ISSN (O): 2584-2196

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEGAL AFFAIRS AND EXPLORATION

Volume 3 | Issue 2

2025

Website: www.ijlae.com

Email: editor@ijlae.com

ISSN (O): 2584-2196

THE ECOWAS IN THE ERA OF THE 'AFRICAN JUNTA'- THE ANALYSIS OF NEOCOLONIALISM IN THE WEST AFRICAN REGION

Piyush Kumar Das

Law Student, Delhi Metropolitan Education affiliated to Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University

ABSTRACT

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975 to promote economic integration, political stability, and collective security, confronts an existential crisis as key member states, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, announce their withdrawal. These nations, governed by military juntas, accuse ECOWAS of deviating from its founding principles, failing to address regional insecurity, and perpetuating neo-colonial dynamics through tacit alignment with foreign powers, particularly France. Their exit is framed as a reassertion of sovereignty, rejecting what they perceive as exploitative foreign interference in governance and resource extraction. Anti-French sentiment has surged across the Sahel, fueled by allegations of economic marginalization, military overreach, and cultural hegemony, prompting demands to expel French troops and dismantle enduring colonial-era ties. Recent coups in these states, while condemned internationally, reflect broader public disillusionment with democratically elected governments seen as complicit in Western agendas, exacerbating instability and eroding trust in regional institutions. The crisis underscores a geopolitical realignment, with juntas seeking partnerships with Russia, whose Wagner Group and diplomatic overtures offer an alternative to Western influence. This shift threatens to fragment ECOWAS's unity, weaken economic collaboration, and destabilize security frameworks, particularly in combating jihadist insurgencies. This paper examines the interplay of colonial legacies, sovereignty struggles, and shifting global alliances driving ECOWAS's decline. It argues that the bloc's credibility hinges on addressing structural inequities, recalibrating its

ISSN (O): 2584-2196

relationship with former colonial powers, and prioritizing endogenous solutions to governance and security. Without urgent reforms to reconcile regional aspirations with transnational challenges, ECOWAS risks irrelevance, potentially catalyzing broader destabilization in West Africa and altering the continent's geopolitical trajectory.

Keywords: ECOWAS, neocolonialism, sovereignty, military coup(s), military junta

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 1975 with the primary goal of promoting economic integration, political stability, and regional cooperation among its fifteen-member states[1] [2]. Over the decades, ECOWAS has played a crucial role in mediating conflicts, facilitating trade, and fostering democratic governance in West Africa. However, the region is currently experiencing a profound transformation marked by a resurgence of military juntas and a growing sentiment against neo-colonial influences, particularly from former colonial powers like France[3]. This complex interplay of factors poses significant challenges to ECOWAS's foundational objectives and its role as a stabilizing force in the region. The backdrop of neo-colonialism has deeply influenced the political landscape of West Africa. Many countries in the region grapple with the legacies of colonial rule, which have manifested in economic dependency, political instability, and social unrest[4]. The perception that Western powers continue to exert control over local affairs has fuelled anti-French sentiments, particularly in nations like Mali and Burkina Faso[5]. The presence of French military forces, initially deployed to combat terrorism and support local governments, has increasingly been viewed as an infringement on national sovereignty. This discontent has catalyzed calls for the removal of foreign troops and a reassertion of local governance. The recent wave of military coups—most notably in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023)—reflects a broader dissatisfaction with perceived Western interference and the inability of traditional political structures to address pressing security challenges. These juntas have framed their ascension to power as a necessary response to external manipulation and internal failures, positioning themselves as champions of national sovereignty against neocolonial

[1] (Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), n.d.)
[2] (ECOWAS in brief, n.d.)
[3] (Padmashree Anandhan, 2025)
[4] (Settles, 1996)
[5] (Bensimon, 2023)

forces. This shift has led to a pivot towards alternative alliances, including potential partnerships with countries such as Russia, which are seen as more amenable to supporting local governance without imposing neo-colonial conditions[6].As member states grapple with these dynamics, the withdrawal from ECOWAS by countries under military rule raises critical questions about the future of regional cooperation[7]. The bloc's cohesion is threatened not only by these departures but also by differing visions for governance and security within its ranks. The challenge for ECOWAS lies in navigating this turbulent landscape while upholding its commitment to democracy and stability. This introduction sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how neo-colonial legacies and military governance are reshaping the political landscape in West Africa, posing both challenges and opportunities for ECOWAS in its quest for regional integration and peace.

Moreover, the implications of these developments extend beyond immediate political ramifications; they also pose significant risks to regional security and economic development. The rise of military regimes often leads to increased instability and can exacerbate existing conflicts, further complicating ECOWAS's peacekeeping efforts. Additionally, as countries turn away from traditional alliances in favor of new partnerships, there is potential for geopolitical realignment that could alter the balance of power within West Africa. This evolving scenario necessitates a comprehensive re-evaluation of ECOWAS's strategies for engagement and intervention, emphasizing the importance of fostering inclusive governance models that resonate with the aspirations of West African populations while effectively countering external influences that threaten sovereignty and stability.

In this context, it becomes imperative for ECOWAS to not only re-affirm its commitment to democratic principles but also adapt its frameworks to address the underlying grievances that fuel discontent among member states. This involves engaging in dialogue with both military leaders and civil society to understand their perspectives and aspirations. By prioritizing grassroots involvement and addressing socio-economic disparities that contribute to instability, ECOWAS can work towards rebuilding trust among its members and enhancing its legitimacy as a regional authority. Furthermore, fostering collaboration with international partners who respect local agency rather than impose external agendas will be crucial for creating sustainable pathways toward peace and development in West Africa. As the region navigates these

[6] (Ferragamo, 2023)
[7] (The withdrawal of three West African states from ECOWAS, 2024)

turbulent waters, the ability of ECOWAS to innovate and respond effectively will determine not only its future but also that of West African nations striving for autonomy and prosperity in an increasingly complex global landscape.

ECOWAS AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional union of fifteen West African countries focused on economic integration, peace, stability, and development. Established in 1975, ECOWAS has received mixed reviews regarding its effectiveness in achieving its objectives. This chapter explores the structure, achievements, challenges, and impact of ECOWAS in addressing the needs of its member states and advancing regional development.

ECOWAS was founded to foster a unified West Africa through economic integration, aiming to drive prosperity, reduce poverty, and strengthen regional stability. Its objectives center on promoting economic cohesion by establishing a common market and customs union to enhance trade and investment, while enabling the free movement of people across member states to facilitate residency, work, and cultural exchange[8]. The bloc also prioritizes conflict prevention and resolution through diplomatic mechanisms and, when necessary, military interventions to maintain peace and security. Additionally, it seeks to advance developmental cooperation by coordinating policies in critical sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, and education, all aimed at fostering sustainable growth and equitable progress across the region[9].

ECOWAS has achieved several notable successes over the years, including the facilitation of free movement of people, goods, and services across borders through the introduction of the ECOWAS Travel Certificate and Biometric Identity Card[10]. It has also played a crucial role in peacekeeping and conflict resolution, notably in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Mali, through its military intervention arm, ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group)[11]. Furthermore, ECOWAS has made strides in economic integration initiatives, such as the ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) and plans for a single currency known as the "Eco," representing steps toward economic unification[12]. Finally,

[8] (About ECOWAS, n.d.)
[9] (Fundamental Principles, n.d.)
[10] (Aderanti Adepoju)
[11] (Waging War to Keep the Peace:The ECOMOG Intervention and Human Rights, 1993)
[12] National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies/University of Benin. Retrieved from (Nelson, 2020)

regional infrastructure projects, including cross-border roads, energy grids, and telecommunications projects, have improved connectivity and integration within the region.

Despite its achievements, ECOWAS faces significant hurdles that impede its effectiveness, including frequent coups, political crises, and weak governance in member states that undermine regional stability and policy implementation. Wide economic disparities between member states complicate efforts to achieve equitable integration. Limited resources and inefficiencies within ECOWAS institutions hinder their ability to execute mandates effectively, while the rise of terrorism and insurgency, especially in the Sahel region, strains ECOWAS' capacity to maintain peace and security. The slow implementation of adopted agreements and protocols, due to a lack of political will or inadequate national enforcement, further challenges the organization. ECOWAS's effectiveness can also be compromised by intricate global political dynamics and coordination challenges The organization's traditional tools of influence, such as sanctions and military threats, have become counterproductive, demanding that legitimate issues are addressed and that member states are given alternative diplomatic and security options. A major shortcoming has been ECOWAS's failure to address leaders amending national constitutions to increase their term.[13]

In recent years, ECOWAS has faced criticism for its response to political and security crises. For instance, the wave of coups in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso exposed weaknesses in the organization's ability to uphold democratic principles. Sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on these nations have sometimes been viewed as counterproductive, worsening economic hardship for citizens without effectively influencing political outcomes[14].

On the economic front, progress toward the adoption of the single currency has been delayed multiple times, reflecting challenges in achieving macroeconomic convergence among member states. Additionally, non-tariff barriers and inadequate infrastructure continue to hinder the realization of a seamless regional market[15].

To enhance its effectiveness, ECOWAS must focus on several critical areas, including building the capacity of its institutions to implement policies effectively and independently, and promoting democratic governance and the rule of law to ensure political stability within

[13] (Oddih & Okor 2020)
[14] (Cam, 2024)
[15] (Anele & Anuga, 2024)

member states. Investing in counter-terrorism efforts and improving the capacity of ECOMOG are also necessary to enhance security frameworks. Addressing structural barriers to trade and ensuring equitable participation of all member states in economic integration projects is needed to accelerate economic reforms, while raising awareness and fostering public support for ECOWAS initiatives will enhance legitimacy and accountability. It should also prioritize incorporating disaster risk reduction principles into its development agenda and programs. This includes strengthening national platforms for disaster risk reduction and specialized sub-regional institutions for disaster risk management. Furthermore, ECOWAS should focus on improving early warning systems to detect, anticipate, and prevent crises, which would lead to improved regional peace, stability, and "investment ECOWAS"[16] remains a critical actor in the quest for a more integrated and prosperous West Africa. While it has made commendable strides in fostering regional cooperation and addressing conflicts, its effectiveness is constrained by political, economic, and institutional challenges. By addressing these issues and reinforcing its commitment to its foundational goals, ECOWAS has the potential to become a model for regional integration and development in Africa.

NEOCOLONIALISM AND THE WESTERN AFRICAN REGION

Neo-colonialism, as a concept, refers to the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures by powerful countries to control or influence less powerful nations, particularly those that were previously colonized[17]. In the context of the Western African region, neo-colonialism manifests in several interconnected ways:

Economic Dependence

West African countries frequently face persistent trade deficits, driven by their dependence on exporting unprocessed commodities such as oil, gold, and cocoa to former colonial powers and Western multinational corporations, while importing costly manufactured products. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the region often concentrates on extractive industries rather than supporting domestic industrialization or infrastructure, leading to profits being repatriated abroad instead of fostering local economic growth. Compounding these challenges, many nations in the region grapple with substantial external debt owed to international financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) mandated

[16] (ECOWAS Investment Forum shows opportunities in West Africa, 2024)
[17] (Obikwelu, Messina, & Odumegwu, 2023)

by these entities typically impose neoliberal reforms, including privatization, austerity measures, and deregulation, which frequently undermine social services and public welfare, exacerbating socioeconomic challenges for local populations.[18] [19]

Political Influence[20]

Western nations have historically exerted political influence in West Africa, backing regimes that align with their strategic or economic interests while destabilizing those perceived as adversarial. Military interventions, often justified as counter-terrorism initiatives, are increasingly viewed as mechanisms of geopolitical control rather than genuine stabilization efforts. France, for instance, retains economic leverage over its former colonies through the CFA franc—a currency tied to the euro and managed by the French Treasury—which critics argue restricts West African nations' monetary autonomy and perpetuates neo-colonial dependencies[21].

Western counter-terrorism strategies in the region have struggled to achieve lasting success, as foreign military operations often erode the legitimacy of partner governments and overlook the complex dynamics of fragmented insurgencies. France's aggressive tactics, including airstrikes and ground operations, have drawn backlash for causing civilian harm and inflaming anti-Western and anti-government resentment, contributing to political instability and recent military coups. Meanwhile, abrupt reductions in Western security assistance risk destabilizing client states reliant on external military backing[22].

As Russia expands its footprint in West Africa through security partnerships, disinformation campaigns, and resource deals, NATO members face mounting pressure to reassess their engagement strategies. The Kremlin's growing influence, fueled by deployments of paramilitary groups and diplomatic overtures, underscores a shift in the region's geopolitical alignment. Concurrently, Western cultural and media dominance continues to shape perceptions, though its hegemony is increasingly contested by alternative narratives and alliances[23].

Cultural imperialism

[18] (West Africa regional overview, n.d.)
[19] (Collier, 2002)
[20] (Gurjar, 2023)
[21] (King, 2022)
[22] (Violent extremism in the Sahel, 2024)
[23] (Stronski, 2023)

ISSN (O): 2584-2196

Cultural imperialism in West Africa is evident in the pervasive influence of Western media and educational systems, which often overshadow local traditions, languages, and viewpoints, fostering cultural dependency. This influence, which came to Africa through slavery and colonialism, disrupted African societies by imposing European rules and customs, thereby dismantling indigenous structures. This imposition was psychologically and culturally damaging, supplanting native social structures with foreign laws and norms. European colonization led to the suppression of numerous African cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems, notably through the neocolonization of public education. The emigration of skilled West African professionals to the West, known as "brain drain," exacerbates this dependence by depriving the region of talent and reinforcing reliance on external expertise.[24]

Resource Exploitation

Western corporations often exploit West African resources without adequately compensating local communities, leading to environmental degradation, such as oil spills in Nigeria's Niger Delta. Many mines in West Africa are owned by French, American, and Chinese majors. Experts call the area a geological scandal due to its exceptionally abundant and diversified mining potential. Large-scale land acquisitions by foreign entities for agriculture or mining displace local populations and undermine food security. The projects that most Multinational Corporations (MNCs) undertake in a number of African countries have no clear justification with the development needs of the host states. MNCs have continued to perpetuate the economic plunder of the colonial governments. MNCs represent a new form of economic imperialism that has resulted in further impoverishment of the African continent[25].

Resistance and Regional Responses

The push for decolonization in West Africa is multifaceted and driven by a desire to break free from historical patterns of exploitation and dependence. Economically, this involves diversifying economies beyond resource extraction, promoting local industries, and renegotiating trade agreements to benefit West African nations. It requires a shift from relying on Western aid and investment to building internal capacity and fostering intra-African trade. Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)[26] are crucial in this regard.In education, decolonization means reforming curricula to reflect African history,

[24] (jr, 1992)
[25] (Hamid, n.d.)
[26] (Making the AfCFTA promise a reality for women and youth, n.d.)

culture, and perspectives, rather than solely focusing on Western narratives. This also involves promoting African languages and supporting local research and scholarship. Politically, decolonization entails strengthening democratic institutions, promoting good governance, and resisting external interference in domestic affairs. It requires a commitment to self-determination and the ability to chart an independent course without undue influence from former colonial powers or other external actors. Culturally, decolonization involves reclaiming and celebrating African traditions, arts, and cultural expressions, countering the dominance of Western cultural norms. This can include promoting African music, literature, and cinema, as well as supporting local artists and cultural organizations. However, the path to decolonization is not without its challenges. Resistance from entrenched interests, both within and outside the region, can hinder progress. Additionally, there is the risk of replacing one form of dependence with another, such as becoming overly reliant on new external partners. Successfully navigating this complex landscape requires a nuanced approach that balances the need for international cooperation with the imperative of self-determination. It also requires strong leadership, popular participation, and a clear vision for a more just and equitable future.

Neo-colonialism in West Africa perpetuates many of the inequalities established during the colonial period[27]. Breaking free from these influences requires bold policy shifts, regional cooperation, and fostering sustainable development strategies that prioritize local needs over external interests.

MILLITARY JUNTA, A THREAT, AN ANSWER, OR A QUESTION ON THE SUSTENANCE OF THE ECOWAS?

The rise of military regimes across West Africa poses a complex dilemma for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), demanding a strategic reassessment of its policies to align with shifting political dynamics. While the overthrow of civilian governments undermines democratic norms, these upheavals also unveil a critical opening to tackle entrenched systemic failures and re-imagine governance frameworks that better serve citizens. This dual reality compels ECOWAS to balance its commitment to democratic ideals with pragmatic engagement to foster long-term stability and equity.

Military coups in the region frequently originate from widespread public disillusionment with civilian administrations plagued by corruption, economic mismanagement, and deteriorating

[27] (Afisi, n.d.)

ISSN (O): 2584-2196

security[28]. Chronic grievances, such as elite enrichment at the expense of marginalized populations and state institutions' inability to counter terrorism or communal violence, have eroded trust in democratic processes. In this context, military interventions—though antithetical to constitutional order—may act as a disruptive force, dismantling entrenched patronage networks and catalyzing institutional overhauls. For instance, juntas often justify their actions by pledging to combat graft, redistribute resources, and restore public services, which, if executed transparently, could lay a foundation for more accountable governance. ECOWAS must recognize these underlying drivers of instability to guide transitions toward inclusive systems that address citizen demands rather than merely re-instating superficial democracy.

A recurring theme in recent coups is the rhetoric of sovereignty and resistance to external influence. Military leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, for example, have framed their ascension as a rejection of neo-colonial interference, particularly from former colonial powers and international organizations perceived as prioritizing foreign agendas over local needs[29]. This narrative resonates with populations weary of exploitative economic partnerships or foreign military presence that fails to enhance security. Such movements underscore a growing aspiration for self-determination, which ECOWAS could harness to strengthen regional cohesion. By acknowledging these sentiments and advocating for collective autonomy, ECOWAS might cultivate a shared identity rooted in Pan-Africanism, reducing reliance on external actors and fostering intra-regional cooperation.

Historically, ECOWAS has responded to coups with punitive measures, including sanctions and suspension of membership. However, this approach risks alienating junta-led states, pushing them toward alternative alliances (e.g., with Russia or regional blocs like the Sahel Alliance), and exacerbating civilian hardships. A recalibrated strategy could blend principled advocacy for democracy with flexible diplomacy. For instance, ECOWAS might conditionally engage juntas by offering roadmaps for transition, tied to milestones such as anti-corruption reforms, inclusive national dialogues, and electoral timelines. Technical support in drafting constitutions, re-training security forces, or auditing public finances could incentivize compliance. By positioning itself as a partner in reform rather than a punitive authority,

[28] (Oyekunle, Oyekunle, Ayowole, & Ibrahim)
[29] (Cheeseman, 2023)

ECOWAS can steer regimes toward participatory governance while mitigating regional fragmentation.

Beyond governance, ECOWAS must amplify efforts to address the socio-economic roots of instability. Chronic poverty, youth unemployment, and climate-induced resource scarcity create fertile ground for extremism and political volatility. Regional initiatives such as the ECOWAS Investment and Development Bank[30] could prioritize infrastructure projects that connect landlocked nations to coastal hubs, stimulating cross-border trade and job creation. Similarly, a unified approach to combating terrorism—through intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and de-radicalization programs—would bolster collective security. Strengthening mechanisms like the Accra Initiative[31], which focuses on conflict prevention, could also pre-empt crises. By linking governance reforms to tangible improvements in livelihoods and safety, ECOWAS can rebuild public confidence in regional institutions.

The current crisis invites ECOWAS to re-envision its role as a facilitator of sustainable transformation. This entails decentralizing decision-making to include grassroots voices—such as youth, women, and civil society—in policy design, ensuring that governance models reflect diverse needs. Additionally, learning from hybrid systems in nations like Ghana or Senegal, which blend traditional leadership with modern democracy, might offer culturally attuned solutions. Proactive engagement with digital innovation, such as e-governance platforms to enhance transparency, could further bridge gaps between states and citizens.

The surge in military rule presents ECOWAS with a pivotal choice: cling rigidly to outdated protocols or adapt to catalyse meaningful progress. By addressing the core drivers of coups—corruption, inequality, and foreign overreach—and championing homegrown solutions, ECOWAS can convert instability into a renaissance of governance. This demands patience, empathy, and a willingness to experiment with hybrid transition models. Ultimately, a reimagined ECOWAS, rooted in equity and agility, could emerge as a beacon of resilience, uniting West Africa in pursuit of shared prosperity and authentic self-governance.

CONCLUSION

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is currently at a pivotal juncture, confronted with the rise of military-led governments in response to widespread

[30] (ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development, n.d.)
[31] (Birikorang & Abdallah, 2023)

ISSN (O): 2584-2196

dissatisfaction with neo-colonial structures and ineffective civilian leadership. As military juntas emerge in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger, the role of ECOWAS is under scrutiny for its perceived alignment with Western interests, particularly in managing political transitions and coups. The resurgence of military governments is indicative of deeper systemic issues within the region, including economic dependency, political instability, and a growing discontent with governance under neo-colonial pressures. These juntas often position themselves as anti-neocolonial forces, challenging the status quo and rejecting external interference. While their legitimacy and long-term effectiveness remain uncertain, they resonate with populations frustrated by years of ineffective governance. For ECOWAS, this era necessitates a recalibration of its approach. Rather than relying solely on sanctions and interventions—which can exacerbate regional tensions—the organization must prioritize dialogue and regional self-determination. Addressing the root causes of instability, such as poverty, inequality, and external exploitation, is crucial for fostering sustainable development. By engaging constructively with military regimes, ECOWAS can help guide them towards more inclusive governance while respecting their sovereignty. This moment presents an opportunity for ECOWAS to redefine itself as a true Pan-African force for unity. By breaking free from neo-colonial influences and empowering member states to chart their own futures, ECOWAS can align itself more closely with the aspirations of the region's people. The current wave of military takeovers underscores the urgency for systemic transformation in West Africa. While neo-colonialism remains a persistent barrier to development, the growing demand for sovereignty and self-reliance offers a pathway for meaningful change. In conclusion, ECOWAS must evolve to reflect the aspirations of West African citizens while balancing its mandate for stability with the pursuit of genuine independence. By embracing dialogue and addressing underlying issues, ECOWAS has the potential to emerge as a relevant force for regional cooperation and development in a rapidly changing landscape. This approach not only enhances its legitimacy but also fosters a sense of ownership among member states in shaping their political futures.