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Issue Brief

Nigeria and ECOWAS: Priorities and Challenges

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S*ummary*

Nigeria's active participation in ECOWAS has encompassed peacekeeping efforts, economic collaboration, and leadership positions within the organisation. Nigeria has been a leading force in countering the military coup culture in the West African region, advocating for democratic norms amidst its own internal shortcomings.

Introduction

On 9 July 2023, Bola Tinubu, the President of Nigeria, took over as the new chairman of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Against the backdrop of escalating insecurity and a resurgence of military coups in the West African region, Tinubu's ascendancy to this pivotal role heralds a renewed push for stability, democracy, and regional integration. Tinubu asserted that under his leadership, ECOWAS will staunchly oppose coups in the region and vowed to discuss the issue with the African Union, Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom.¹

The new ECOWAS Chairman swiftly denounced the coup in Niger that took place on 26 July 2023 and led diplomatic efforts against it, including by imposing sanctions and giving an ultimatum for the interim military government. While his actions are seen as revitalising Nigeria's leadership, there are divisions within ECOWAS—with Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea cautioning against military intervention in Niger.²

Nigeria's Consistent Role

Nigeria has played a crucial and consistent role in the ECOWAS since its establishment in 1975.³ Although the original mandate of ECOWAS was on achieving regional economic integration to enhance economic stability and development, member states recognised that realising the organisation's ambitious objectives hinged on establishing an atmosphere of peace and stability. As a populous and economically influential nation in the region, Nigeria's involvement has been integral to ECOWAS's mission of fostering economic integration, political stability, and regional cooperation.

Nigeria's active participation has encompassed peacekeeping efforts, economic collaboration, and leadership positions within the organisation. ECOWAS shifted its focus from economic development to interventions in 1990 with its involvement in the Liberian civil war, departing from a non-political stance. This marked the beginning of ECOWAS's engagement in regional political and security issues, exemplified by deploying the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) for peace restoration.

Nigeria's approach to its neighbouring countries in West Africa is both remarkable and paradoxical. It has been a leading force in countering the military coup culture in the region, advocating for democratic norms, even amidst its own internal

¹ Chiamaka Okafor, “[We Will Not Tolerate Coups in West Africa – Tinubu](#)”, *Premium Times*, 10 July 2023.

² Chiamaka Okafor, “[Tinubu Speaks on Coup Attempt in Niger](#)”, *Premium Times*, 26 July 2023.

³ Olatunde J. B. Ojo, “[Nigeria and the Formation of ECOWAS](#)”, International Organization, September 1980.

shortcomings. In the 1990s, ECOWAS interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau were often driven by ad-hoc arrangements led by Nigeria.

Nigeria's economic and military strength enabled it to initiate these interventions using its own resources. In 1999, a pivotal shift occurred with the establishment of the Protocol Mechanism by ECOWAS. This protocol empowered a nine-member Mediation and Security Council (MSC) to make decisions regarding conflict management, resolution, and potential military action through majority voting.⁴

Nigeria's influential role in these developments stemmed from its commitment to democratic values and its desire to uphold its intervention capabilities. The protocol's inception was also influenced by Nigeria's internal transitions of leadership and efforts towards democratisation. By enhancing procedural legitimacy and prioritising negotiated solutions, the protocol bolstered ECOWAS's effectiveness in resolving conflicts. This shift represented a significant reconfiguration of regional dynamics, and regionally driven decision-making process.

Since the adoption of the protocol mechanism by ECOWAS, Nigeria has consistently played a prominent leadership role in several key regional interventions led by the organisation. In 2003, Nigerian troops formed a significant part of ECOWAS forces (ECOMICI) deployed in Côte d'Ivoire following a ceasefire agreement. Similarly, during the Liberia mission in 2003, Nigeria contributed significantly to the ECOWAS Mission in Liberia (ECOMIL), aiding the efforts that facilitated the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL).

In the 2013 Mali intervention, Nigeria led the Africa-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), responding to the coup-induced instability. Moreover, Nigerian leadership was evident in the 2017 intervention in The Gambia, codenamed 'Operation Restore Democracy'. President Yahya Jammeh's refusal to step down after losing the election in Gambia triggered a constitutional crisis. Nigeria, along with ECOWAS, implemented a naval blockade and airspace control, while Nigerian troops advanced towards the Gambian border. This pressure led Jammeh to eventually agree to exile, showcasing Nigeria's commitment to ending dictatorships and supporting peaceful power transitions in West Africa.⁵

West African Coup Belt

The West African region has experienced enormous volatility as a result of two principal challenges—military coups and terrorism. In recent years, West and

⁴ Christof Hartmann and Kai Striebinger, *Governance Transfer by Regional Organizations Patching Together a Global Script*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015, pp. 68–83.

⁵ John Campbell, *Nigeria and the Nation-State: Rethinking Diplomacy with the Postcolonial World*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2020, pp. 159–184.

Central Africa have experienced a series of successful coups that have challenged efforts to move away from the region's reputation as a ‘coup belt’.⁶ Notable coups include ones that led to the removal of Burkina Faso's President Roch Kabore, Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the military takeover in Chad following President Idriss Deby's death, ousting of President Alpha Conde by Mamady Doumbouya in Guinea.

With the exception of the recent coups since 2020 in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, Africa has experienced the most attempted and successful military coups worldwide between 1950 and 2020. During this time period, there were 214 coup attempts in Africa, accounting for roughly 44 per cent of the total 486 attempts worldwide. Among these attempts, 106 were successful, representing around 44 per cent of the 242 successful military coups worldwide.⁷

Notably, a significant proportion of these events occurred in West Africa. Apart from Cape Verde, all West African nations have encountered military coups since achieving independence. The region has seen a total of 93 coup attempts, with more than half of them resulting in successful takeovers. Some countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, had multiple coups. These events highlight instability, corruption, disputed elections, and external influence, which hinder stability and democracy.

The ECOWAS has condemned the unconstitutional seizures of power and took actions to reinstate democratic order and regional stability. ECOWAS imposed sanctions on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, and suspended their memberships in efforts to pressure a return to constitutional rule. Notably, in Mali, ECOWAS acted as a mediator to facilitate the shift towards civilian-led governance and establish clear timelines for democratic elections.⁸ Although the response from the organisation has been varied based on context, ECOWAS consistently aimed to uphold democratic principles and ensure political stability in the region, relying on diplomatic means and economic pressure.

Terrorism and Political Instability

The intricate interplay between political instability stemming from coups and the subsequent upsurge in terrorist incidents is a deeply concerning phenomenon within West Africa. Paradoxically, military factions orchestrating these coups often assert

⁶ Bate Felix, “[Niger Coup: List of Recent Military Takeovers in West and Central Africa](#)”, *Reuters*, 27 July 2023.

⁷ Megan Duzor and Brian Williamson, “[By The Numbers: Coups in Africa - VOA Special Reports](#)”, *Voice of America*, 2 February 2022.

⁸ Bate Felix, “[Niger Coup: List of Recent Military Takeovers in West and Central Africa](#)”, no. 6.

their actions as necessary to protect their countries from jihadist threats. Yet, the reality has been that these military-led administrations are less effective in addressing these very challenges than the elected governments they replaced. Notable terrorist groups, including Boko Haram, Ansaru, Ansar Dine, AQIM, MOJWA, al-Mourabitoun, FLM, and Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, have capitalised on the power vacuum created by these coups to firmly establish themselves in the region.

In the case of Niger, it not only stood as the final stronghold of democracy in the Sahel, but was also regarded as the last defense against jihadists and Russian influence across the area.⁹ While Niger's inclusive approach to counter-terrorism has demonstrated some success, Mali and Burkina Faso have grappled with escalating instability marked by military interventions and ethnic tensions. The recent coup in Niger raises concerns about potential extremist expansion, reflecting patterns observed in neighbouring nations and the possible impact on the broader Sahel region.

Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin, and Togo have witnessed a substantial increase in terrorist incidents, leading to their inclusion in the top 10 countries on the Global Terrorism Index. The negative impact of these activities goes beyond security concerns, affecting multiple aspects such as social and political dynamics, as well as economic landscapes.¹⁰ This influence is far-reaching, impacting both internal territories and neighbouring nations in the region. Benin and Togo have witnessed a significant surge in violent incidents, with reported events increasing to 131 from 16 in Benin and to 22 from 3 in Togo over the past year. This eight-fold rise indicates an ongoing security threat, previously seen as sporadic from Burkina Faso, now affecting these littoral West African states. The reported fatalities of 140 in Benin and 98 in Togo further highlight the gravity of the situation.¹¹

In the first half of 2023, West Africa encountered over 1,800 terrorist attacks causing almost 4,600 fatalities, amplifying a severe humanitarian crisis. Omar Touray, ECOWAS Commission President, informed the UN Security Council that within ECOWAS, the number of refugees stand at over 5,00,000 while 6.2 million people are internally displaced, and more than 40 million in need of food assistance.¹² Touray identified multiple drivers of insecurity, including terrorism, armed rebellion, organised crime, illegal maritime activities, and environmental crises. Notably, 4,593

⁹ Mohamed Bazoum, [**“President of Niger: My Country is Under Attack and I’ve been taken hostage”**](#), *The Washington Post*, 3 August 2023.

¹⁰ [**“Global Terrorism Index \(2023\)”**](#), Institute for Economics and Peace, 14 March 2023.

¹¹ [**“African Militant Islamist Group-Linked Fatalities at All-Time High”**](#), Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 31 July 2023.

¹² Edith M. Lederer, [**“West Africa Recorded over 1,800 Terrorist Attack in First Six Months of 2023, Regional Official Says”**](#), Associated Press, 26 July 2023.

deaths from terrorist attacks were reported between January and 30 June, with high casualties in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

ECOWAS has assumed a crucial role as a collaborative platform among member states, facilitating the formulation and implementation of counter-terrorism strategies. A significant milestone in this endeavour was the establishment of The Inter-Governmental Action Group against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA) in 1999, which subsequently expanded its mandate in 2006 to encompass combatting both money laundering and the financing of terrorism. GIABA proactively advocates for Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Counter-Financing of Terrorism (CFT) measures, delivers technical support, conducts evaluations, and nurtures collaborative initiatives. Furthermore, ECOWAS has established close collaboration with the UN Counter-Terrorism Committee, instituting mechanisms for coordinated actions that involve the exchange of critical reports and assessments.¹³

ECOWAS faces a range of significant challenges in its pursuit of its counter-terrorism measures. One such challenge is the incomplete implementation of counter-terrorism decisions and legally binding instruments by member states, undermining the cohesive regional effort. Additionally, inadequate financial commitment from member states imposes constraints on the capacity of ECOWAS institutions, impeding their ability to achieve optimal results in counter-terrorism endeavours. The lack of uniform ratification of international legal instruments on counter-terrorism among member states poses another obstacle, hampering the establishment of a unified regional framework. ECOWAS's own counter-terrorism initiatives have been hindered by slow implementation, often attributed to a lack of dedicated resources. Moreover, the effectiveness of ECOWAS's endeavours can be compromised by intricate global political dynamics and coordination challenges, particularly in relation to interactions with entities like the AU and UN with respect to the use of force or interventions.¹⁴

Challenges for Nigerian Chairmanship of ECOWAS

In its post-independence era, the region of West Africa, composed of 16 independent nations, has remarkably avoided inter-state violent conflicts, aside from a minor armed clash between Burkina Faso and Mali in 1985.¹⁵ While internal strife has plagued the region and the continent at large, instances of significant hostile engagements among West African countries have remained infrequent. However, the

¹³ Olajide O. Akanji, [“Sub-regional Security Challenge: ECOWAS and the War on Terrorism in West Africa”](#), *Insight on Africa*, 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Abubakar Abubakar Usman and Hakeem Onapajo, [“Why West African States Do Not Go to War With Each Other: ‘Pan-West Africanism’ and Constructivist International Relations”](#), *African Security Review*, 1 May 2023.

current intentions of the ECOWAS to intervene militarily could disrupt the prevailing state of peaceful coexistence.

Presently, there is a division within ECOWAS, with member states like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger sharing recent experiences of governmental changes through coups, as well as facing shared security risks from extremist groups like al Qaeda and Boko Haram. In a united front against external involvement, particularly interventions aimed at removing leaders in Niger, these nations, especially Mali and Burkina Faso, have jointly asserted that any attempts to depose a Nigerien leader would be construed as an aggressive act against their respective nations.¹⁶ This position introduces a complex scenario that could involve both forces aligned with junta-led regimes and ECOWAS military forces.

Furthermore, any potential intervention efforts could involve Russia. The recent coup in Niger has elicited concerns regarding Russia's increasing influence in West Africa, notably through backing from the Wagner Group. This coup serves as a striking example of the ongoing indirect confrontation among major global powers within the region. Western nations, notably the US and France, perceive the establishment of democratic governance as a means to counteract Russia's expansionist aims and uphold their own sway. The prospect of the coup aligning with Russian interests raises alarm in the West, given Niger's strategic uranium resources and its potential role as a key point for Russian endeavours.¹⁷ This predicament poses a formidable test for both the West and ECOWAS, compelling them to grapple with external interference and safeguard the West African countries sovereignty.

Moreover, France's engagement in Francophone countries has sparked negative sentiments among locals, making it advisable for ECOWAS to consider letting the US lead instead of France. Notably, Niger was a significant collaborator with the US on counter-terrorism efforts. A shift towards Russia-leaning governance could be detrimental to Washington, Paris, Brussels, and local population, replacing a fragile democracy with an unstable military regime. The recent Niger coup received local applause with minimal resistance, suggesting a perception of democracy as an elite endeavour, as the populace prioritises stability over democratic ideals.

France's role in Africa, including economic and political interventions post-independence, has led to criticism. France's continued influence is evident in the use of the CFA franc currency in Francophone states, backed by France's guarantee and pegged to the euro. France also intervened militarily to support unpopular leaders.¹⁸ The French-led response to Sahel region insurgencies has not yielded desired results,

¹⁶ [“Burkina Faso, Mali Warn against Military Intervention in Niger”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 1 August 2023.

¹⁷ Andreas Kluth, [“Out of Africa, a New World War?”](#), *Bloomberg*, 8 August 2023.

¹⁸ Leonard Mbulle-Nziege and Nic Cheeseman, [“Niger Coup: Is France to Blame for Instability in West Africa?”](#), *BBC News*, 6 August 2023.

allowing West African governments to regain control. This failure contributed to the erosion of civilian leadership in Burkina Faso and Mali, fostering the belief that French support was more of a liability than a benefit. Increasing public frustration bolstered military leaders' confidence in staging coup.

Finally, reforming Nigeria holistically is a major challenge and the only viable long-term option given the geopolitical situation. President Bola Tinubu's call for restructuring the country's security apparatus faces challenges, as highlighted by the rejection of his request for ECOWAS intervention by the Nigerian Senate. The Senate emphasised the dire internal situation and the need to prioritise fixing the country's issues and reforming the military before considering external military involvement. Senators expressed concerns over the military's lack of equipment and readiness, citing Nigeria's fragile peace and the prevalence of arms trade in the region, particularly in Niger.¹⁹ The rejection underscores the complex security landscape and the imperative to strengthen the national military capabilities before pursuing external interventions.

While ECOWAS aims to enforce stability, capacity limitations, conflicting priorities (debt, poverty), and a credibility gap due to past interventions hinder its effectiveness. External support is often limited due to perceived strategic benefits. A comprehensive approach is needed, emphasising leadership, governance, financial prudence, security, secular governance, people-centric policies, and economic management. Nigeria's leadership must navigate these complexities to promote stability and resilience during its ECOWAS chairmanship.

Conclusion

Nigeria's leadership as the chair of ECOWAS presents a pivotal opportunity to navigate the challenges noted above. Nigeria can help ECOWAS foster collaboration with international partners such as the AU and UN, build institutional capacities and review and improve counter-terrorism strategies to forge a more secure and resilient future for its member states. The realisation of these strategies will not only reinforce ECOWAS's role as a regional stabilising force, but also contribute significantly to the broader global efforts against terrorism and instability.

¹⁹ Bisi Abidoye, [“Niger Coup: Nigerian Senators Reject Tinubu’s Request for Troops Deployment”](#), *Premium Times*, 5 August 2023.

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