



IPSS

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ECOWAS AND COUPS: NIGER

RECs Spotlight: Tracking Africa's
Peace Through a Regional Lens

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BACKGROUND

Viewed from many angles, recent developments within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), are somewhat unprecedented in its history. While on a few occasions the regional body had justifiably intervened in the security situation of some of its members, never has the organisation been divided to the extent that some members would consider aligning with a “recalcitrant” member in a possible military confrontation with the organisation. All this and even more have brought ECOWAS as a regional body to focus of international attention, with some people blaming the organisation for going too far, and others criticising it for not going far enough.

The origin of ECOWAS most recent incursion into peace and security foray occurred in July 2023, when a military coup took place in Niger Republic. Before this, previous military take-over of governments had occurred in Mali, (2020), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022). The July 2023 coup in Niger was thus considered as a continuation of a resurged era of military coups that the region thought it has left behind. There had been agreements and protocols that forbade military takeover of governments, and before the occurrences of the series mentioned above, a crude semblance of democratic order had been established in the region. Indeed, across the countries, the military had begun recognising the essence of Democratic control such that ECOWAS had begun launching itself into a sense of euphoria that forceful take-over of governments in coups had become a thing of the past in the region. Consequently, viewed from many angles, the July 2023 coup that overthrew the government of Mohammed Bazoum in Niger Republic was seen as one too many.

The immediate reaction of ECOWAS to the coup was the procedural condemnation. But it was also clear from the outset that the organisation was not willing to handle Niamey with the somewhat soft gloves with which it has handled Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. Just shortly before the coup, the organisation had appointed the newly elected Nigerian leader, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, as its chairperson, and he was determined to use his personal clout and his country’s dominant position, to stamp a foot of authority on the organisation.

Once the platitudinal condemnation of the coup passed, ECOWAS gave a week ultimatum for the junta in Niger to restore the ousted leader, otherwise there would be a military effort to bring back constitutional order. This was rejected by the coup leaders, and in an uncommon show of force, efforts seem to begin about a possible use of force to restore Bazoum. The Coup leaders, believing that it was dealing with a hostile international community, refused to engage with ECOWAS and even the African Union (AU) or the United Nations. A first delegation sent by ECOWAS got no further than the airport, while the second was warned off before attempting the trip. However, despite refusing several ECOWAS mediations, the coup leaders welcomed a delegation of Nigerian religious leaders. Noticing the demonstrative defiance on the part of the coup leaders in Niger, ECOWAS immediately imposed heavy economic sanctions on the country.

The Chiefs of Staff of ECOWAS countries met few times to consider the possibility of deploying military force to Niger Republic, and at a time, this was believed to be a distinct possibility. While this was being considered, Burkina Faso and Mali, neighbours of Niger that were also governed by the military, showed their solidarity with the fellow putschists, and openly declared that any military intervention by ECOWAS into Niger would be interpreted as a declaration of war against their respective countries to which a legitimate use of retaliatory force would be considered. They also said they would seriously reconsider their membership of ECOWAS and from all its protocols they had previously adhered to. The delicate balance is still subsisting, with ECOWAS now saying that it would still prefer a peaceful resolution of the crisis, but the military leaders in Niamey and their putschist collaborators saying that the overthrow of Mohammed Bazoum is final.

The unfolding developments in Niger, and to an extent in Burkina Faso and Mali raise a sting of important considerations for ECOWAS. The first is on how West African is transiting from a crude semblance of democratic governance, back into a theatre of recurring military coups and, more importantly, why these military coups seem to be enjoying support from the local population. Answers to this can be found largely in the nature of democracies that exist in the countries, how they were established, and most importantly, how they have delivered the dividends of democracy. In some countries like Nigeria, all Presidential elections have gone to the country's supreme court, amidst allegations of vote rigging and corruption. In Togo, son's succession of introduced a variance of democracy that bordered on monarchy, while, in countries like Mali and Sierra Leone, ethnicity has completely coloured how democratic rule has been established and sustained. In some countries, too, desperate desires by elected leaders to alter the constitution and extend term limits have been intensely controversial. All this raises the question of how sustainable democracy can last within an organisation that has become somewhat indifferent to internal order and processes in its member states. The best way to effectively prevent coups is to ensure that leaders are properly elected and legitimately sustained in power delivering services to the population. But on a minor level, too, is the external dimension, with foreign interests still scrambling for the region's natural resources, thus further weakening its economic base to sustain credible democracy.

Also important are the implications of all the developments of religious radicalisation and political violence occurring in the Sahel region for ECOWAS and its member states. There are activities of militant groups like Boko Haram, the Islamic State of West Africa (ISWAP), AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine in regions around which the countries experiencing coups are located. Also, extremist activities and violence in the centres of conflict in the Sahel (i.e., Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) are moving south towards Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal and Togo. Among the broader questions this elicits include: what are the links that Islamic radicalisation and political violence, especially various governments reactions to it, have to the emergence of coups within ECOWAS? to what extent can the seeming positive responses to these coups be interpreted as local objections to the stances taken by the government in regional fights against Islamic insurgency groups in the region? what are the links (if any) between global Islamic insurgency and the occurrences of military coups in the affected West African states, and how easy can it be for it to further gain grounds in the sub-region?

Of potentially far more frightening dimension for ECOWAS too is the unfolding connection between events in Niger with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Determined to fight one of the key actors of in the alliance against it, Russia, was alleged to have decided to use Niger, a former colony of key strategic and commercial interest to France. This strategy allegedly underlined the Russian/African meeting held in July 2023. The occurrence of the Niger coup shortly after the meeting and the coup plotters' immediate anti-French stance gave many the impression that the coup might have had the implicit endorsement of Russia. Also, the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, has now become a major actor in the region, all with potentially importance consequences for ECOWAS.

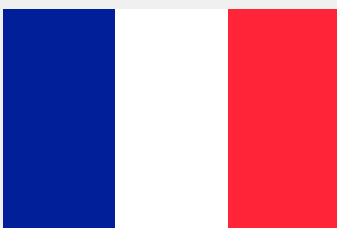
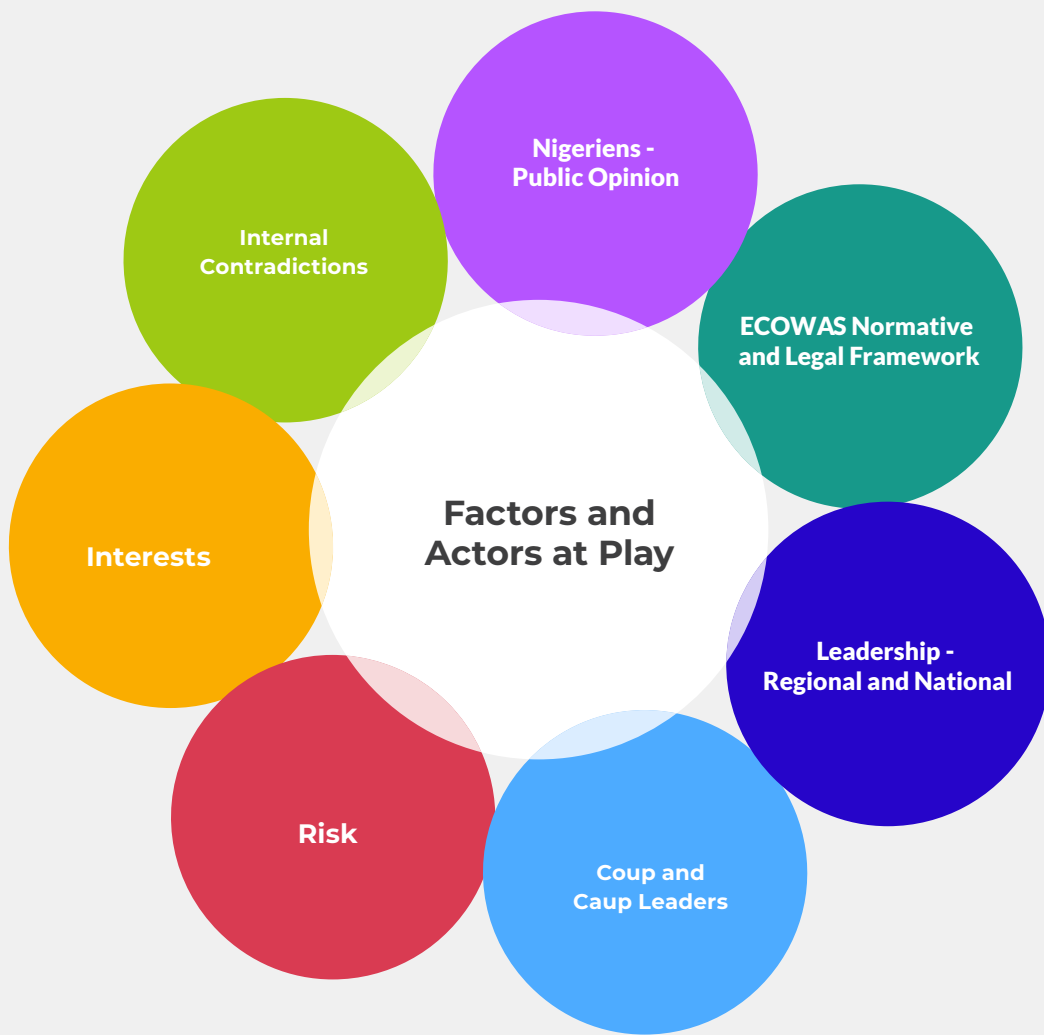
Equally important is the extent to which the population of key ECOWAS member states, especially Nigeria, support any forceful intervention in Niger. Indeed, the idea of military intervention is divisive, with political, religious, and civil society voices being raised in northern Nigeria, fearing that serious consequences would come to the country from the Sahel region, which has been ravaged by jihadist violence. The development also raises "ethno-nationality" concerns for Nigeria, whose ethnic nationalities share border with Niger and whose new leader, unlike his predecessor, was of a different ethnic stock from those in Niger republic. This thus introduced strong ethno-nationalist sentiments to what should be the reaction to the Niger coup. This feeling was further aggravated because the new Nigerian leaders had only just assumed office and his election was still being challenged in courts when the Niger crisis emerged.

Finally, also worthy of note is what, for want of better terms, can be called the "Franco-peculiarity" nature of the

coups. With all the three countries where military take-over of governments has occurred being Francophone, and they are all taking strong anti-French stances, there is the need for ECOWAS to consider the possible implications this may have for other Francophone West African countries.

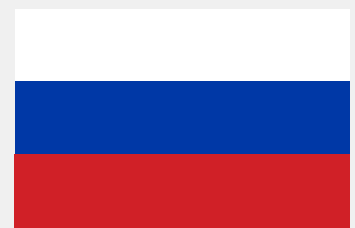
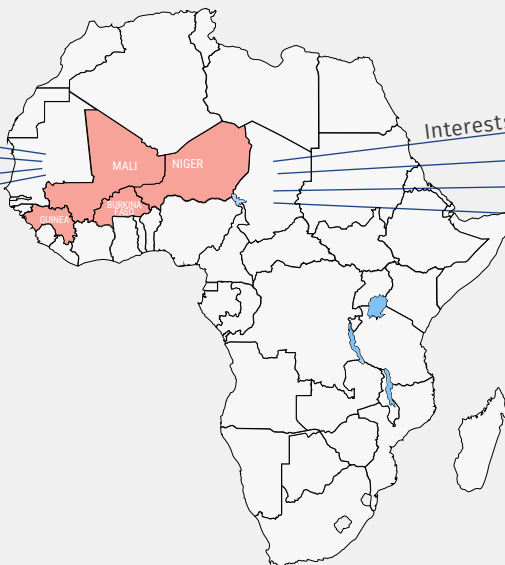
Before concluding this analysis, there is the need to address some key questions, albeit somewhat briefly. First, what is the foundation of ECOWAS' anti-coup stance, or put differently, what legal or normative framework did ECOWAS rely on to oppose the coup? Answer to this is the ECOWAS's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, adopted in 2001, includes a mechanism for responding to such unconstitutional changes of government. The protocol also includes provisions on the democratic governance of ECOWAS members, including on elections, the neutrality of the judiciary, and the impartiality of the security forces. Second, what would the continued stay of the putschists mean for the above framework. In answering this, it should be noted that the continued stay of the putschists in power would be a demonstrative defiance of ECOWAS and would portray the organisation as being incapable of protecting its clauses. Third question is, what framework would ECOWAS had relied on to justify a military action/the use of force? If ECOWAS had insisted on a military action, it could have relied, and quite justifiably on a number of its existing Protocols, including: The October 1999 framework for peace Operations; the protocol relating to the mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security. These clauses established that it would respond to humanitarian disaster, threats to peace and security for the sub-region, and disorder occurring after threats to a democratically elected government. The final question is what does ECOWAS' behavior towards the coup mean in terms of "whose interest they represent?" What risks are there for ECOWAS if perceptions towards it are negative in this regard? In answering this, it should be noted that ECOWAS handling of the Niger Republic situation has put it in somewhat a quagmire, with some critics seeking answers as to why the country is different from others where there had recently been military coups, as to justify what such people see as possible unnecessary overaction on the part of ECOWAS. Less charitable critics even see ECOWAS involvement as an encouragement from France, whose interest was allegedly threatened to the putschists. Quick efforts would need to be made by ECOWAS to show that its interest in Niger was not colour by any ulterior motive.

In conclusion, there is the need to highlight the critical factor that regional actors like ECOWAS have to consider when addressing the prevention of coups. Regional organisations cannot completely prevent military coups from occurring across all their member states, because coups are reactions more to internal contradictions than external developments. Indeed, all they can realistically do is the ensure elected leaders provide credible leadership that would make coup considerations unthinkable for the military, and to ensure that, if such is attempted by over-ambitious military, domestic rebellion against it would frustrate such intentions.



- Colonial Legacy
- Strategic Partnership
- Natural Resources

Interests



- Counter-Terrorism
- Natural Resources
- Anti-French Atance

Interests

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