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REGIONAL STABILITY AND INTEGRATION: THE IMPLICATION OF THE WITHDRAWAL OF BURKINA FASO, MALI AND NIGER FROM ECOWAS

Dr. Adamu Mohammed^{1*}, Umar Abubakar Arabo²

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Federal University Gusau.

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*Corresponding author: Dr. Adamu Mohammed

Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Federal University Gusau.

Abstract

In 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger jointly withdrew from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a significant political event with far-reaching implications for regional stability, security, and development. This research investigates the causes behind the withdrawal of these countries, including the role of political dissatisfaction, security concerns, and sovereignty issues, as well as the broader implications for ECOWAS through the lens of regionalism theory. Utilizing a qualitative methodology that combines document analysis and case studies, the study explores the internal and external factors influencing these nations' decisions to distance themselves from the regional bloc. Findings indicate that the political and military instability, particularly the rise of insurgencies and coups in the Sahel region, contributed significantly to the decision to withdraw. Additionally, dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's interventionist policies, especially its stance on political transitions and sanctions, played a crucial role in the member states' departure. The paper further examines the potential consequences of this withdrawal for ECOWAS, particularly in terms of its effectiveness in promoting regional unity, security cooperation, and economic integration. The study concludes by offering recommendations for ECOWAS to reform its approach to address the evolving challenges in West Africa while maintaining its relevance as a regional organization. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on regional integration and governance in Africa, providing insights into the changing dynamics of West African politics and regional cooperation.

Keywords: ECOWAS, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Regionalism, Integration.

INTRODUCTION

The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2024 represents a significant moment for regional stability in West Africa. Since its founding in 1975, ECOWAS has aimed to promote economic cooperation, peace and security among its members addressing conflicts and enhancing integration across West African countries (Olayoku, 2018; Adekeye, 2020). This role has been especially critical given the political volatility and security challenges in the Sahel where extremism, governance instability and insurgent activities have increased in recent years (Sanyang&Camara, 2022). However, recent political developments especially military coups in Mali (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) have strained ECOWAS's relationship with these countries. These states eventually chose to withdraw from the organization, citing dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's interventions and sanctions aimed at restoring civilian governance (PRX, 2024; Kabir, 2023).

The exit of these countries marks a challenge for ECOWAS's authority and cohesion. Their withdrawal raises questions about the organization's effectiveness in navigating political crises and its ability to uphold democratic principles without alienating member states. The three countries have argued that ECOWAS's approach fails to account for their immediate security needs, particularly the fight against terrorism (Wong, 2024). Their exit also raises broader concerns about the organization's future, its capacity for peacekeeping and its role in economic integration, as ECOWAS may find it increasingly difficult to maintain unity and cooperation among remaining members (PRX, 2024; The Conversation, 2023).

In light of these developments, this paper examines the reasons behind the withdrawal of these countries from ECOWAS and analyzes its potential impact on regional stability, security and economic integration. It seeks to answer critical questions about the future of ECOWAS and what these exits signify for West African unity and resilience in a region facing complex political and security challenges (Sanyang&Camara, 2022; Adekeye, 2020).

CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, formerly known as Upper Volta, gained independence from France in 1960. Historically, the country has faced political instability marked by frequent coups and leadership changes. Since joining ECOWAS in 1975, Burkina Faso has participated in regional economic and political activities particularly in addressing shared security concerns such as cross-border terrorism in the Sahel region (Hartmann, 2020). However, internal challenges such as underdevelopment, weak governance, and insurgencies have strained its ability to contribute effectively to ECOWAS's broader goals (Kabir, 2023). In recent years, Burkina Faso has experienced significant unrest, including military coups in 2022 and 2023, driven by dissatisfaction with the government's handling of terrorism and insecurity. This instability led to strained relations with ECOWAS, particularly after the bloc imposed sanctions in response to unconstitutional changes in leadership. The sanctions and perceived lack of understanding from ECOWAS over Burkina Faso's security needs contributed to the country's decision to withdraw (PRX, 2024).

Mali

Mali a landlocked country in West Africa has a rich historical heritage as the heart of the Mali empire (13th – 16th century) which

was known for its wealth, culture and education under the rulers such as Mansa Musa (Levtzion, 1973). Following colonization by France, Mali gained independence in 1960. However, Mali's political history has been tumultuous, characterized by a series of coups, the most recent occurring in 2020 and 2021. These coups were precipitated by widespread public discontent with corruption, poor governance, and the government's inability to contain Islamist insurgencies in northern and central Mali (Sanyang&Camara, 2022).

Mali has been a member of ECOWAS since its inception, benefiting from its economic programs and participating in regional peace initiatives. ECOWAS's imposition of sanctions following the coups created significant tension between Mali and the organization. The junta leadership accused ECOWAS of prioritizing democratic norms over Mali's immediate security needs, particularly as the country grappled with a growing terrorist presence. The deterioration of relations, coupled with Mali's pivot toward external actors like Russia for security assistance, led to its eventual withdrawal from ECOWAS in 2024 (Kabir, 2023; The World, 2024).

Niger

Niger, a landlocked nation in West Africa, is home to a rich history of ancient empires such as the Songhai and Hausa states. It was colonized by France in the late 19th century and gained independence in 1960. Niger has a history of military coups and has long struggled with poverty, political instability, and security challenges stemming from terrorism and armed insurgencies in the Sahel. Like its neighbors, Niger became a member of ECOWAS in 1975 and engaged actively in its economic and security frameworks (Miles, 2012). Despite these efforts, the country faced significant challenges, including persistent attacks from extremist groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (UNODC, 2023).

The military coup in Niger in 2023 was a tipping point in its relationship with ECOWAS. After the coup, ECOWAS imposed sanctions and threatened military intervention to restore constitutional order. These measures were perceived in Niger as heavy-handed and detached from the country's complex security realities. As a result, Niger aligned itself more closely with Burkina Faso and Mali, forming a mutual defense alliance and collectively deciding to withdraw from ECOWAS in 2024 (PRX, 2024; The Conversation, 2023).

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with a focus on fostering regional economic integration, cooperation and stability among its member states. Over time the organization has evolved to address broader security and political challenges, reflecting the needs of a region marked by political unrest, economic disparities and frequent conflicts (Olayoku, 2018; Adekeye, 2020). ECOWAS's framework for stability and integration includes political, economic, and security mechanisms designed to support both development and peace in West Africa (Adeoye & Mohammed, 2021; Hartmann, 2020).

ECOWAS has developed a strong mandate for promoting peace and security, particularly in response to political instability and conflicts that threaten regional stability. The organization has historically intervened in crises such as the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars in the 1990s, through its peacekeeping arm, the

ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). ECOMOG and later ECOWAS's broader conflict prevention framework, has allowed the organization to mediate and provide peacekeeping forces where national governments are unable to maintain stability (Aning& Bah, 2019). In recent years, ECOWAS has implemented policies to support democratic governance, such as the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which encourages member states to uphold democratic principles and allows ECOWAS to intervene in cases of unconstitutional changes of government (Hartmann, 2020). These protocols emphasize the organization's commitment to preventing and responding to coups, authoritarian practices and electoral violence, aiming to maintain a stable and cooperative political environment in the region.

Economically, ECOWAS seeks to create a unified market that allows for the free movement of goods, services and people. The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), for example, was designed to eliminate tariffs and trade barriers among member states, promoting cross-border commerce and encouraging foreign investment. In addition to the ETLS, ECOWAS aims to establish a common currency to strengthen financial ties, although this goal has faced delays due to economic disparities and structural differences among member economies (Adeoye& Mohammed, 2021). ECOWAS also focuses on social and infrastructure projects that enhance connectivity and improve the quality of life for its populations. Investments in transportation, energy and telecommunication infrastructure are part of ECOWAS's broader development objectives intended to create a more integrated and resilient regional economy. These initiatives aim to address some of the root causes of instability by fostering economic growth and reducing poverty (Akopari, 2022).

The security landscape in the Sahel region has drastically deteriorated over the past decade due to the rise of extremist groups. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, located in the heart of the Sahel, are particularly vulnerable to terrorist violence and insurgencies (Sanyang&Camara, 2022; UNODC, 2023). Although ECOWAS has initiated security frameworks to counter these threats, scholars argue that its approaches often lack the necessary support or alignment with the specific needs of Sahelian states (Kabir, 2023). A significant body of literature suggests that ECOWAS's inability to adequately address these security threats in the Sahel undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of these member states, who seek alternative approaches such as forming alliances with external actors like Russia (The World, 2024).

WHY BURKINA-FASO, MALI AND NIGER CUT TIES WITH ECOWAS

The decision of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2024 is rooted in a complex mix of political, security and ideological factors. This departure underscores the challenges the organization faces in navigating political crises while balancing its principles with the sovereignty concerns of member states. Each country's withdrawal was influenced by dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's intervention policies, disillusionment with the organization's effectiveness in addressing security threats and growing resistance to external influence over domestic political processes.

i. Political Tensions and ECOWAS Sanctions: One of the primary drivers behind the withdrawal of these countries was the political fallout over recent coups and the sanctions that followed. In recent years all three nations

experienced military takeovers, which ECOWAS strongly condemned. The organization imposed sanctions in an effort to pressure military juntas to restore civilian governance, a core principle under ECOWAS's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (Hartmann, 2020). However, the military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger saw these sanctions as punitive measures that undermined their sovereignty and autonomy. For instance, after Niger's 2023 coup, ECOWAS swiftly imposed economic sanctions and threatened military intervention, actions that drew criticism from the new government in Niger and sparked protests against ECOWAS's interference (PRX, 2024; Kabir, 2023).

The perception of ECOWAS as overstepping its mandate intensified among these countries, who argued that their political transitions were driven by internal crises requiring local solutions. These sanctions were seen as disproportionately harsh, particularly in countries facing severe security threats, economic instability and popular dissatisfaction with previous civilian governments. Consequently, the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger increasingly viewed ECOWAS as an organization favoring Western-aligned democratic norms over the unique political contexts and needs of its member states (Kabir, 2023; Sanyang&Camara, 2022).

ii. Security Concerns and the Fight against Terrorism: Security issues especially the surge in terrorist activities in the Sahel region, have also played a pivotal role in motivating these countries to leave ECOWAS. The Sahel, encompassing parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has been a hotspot for extremist violence, with groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and ISIS exploiting weak governance and vast ungoverned territories (UNODC, 2023). Despite ECOWAS's mandate to support regional security, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger criticized the organization for its limited support in combating terrorism effectively. They argued that ECOWAS's response to the security crisis had been insufficient, and their urgent needs for military and logistical support were unmet. The lack of robust assistance from ECOWAS in addressing these existential threats led these countries to seek alternative security partnerships, including stronger ties with external powers like Russia (PRX, 2024; The Conversation, 2023). Moreover, the rising insecurity heightened the appeal of military-led governments, who promised stronger, more decisive action against terrorist groups. In contrast, ECOWAS's insistence on quick democratic transitions was perceived as compromising their ability to stabilize the region and combat insurgency effectively. The new governments in these countries argued that ECOWAS's pressure to transition back to civilian rule was unrealistic and disregarded the immediate priority of restoring security (Kabir, 2023; Sanyang&Camara, 2022).

iii. Ideological Shifts and a Push for Sovereignty: The withdrawals of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger also reflect a broader ideological shift in favor of sovereignty and self-determination, challenging ECOWAS's interventionist stance. The juntas in these countries have increasingly aligned themselves with a narrative that emphasizes African solutions to African problems, rejecting what they perceive as undue influence from ECOWAS and its Western partners. This stance is particularly evident in the growing influence of anti-Western sentiment and the embrace of alternative alliances,

such as partnerships with Russia, which offer military support without the same democratic conditions imposed by ECOWAS (PRX, 2024; The World, 2024). The ideological divergence is further fueled by popular support in these countries, where the public has often expressed frustration with ECOWAS's approach. Many citizens of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have welcomed the military-led governments as a necessary response to ineffective civilian regimes and see the ECOWAS sanctions as external interference. The sentiment that ECOWAS is prioritizing Western-backed democratic principles over local needs and values has gained traction, reinforcing the juntas' decisions to withdraw from the organization (The Conversation, 2023; Kabir, 2023).

THE TRIPARTITE EXIT AND ITS RIPPLE EFFECT ON ECOWAS

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS in 2024 has created substantial challenges for the organization, impacting its unity, credibility, and capacity to effectively fulfill its mandate. ECOWAS, long regarded as a stabilizing force in West Africa, now faces a weakened political and security framework, which could affect its regional influence and ability to maintain cooperation among member states.

i. Diminished Credibility and Authority: The exit of three member states due to dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's handling of political crises and military coups challenges the organization's authority in promoting democratic governance. ECOWAS has historically enforced norms against unconstitutional changes in government, imposing sanctions and demanding transitions back to civilian rule when coups occur. However, the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger signifies a rejection of these principles, questioning ECOWAS's ability to enforce its policies effectively (Kabir, 2023). By stepping away, these countries underscore their dissatisfaction with what they perceive as ECOWAS's alignment with Western democratic ideals over African sovereignty and local governance needs (The Conversation, 2023). This divide could embolden other member states facing similar pressures, potentially undermining ECOWAS's credibility in promoting regional democracy (Hartmann, 2020).

ii. Weakening Regional Security and Counterterrorism Efforts: The departure of these countries from ECOWAS could fragment regional security efforts, particularly against terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are central to the Sahel region's security framework, facing direct threats from extremist groups. ECOWAS has previously sought to support regional security through joint efforts. However, these efforts may lose effectiveness without the involvement of key Sahelian nations (PRX, 2024). Additionally, with these countries now potentially looking to alternative alliances, including partnerships with Russia and other non-Western entities, ECOWAS's capacity for coordinated counterterrorism responses could be compromised (UNODC, 2023).

iii. Economic Impact and Challenges to Regional Integration: The exit of these countries from ECOWAS could also hinder economic cooperation and regional integration. ECOWAS was founded on principles of economic collaboration, aiming to create a single market and promote

the free movement of goods and services. The absence of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger disrupts this vision, as regional trade and connectivity may suffer setbacks (Adeoye & Mohammed, 2021). The economic isolation of these countries may further destabilize their economies, creating ripple effects in trade with neighboring states and reducing ECOWAS's overall economic influence (The Conversation, 2023). This withdrawal may also strain ECOWAS's ongoing initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, which relies on cooperation from all member states to facilitate open markets across the region (Akopari, 2022).

iv. Strategic and Geopolitical Shifts: The exit of these countries is likely to influence ECOWAS's geopolitical stance, especially as they seek partnerships outside of the West African bloc. By aligning with alternative powers, such as Russia, which has provided military support without requiring adherence to democratic norms, these countries introduce new dynamics to regional security. This shift could reduce ECOWAS's influence in the region, as member states begin exploring other diplomatic and security options beyond the ECOWAS framework (PRX, 2024; Kabir, 2023). In the long run, this realignment may impact ECOWAS's position as a leading regional body in Africa, affecting its influence in African Union policy-making and weakening its ties with international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union, which have historically supported ECOWAS's peacekeeping missions.

IMPACT OF THE TRIPARTITE EXIT ON WEST AFRICAN STABILITY AND UNITY

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS could have profound long-term consequences for regional stability and development in West Africa. This departure not only poses immediate challenges but may also reshape the political and economic landscape of the region for years to come.

i. Weakening of Regional Unity and Cohesion: this is one of the most significant long-term impacts on ECOWAS aim for regional stability and unity. ECOWAS has historically served as a model of African regionalism, emphasizing collective security, economic integration and political stability (Adeoye & Mohammed, 2021). The departure of these three countries may encourage other states facing political crises to question ECOWAS's authority, thereby risking further fractures within the organization. A decline in cohesion could weaken ECOWAS's ability to act decisively on regional issues, reducing its influence and credibility across Africa and internationally (Hartmann, 2020).

ii. Challenges in Collective Security and Anti-terrorism Efforts: Given the security threats in the Sahel region, particularly terrorism, the exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger may reduce ECOWAS's capacity for effective regional security cooperation. These countries are central to counterterrorism operations in the Sahel and their withdrawal complicates coordinated responses to the spread of extremist violence. Without their involvement, ECOWAS's security initiatives in the region may face logistical and strategic challenges, potentially giving insurgent groups more freedom to expand (UNODC, 2023; Sanyang & Camara, 2022). This security vacuum could lead to destabilization beyond their

borders, affecting neighboring states and possibly prompting a regional humanitarian crisis as more people are displaced by conflict.

iii. Economic Fragmentation and Setbacks in Regional Integration: The withdrawal may also hinder ECOWAS's long-term economic integration goals particularly the creation of a unified market and common currency (Akopari, 2022). These initiatives rely on the full participation of member states to ensure cohesive trade policies, smooth movement of goods and shared economic infrastructure. The absence of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS limits the reach of regional trade frameworks, potentially creating isolated economies that operate outside the established ECOWAS protocols (Adeoye & Mohammed, 2021). This fragmentation could weaken the region's attractiveness to foreign investors and disrupt cross-border trade routes, slowing down economic development and diminishing the region's bargaining power on the global stage.

iv. Influence of New Alliances and External Powers: The exit of these three countries may also lead to a shift in their foreign policy, with a potential increase in alliances with non-traditional partners, such as Russia. This realignment could influence the geopolitical landscape in West Africa, introducing new diplomatic and security dynamics that might not align with ECOWAS's priorities (PRX, 2024; The World, 2024). As these countries form closer ties with alternative powers, it may weaken ECOWAS's collective foreign policy stance making it harder for the organization to act as a unified bloc on international issues.

v. Potential for Reform within ECOWAS: Despite these challenges, the situation also presents an opportunity for ECOWAS to reassess and reform its policies to better address the needs of its member states. The departure of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger reflects broader criticisms of ECOWAS's intervention methods, including its use of sanctions and demands for rapid political transitions. By examining these critiques, ECOWAS could consider adopting more flexible, context-sensitive approaches that balance democratic principles with respect for sovereignty (Kabir, 2023). Such reforms might help restore confidence among member states, potentially preventing further withdrawals and strengthening the organization's resilience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Regionalism theory, developed by Karl W. Deutsch and later advanced by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, examines why states form regional alliances or organizations to address common political, economic, and security issues. This theory helps explain the formation of ECOWAS, which focuses on collective security, economic integration, and political stability in West Africa. It also highlights the expectation that member states adhere to shared norms like democratic governance, which ECOWAS enforces through interventions and sanctions. Tensions can arise when national interests conflict with regional goals, as seen in recent withdrawals from ECOWAS.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS marks a critical turning point in West African governance. The decision stems from dissatisfaction with

ECOWAS's interventionist policies, unaddressed security issues and a growing focus on sovereignty. This departure poses challenges to ECOWAS's unity, security cooperation and economic integration, while shifting regional geopolitical dynamics. However, it also highlights the need for ECOWAS to reform and adapt to the changing priorities of its members to remain relevant and effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. ECOWAS should reconsider its political crisis approach, prioritizing dialogue and tailored responses over punitive measures, promoting flexible frameworks that respect sovereignty and promote gradual democratic transitions.
- ii. Strengthening regional security initiatives, particularly in the Sahel, is critical. ECOWAS should establish specialized task forces to address terrorism and insurgency, ensuring member states receive adequate military and logistical support.
- iii. Revitalizing economic frameworks, such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme, should involve targeted support for economically vulnerable member states. This includes investing in infrastructure and reducing trade barriers to foster resilience and connectivity.
- iv. ECOWAS must rebuild trust among member states by promoting inclusive decision-making processes. This involves engaging with all members to develop policies that reflect shared priorities and regional realities.
- v. To counter the influence of external powers, ECOWAS should bolster partnerships with international organizations such as the African Union and the United Nations. Collaborative efforts can enhance the region's capacity to address security and development challenges.

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