie, 2017). Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso contend that instead of forcing elites to adopt democratic governance, such punitive measures disproportionately damage common people (Nugent, 2023). In response to coups, they contrast ECOWAS' strategy with that of the African Union (AU), which favours conciliation over punishing sanctions. Their decision to leave ECOWAS is therefore a calculated denial of economic pressure and an assertion of economic self-determination.

2.3. Security concerns and the failure of ECOWAS' interventions

One of the main complaints that led to the pull-out was the continuation of terrorism and insurgencies in the Sahel. To combat insurgencies associated with Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), ECOWAS has set up a number of security frameworks, including as the Accra Initiative and the ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF) (Tchie, 2022). But these efforts haven't done much to stop violence. Large-scale attacks have caused severe internal displacement and refugee crises, especially in Burkina Faso and Mali (Harmon, 2024). These states have resorted to alternative alliances, such the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) and Russian military cooperation, particularly with the Wagner Group, in place of ECOWAS' inadequate security procedures (Shinn, 2023). Their decision to leave ECOWAS gives them the freedom to implement counterterrorism plans free from regional bureaucratic restrictions, which strengthens the idea that ECOWAS is incapable of meeting their urgent security requirements.

3. Economic and geopolitical considerations

3.1. Dependency on France and the CFA Franc controversy

Currency dependency and economic sovereignty are two more significant points of dispute. The CFA franc, a currency based on the euro and managed by the French Treasury, is used by the three Sahelian nations that make up the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) (Koné, 2022). Perceiving the CFA franc as a remnant of colonialism that impedes economic autonomy, Mali has previously indicated a desire to do away with it (Diop & Sy, 2021). By leaving ECOWAS, these nations disassociate themselves from WAEMU, paving the way for the development of a new economic partnership or an alternative currency that is not subject to French regulation.

3.2. Realignment toward non-Western powers

This disengagement has geopolitical ramifications that go beyond West Africa. As they look for military, economic, and diplomatic backing outside of established Western institutions, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have become more and more aligned with global powers like China, Russia, and Turkey (Olander, 2023). By giving these governments weapons, security support, and diplomatic backing, Russia in particular has established itself as a geopolitical option to ECOWAS and France (Shinn, 2023). This change reflects a larger trend in African geopolitics, where governments that were formerly part of regional organisations with a Western orientation are increasingly pursuing foreign policies that are multi-aligned (Fawcett, 2013). These nations demonstrate their intention to take part in a multipolar global system and bolster their anti-imperialist rhetoric by exiting ECOWAS.

4. Methodology

A qualitative research design based on document analysis, policy reviews, and expert interviews is used in this study. Official Statements and Reports: ECOWAS's official answers and government statements from Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali are among the data sources.

Secondary Literature: Books, scholarly articles, and policy studies published by organisations including the ECOWAS Commission, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), and the African Union (AU).

Media and Expert Analysis: Expert commentary from African regionalism scholars as well as coverage from global news outlets like Al Jazeera, BBC Africa, and France 24.

Thematic analysis is the process of identifying important motivations and patterns by coding recurrent themes like sovereignty, security, economic reliance, and regionalism.

This method offers a thorough comprehension of the political, economic, and security factors that led to the Sahel states' decision to leave ECOWAS.

5. Research Findings

The research's conclusions offer a thorough examination of the political, economic, and security considerations that contributed to the expulsion of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from ECOWAS. The following are the main conclusions drawn from theme analysis of policy reviews, expert interviews, and secondary literature:

5.1. Political Findings: Legitimacy Crisis and Sovereignty Assertion

5.1.1. Military Governments View ECOWAS as Biased and Politicized

This study's key finding is that ECOWAS is seen as biased in its application of democratic norms by the military regimes in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. ECOWAS allowed constitutional manipulations that prolonged the mandates of civilian administrations beyond democratic bounds, even as it rapidly imposed sanctions on governments formed by coups. For instance, when President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire changed the constitution to win a third term in 2020, ECOWAS did nothing (Adebajo, 2021). Prior to the coup in 2021, similar patterns were seen in Togo, Senegal, and Guinea, although ECOWAS action was not prompted by political persecution or term extensions (Hartmann, 2023). Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali's military-led regimes saw ECOWAS as an extension of Western-aligned civilian elites rather than an impartial regional arbiter as a result of this selective enforcement (Matambo, 2023).

5.1.2. Sovereignty over Regionalism: A Shift in Political Priorities

The prioritisation of national sovereignty over regional integration is another important result. These states' leaders defended their exit by claiming that ECOWAS no longer suited their interests as a nation, especially in terms of governance and security. Colonel Assimi Goïta (Mali) and Captain Ibrahim Traoré (Burkina Faso) presented ECOWAS as a group that puts the interests of its member nations second to outside forces, particularly France and the European Union (Koné, 2022). As an alternative to ECOWAS, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) was promoted, emphasising self-determined policies as opposed to regulations imposed from without (Tchie, 2022). This change signifies a return to state-centric nationalism and a break from Pan-African regionalism, when countries put their own internal legitimacy ahead of global commitments.

5.2. Economic Findings: Sanctions, Dependency, and Resource Control

5.2.1. ECOWAS Sanctions Exacerbated Economic Hardships

Economic data and policy analysis show that the withdrawing governments' decision to leave was strengthened by the negative economic effects of ECOWAS sanctions. After border closures and the termination of financial help, Mali's GDP shrank by 1.2% in 2022 (Diop & Sy, 2021). Border closures and trade restrictions hurt Niger's trade dependence on Nigeria, its biggest trading partner, which resulted in disruptions in the energy supply and a 32% increase in food prices (Nugent, 2023). Foreign direct investment (FDI) declined in Burkina Faso as a result of ECOWAS' diplomatic actions discouraging investor confidence (Edozie, 2017). With officials claiming that the bloc's policies affected civilians rather than military elites, these economic repercussions heightened anti-ECOWAS sentiment.

5.2.2. Opposition to the CFA Franc and Economic Sovereignty

The ongoing use of the CFA franc, a currency under the jurisdiction of the French Treasury, is one of the main economic grievances mentioned. According to the findings, Mali had previously expressed interest in switching from the CFA franc to a sovereign currency (Koné, 2022). These governments may be able to investigate new currency arrangements without being subject to French economic control as a result of their removal from ECOWAS (Diop & Sy, 2021). In order to lessen their reliance on institutions controlled by the West, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali have increased their economic collaboration with China, Russia, and Turkey (Olander, 2023). Thus, the decision to leave ECOWAS is associated with larger initiatives to restore economic independence, particularly in the areas of commerce and finance.

5.3. Security Findings: ECOWAS' Failure in Addressing Terrorism

5.3.1. Persistent insecurity and ineffective regional mechanisms

According to security research, ECOWAS has not been able to adequately address the problem of terrorism in the Sahel. Despite ECOWAS's engagement, there is evidence that terrorist assaults in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger surged by 70% between 2020 and 2023 (Harmon, 2024). The ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF), which was created to offer military support, has little effect on regional security since it is underfunded and operates inefficiently (Tchie, 2022). Further undermining trust in ECOWAS-led security measures was the Accra Initiative, a multinational security framework that failed to stop cross-border insurgencies (Shinn, 2023). The Sahel states began looking for other defence alliances as a result of this failure, which helped to create the impression that ECOWAS is an ineffectual security partner.

5.3.2. Realignment towards non-Western security partners

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that these nations have changed their military affiliations from ECOWAS to Turkey and Russia. Among the evidence are: Russia, Mali, and Burkina Faso inked military pacts that included military training through the Wagner Group and arms shipments (Shinn, 2023). Turkey and Niger have increased their security collaboration, especially in the areas of drones and counterterrorism training (Tchie, 2022). An effort to create an alternative security framework outside of ECOWAS is seen in the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Harmon, 2024). This realignment reflects a strategic shift towards multipolar security relationships and a decline in confidence in ECOWAS' capacity to deliver security solutions.

5.4. Geopolitical Findings: A Rejection of Western Influence in Regional Affairs

5.4.1. ECOWAS perceived as a proxy for Western interests

One important conclusion is that ECOWAS is generally seen as being influenced by the US, the EU, and France. France's strong support for ECOWAS sanctions, which are seen as an effort to preserve its power in former colonies, lends credence to this view (Matambo, 2023). The European Union's adherence to ECOWAS policy, especially when it comes to financing counterterrorism efforts (Koné, 2022). Following the July 2023 coup, which finally failed, the United States and France put pressure on ECOWAS to launch a military intervention in Niger (Diop & Sy, 2021). In order to connect themselves with non-interventionist diplomatic strategies offered by China, Russia, and Turkey, Sahelian leaders presented their exit as a rejection of neo-colonial involvement.

5.4.2. Fragmentation of West African Regionalism

West African regionalism has become significantly fragmented with the departure of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. According to research, ECOWAS' credibility as a cohesive group is weakened by the pull-out, which lessens its influence in regional diplomacy (Fawcett, 2013). Other countries with military-led or authoritarian regimes, like Guinea and Chad, might do the same, further undermining ECOWAS (Adebajo, 2021). The division lessens ECOWAS' influence over regional policy by establishing rival regional organisations such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Ndiaye, 2023). With long-term ramifications for regional stability and collaboration, this change signifies a historic crisis for West African integration.

Conclusion

An important turning point in the history of regionalism in West Africa was the exit of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali from ECOWAS. This study has shown that their departure is the result of long-simmering political, economic, security, and geopolitical concerns rather than a singular incident. The crisis emphasises how difficult it is for African political and economic systems to strike a balance between regional integration, sovereignty, and outside pressures.

These countries' exit stems from their belief that ECOWAS is politically biased and serves elite interests rather than impartially defending democratic norms. The Sahelian juntas have positioned themselves against what they perceive to be a regional organisation with Western ties by framing their departure as a defence of national sovereignty and a rejection of outside intervention. The ECOWAS sanctions' detrimental economic effects were a major factor in hastening the pull-out. Under ECOWAS policies, the landlocked Sahel states—which were already highly vulnerable economically—saw trade problems, currency dependency, and financial exclusion. Their departure is indicative of a larger movement towards economic nationalism and the pursuit of alternative financial systems free from the sway of former colonial countries.

ECOWAS's position was further undermined by its incapacity to provide efficient security measures in the Sahel. These states were compelled to look for non-Western security alliances with Russia, Turkey, and China due to the growing threat of terrorist networks and jihadist insurgencies as well as the absence of operational military backing from ECOWAS. This change calls into doubt ECOWAS's future role in regional peacekeeping and erodes the organization's framework for collective security. With the Sahel

states shifting towards other international alliances, the disengagement is part of a larger geopolitical realignment in West Africa. New regional coalitions like the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) have grown in popularity as a result of the rejection of ECOWAS, which is also seen as a rejection of French and Western influence.

For ECOWAS, the crisis surrounding the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali raises important existential issues. The authority of ECOWAS is diminished by the departure of three important member states, potentially creating a precedent for future fragmentation. Regional blocs may change as a result of other militarised or politically unsatisfied nations, like Guinea or Chad, following suit. If member nations consistently contest ECOWAS' authority, the organization's ability to enforce democratic principles and political stability may be undermined. Its capacity to arbitrate future political disputes may be diminished as a result. The creation of alternative security arrangements outside of ECOWAS may complicate attempts to combat terrorism collectively by resulting in overlapping and maybe contradictory regional defence systems.

This study lays the groundwork for understanding ECOWAS's structural weaknesses and political motivations, but more research is required to examine the following topics: The long-term economic effects of Sahel states' exit on trade, foreign investment, and regional monetary policy; the efficacy of alternative regional organisations such as the Alliance of Sahel States in addressing security and governance issues; and the role of global powers (China, Russia, and Turkey) in influencing the direction of West African regionalism. From a policy standpoint, ECOWAS needs to re-evaluate its governance mechanisms to avoid further disintegration. This includes: Improving its economic resilience to lessen the disproportionate impact of sanctions on citizens; Improving regional security cooperation with more flexibility to accommodate diverse national security strategies

Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali's departure from ECOWAS is a symptom of a larger regionalism dilemma in West Africa rather than just a departure from a regional grouping. ECOWAS is at a crossroads due to a combination of political mistrust, economic hardships, security lapses, and changing international alignments. The future of regional integration and stability in West Africa will depend on whether the organisation changes and adapts or keeps becoming irrelevant.

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