

ECOEXIT: On The Rationality of a Disintegrating ECOWAS Bloc, 1975-2025

Charles Okeke Okoko

Department of History and International Studies, Evangel University,
Akaeze, Ebonyi State, Nigeria

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijirmmcs.15/vol11n14054>

Published June 10, 2025

Citation: Okoko CO (2025) ECOEXIT: On The Rationality of a Disintegrating ECOWAS Bloc, 1975-2025, *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies*, Vol.11, No.1, pp.40-54

Abstract: *The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) evolved gradually since 1975. Its creation was intended for cooperation and an envisaged eventual integration in trade, security, unified tariff systems and legalities in a common court and parliament. Did these expectations come to fruition? Did the signatories reap optimal benefits from the ECOWAS? What were the cost-benefit implications for the exiting nations of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger vis-à-vis their economies, politics, security and, generally, freedom of movements and migrations? These nations exited seemingly because the ECOWAS failed in the implementation of the ideals for which it was conceived. Moreover, bigger member-nations, such as Nigeria and Ghana that made more financial contributions to the association immediately wielded the big stick of suspension. This action nexus the coups d'état in the nations was overreaching especially since the ECOWAS failed in the overall purpose of regional integration, promotion of intra-national trade and in ensuring security in the West African subregion. Additionally, the exiting nations accused former colonists, majorly France, of meddlesomeness in the internal affairs of the ECOWAS and conceived that the ECOWAS was no longer a safe haven vis-à-vis the insecurity that characterized the Sahel region of West Africa. Insecurity was exemplified by the activities of al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS) that competed with each other for footholds in the region. It was concluded that ECOEXIT portended greater danger since freedom of movements of the people; goods and capital which underpinned integration, were curtailed. That border controls, tariff and customs' checks were reintroduced and further complicated intra-regional businesses and activities that flowed to some extent before ECOEXIT. Primary sources were used extensively while secondary sources served complementary purposes.*

Keywords: ECOEXIT, exiting, ECOWAS, insecurity, freedom, movements, interregional, nations, failures, rationality, suspension.

INTRODUCTION

ECOEXIT has been coined after the departure of some nations from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) subregional bloc. The costs and benefits for membership in the bloc are *raison d'être* for the exiting of some of its members. Created in emulation of the European Economic Community (EEC), the ECOWAS had hiccups in operationalizing the ideals for which it was set up. Notable among these ideals, encapsulated in a cooperation agreement signed in 1975 were in trade, common tariff and

customs systems, common currency and legalities in a common court and parliament. It was hoped that as cooperation among members grew, the possibilities of an eventual integration loomed large.

Certain questions have been raised resultant from ECOEXIT. What were, and indeed, the costs and benefits for membership of the exiting nations? What would become the fate of the nations regarding the cooperation agreement in trade, security, tariff systems and legalities signed in the ECOWAS? Would ECOWAS laws and Court still have primacy over these nations' laws? Would the ECOWAS risk disintegration if the Republics of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger exited, especially as they were among the founding nations of the bloc?

Further questions were raised to include: Can a neo-integrational bloc subsist in the West African subregion? During a Summit in the Nigerien capital, Niamey, the military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger signed a Confederation Treaty that underscored ECOEXIT and aimed at evolving a mutual defense pact in 2022; and named it the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This marked a move away from the traditional regional cooperation from pre-coloniality and from former colonial Western allies in coloniality (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2024). On July 6, 2024, in Niamey, the Sahel leaders officially signed and adopted the following (Blazenews, 2024):

1. The creation of the 'Confederation of Sahel States Alliance' (AES);
2. The creation of an AES Investment bank and a stabilization fund for the immediate launch and use of a single currency;
3. Strengthening a mutual defence pact announced in 2023;
4. The AES will unite against possible threats of armed rebellion or external aggression; and
5. That Burkina Faso will host the first parliamentary session of the Alliance while Colonel Assimi Goita of Mali will assume the Presidency of the AES with a mandate of one year.

This pact was created after general Abdourahman Tchiani, Captain Ibrahim Traore and Colonel Assimi Goita of the republics of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, respectively, took over power in successive military coups *d'état* in their West African nations. Consequent on the coups, ECOWAS had undiplomatically suspended the three nations from the bloc. It will be recalled that the military takeovers occurred in August 2021 in Mali, September 2022 in Burkina Faso and July 2023 in Mali. The mutual defense pact was possible, in part, because these are contiguous border nations. Although the ECOWAS leaders held the hope of an eventual reunion of the trio with the regional bloc, their display of highhandedness compelled the Sahel nations to severe relations and withdrew in January 2023. To them, the fifty-year old ECOWAS had become a threat to their States.

Views of the Sahel Nations' Leaders

Recalling the statements of the Nigerien and Burkina Faso Presidents, Tchiani and Traore (Blazenews, 2024):

We are going to create an AES of the peoples, instead of an ECOWAS whose directives and constructions are dictated to it by powers that are foreign to Africa ...; and seeking to exploit the countries.

Rehearsing Traore and Goita who accused former colonial rulers, especially France, of meddling in the internal affairs of ECOWAS (Blazenews, 2024), they said:

Westerners consider that we belong to them and our wealth also belongs to them. They think that they are the ones who must continue to tell us what is good of our States.

This era is gone forever. Our resources will remain for us and our populations. The strengthened relationship means an attack on one of us will be an attack on all other members [of AES].

Efforts were made by ECOWAS leaders, in both official and personal capacities to mediate the dissenting countries back into the old bloc but to no avail. Ahmed Idris noted vehemence by the leaders of the Sahelian States on not returning to the 'old' fold. The efforts of the Senegalese President, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, at mediation via personal visits to these nations did not yield reconciliation. The resoluteness that underpinned the creation of the three-member Alliance of Sahel States, which obviously weakened the ECOWAS, resonated the fact that the ECOWAS did not perform well in achieving regional integration, promoting intra-African trade and ensuring security in the region. These non-achievements were enough justifications for the outrage and feelings of the citizens of the three nations and their 'coupist' leaders; and on the other hand are the remains of ECOWAS member-nations that feel shortchanged but not exited. Certain questions have further been raised regarding the standing of the ECOWAS vis-à-vis whether it should be revised and/or reinvented? The threat of military action by 'mother' ECOWAS was bared-faced un-diplomacy.

Violence and Instability

Violence and instability were rife in the Sahel States, although not peculiar to them. Their leaders raised concerns over the unabating insecurity created by armed groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS) which competed with each other for footholds in the large expanse of wastelands or desert that characterized the Sahel region of West Africa.

Pursuing homegrown efforts in antiterrorism and banditry, and, indeed, portraying obvious anti-neocolonialist moves, the three nations severed relations with Western governments, especially with their former colonial rulers. Consequent on the severance (Blazenews, 2024):

- i. French troops withdrew from Mali in 2022 and from Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023;
- ii. The United States of America equally withdrew their troops from the Republic of Niger from its airbase in Niamey and abandoned a \$100 million drone base in Agadez. This facility was ironically used in the gathering of intelligence about armed groups in the region; and
- iii. Having pushed out Western allies, the military leaders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso increasingly pursued security and economic ties with Russia.

The extent to which the moves by the leaders of the three exiting nations helped in tackling violence and insecurity with a combined population of about 72 million remains difficult to ascertain. According to Tracker Reports, the escalation of violence led to the death of more than 8000 persons in 2023. In Niger, the gains made against armed groups were lost as a result of the coup *d'état*. The launching of offensives against armed groups in association with Russian government's linked group, the Wagner Mercenaries, seemingly produced an inverse result - the indiscriminate killing of hundreds of civilians, destruction of infrastructure, looting of property and mass displacement of about 3 million peoples across the region (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 2024).

Yet, in spite of these setbacks, the leaders of the nations remained resolute, avowedly turning their backs on the 'old' West African bloc - ECOWAS. The leaders reinvented the processes that would consolidate

on the foundations of the true independence of their nations. Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso reaffirmed the tripartite resolution of independence nexus the meddlesomeness of Western powers when he stated that Africa has suffered and continues to suffer from the fire of the imperialists who have only one cliché in mind: “Africa is the empire of slaves” (Damian Zane, 2024).

The exiting leaders insist on the cooperation and growth of an AES that will serve as the new blueprint that would aid the reinvention of the failed ideals of the ECOWAS, such as the formation of closer economic ties, creation of a common currency, thereby rejecting the French-backed Franc used in the Sahel nations. Seemingly a resurgence of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM) of 20th century Africa, the three nations, as mentioned elsewhere, expelled their colonial and neo-colonial rulers alongside their organs of coercion (the army) which, unarguably and ironically, were part of the anti-jihadist mission. They rather turned to Russia for military assistance. Particularizing on tackling insecurity, the leaders initially muted and eventually activated a standby force that would be used in fighting terrorism and banditry in the Sahel zone. In the words of Traore (Damian Zane, 2024):

Today, as Africans, we are very proud to see a summit where its an African summit, a summit where States have decided to pool their energies, to pool their forces to create an alliance for their development, without any foreign stakeholders, without any counterparts from the powers that are used to ruling over us.

Effects of ECOEXIT

The announcement by the exiting military leaders at the end of January 2024 that they were withdrawing from ECOWAS immediately created a complex set of challenges for the West African subregion. It will be sounding the death bell of the 50-year ECOWAS bloc unless the leaders reversed their decision.

Perhaps, the ECOWAS leaders thought that threatening military action and imposing hard-lined sanctions would have intimidated and emasculated the exiting leaders. They were not cowed. The leaders of ECOWAS, rather, were disgraced or ‘lost face’ when the Sahel leaders refused to back down (Chris Ewokor and Bassilloh Rukanga, 2024). To the exiting leaders, the protocols of ECOWAS that aimed at upholding democracy and good governance were a farce. The *volte faces* on removing sanctions by ECOWAS was also perceived by them as deceptive.

Contrary to the opinion of, and to douse the fears of, ECOWAS leaders that ECOEXIT would disrupt the freedom of movements of people across the region; and undermine efforts at combating regional insecurity, especially in the area of intelligence sharing, the exiting leaders had during the signing into existence of the Alliance for Sahel States (AES) agreed to build common institutions and infrastructure that would aid the free movement of their citizens within the three countries. This was necessary in order to protect the full consideration of what could become of the fate of their citizens who lived and worked in other ECOWAS member-nations.

The yearnings of the exiting leaders seemingly aligned with those of the present ECOWAS Chairman (2025), President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, himself adjudged to have come to power constitutionally through the subversion of electoral laws and rigged elections, who ‘inadvertently’ stressed on the need to form new partnerships in order to overcome the political, economic and security challenges in West Africa, especially in the Sahel region immediately south of the Sahara Desert. That in addition to the disruption of movements

in the region, was the palpable fear that jihadists would spread through the Sahel borders into neighbouring countries. It will be recalled that the nations of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger that were also founding members of the ECOWAS had been worst-hit by Islamic insurgencies; and accounted largely for the military takeovers. Rehearsing Adama Gaye, a former Director of Communication of the ECOWAS bloc, the newly created Confederation of Sahel nations would deal a blow to the 'old' ECOWAS which had not performed to members' expectations (Ewokor and Rukanga, 2024). It was disheartening to the exiting leaders that in spite of the hue and cry of democratic rule, most West African countries have not been true democracies. ECOEXIT has proven ECOWAS as an institutional laughing stock, especially, democratically.

ECOEXIT, so far, has the negative effects of hindering economic cooperation, disenfranchised integration and increased trading costs; and increased humanitarian crises in and betwixt the Sahel nations that before now did not have clear-cut blueprints in tackling terrorism (Eric Pichon, 2024: 1).

Another major effect of ECOEXIT is directly linked to the exiting leaders' criticisms of the role of Western powers in the ECOWAS region, especially France, their former colonial ruler. Engaging in a neo-decolonization, the leaders argued that the ECOWAS has been subservient to, and manipulated by, France; and declared Paris a common enemy of the Sahel States portrayed in the favouring of partnerships with Russia, Turkey and Iran (Channelstv, 2025). To underscore their breakaway, they expelled France, Germany and US forces from the Sahel region. Consenting, the German Defence Ministry announced that it will end operations in Niger at the end of August 2024, however, as a result of breakdown in talks with her ruling military junta. The US also completed the withdrawal of troops from an airbase in Niamey; and from even her drone base in Agadez (Ewokor and Rukanga, 2024).

Yet, and unarguably too, the effects of the hurriedly imposed sanctions by the ECOWAS on the one hand, and the injunctions for Western powers and the United Nations to withdraw troops from the Sahel, on the other, weakened existing security mechanisms and international cooperation against terrorism (Pichon, 2024: 1). Conversely, the enforced hands-off of France from its former colonies affected the standing of the European Union (EU) which depended "significantly on the leverage of ECOWAS over its member States". As fallout of these withdrawals, security risks escalated in an already destabilized subregion from the Senegambia to the Cameroon border. ECOEXIT and its consequences increased irregular migrations to Europe (Pichon, 2024: 1).

To stamp on ECOEXIT and quit some regarded disempowering associations, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger put out a common passport into circulation on January 29, 2025, announced a unified Sahel alliance army of 5000 men and women and left the *Organization Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF): a post-colonial organization akin to the Commonwealth of Nations. They ignored ECOWAS' call to extend the period of exiting 'finally' by six months in the hope that ECOEXIT could be averted (Channelstv, 2025). Further to these, in a new Charter published on March 31, 2025, the national language of the Republic of Niger became Hausa. Although the working languages of the Republic remained French and English, Hausa is widely spoken among the more than 26 million Nigeriens. This new Charter, an outcome of a National Conference, equally mandated President Tchiani to remain in power for the next five years till 2030 (Vanguard News, April 10, 2025).

Commentators have pondered on, in view of the obvious ECOWAS failures especially in fighting insecurity and the failed political economies of West African nations, whether a successful ECOEXIT, as has become obvious, will not encourage more coups *d'état* among ECOWAS member-nations? (Abubakar Usman,

2024: 1). The exiting nations successfully signed a mutual Defense Pact called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in response to the ECOWAS' threat of military intervention with the intent of restoring democratic rule in them. Additionally, as will be examined under 'double standards', there is a moral angle that indicts ECOWAS in its stance against ECOEXIT. Many, seemingly, democratic nations within and withal West Africa fall short in governance metrics compared to the three nations in the AES. The indicators include political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law maintenance and the control of corruptive activities. It, therefore, behoved on the ECOWAS to prioritize the enhancement of these governance indicators rather than leveraging on superficial democratic processes, such as elections and voting (Abubakar Usman, 2024: 7).

However, ECOWAS' *volte face* was on the realization that an eventual ECOEXIT will disrupt a more than fifty years regional dynamics vis-à-vis on-going peace, security and development instruments. It also dawned on ECOWAS that the quick rethink was necessary in order to avert fostering negative sentiments towards the regional bloc by the exiting nations' populations. Evenso, convincing them to rejoin the ECOWAS in an expected post-transition to civil rule would be uphill tasks. But these thoughts and actions of the ECOWAS came late. Yet, rehearsing Abubakar Usman, who opined that although the lifting of sanctions was timely as it stemmed internal divisions within the ECOWAS from spiraling out of control (Abubakar Usman, 2024: 5), it was an unfortunate compromise that sent out the message to intending coupists that coups *d'état* could yield favourable outcomes since, as has been portrayed by the Sahelian case, ECOWAS could be forced into adopting less intensive policies towards perpetrators in the subregion.

Nigeria's Roles and ECOEXIT

Since Nigeria gained independence in 1960, events in Africa, especially the gaining of independence by the other still colonized territories and, subsequently, of their economies, became the prime objective of Nigeria's foreign policy thrust. Rehearsing Charles Okeke Okoko (2025: 41-42):

Nigeria took a number of measures that aimed primarily at removing the constraints on the development of trade; and at increasing the degree of economic co-operation between her and other African States. Indeed, Nigeria as a result of her geographical size and obvious potentials consciously plays a leading role in the economic development of Africa, and for her own economic expansion within and withal.

Nigeria's population constitutes a substantial fraction of the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as her abundance of natural. Since most of the problems of the ECOWAS have been finance-related, and having a comparative advantage over the other member-States, Nigeria has found herself contributing more to the annual budgets of the Community. This is more, when Nigeria sees herself, because of her endowments, as the natural leader in the sub-region. Nigeria had occasionally written-off some of the expenditures of the Community and ensured that the level of mutual distrust and conflict among members remained minimal. There is no doubt that these were positive steps for which Nigeria could be commended, although the impact of the country's efforts was not been as dramatic as observers expected. Indeed, Nigeria over the years was able to drag the ECOWAS along despite her obvious handicaps. This, in fact, entitled Nigeria to the claim of "Big Brother" in the ECOWAS nexus the indices highlighted above.

Thus, observers and commentators expected her to have played out the monumental role of projecting and ensuring the true integration (economic, political, cultural, linguistic, *et cetera*) of the West African sub-region. Evenso, the actions that emanated from Nigeria vis-à-vis her leadership efforts in the ECOWAS

were always viewed with suspicion by the less-endowed member States that often were left with no wide ranging choices. The poorer countries that had lesser chances of economic survival, in turn, over the years continued to perceive the ECOWAS as the means through which they could strengthen their straggling economies and politics alike.

The implication of Nigeria's involvement and role in ECOWAS has been adjudged both positive and negative. Whereas the country expended so much in keeping the West African sub-region together, she at the same time ensured steady market for her products and services. This has been because in Nigeria's thinking her economy would be sustained or even better improved if the West African sub-region remains in peace and prosperity. Thus, she undertook to give all that this would cost her, especially, as it is also expected that the benefits derivable from the ECOWAS by Nigeria would be more in the long run (Okoko, 2025: 37, 43).

The extracting of Nigeria's role in the ECOWAS and contextually in ECOEXIT is imperative for her having been at the centre of the subregional bloc's activities. The emphasis here will be on Nigeria's pursuits towards the promotion of democracy and security. Certain questions have been raised to include: Were Nigeria's interventions in Liberia between 1990 and 1997 and in Sierra Leone in 1998 credible? Were the interventions internationally acclaimed? Did Nigeria nurture democracy in West Africa? However, because of Nigeria's predominance in the affairs of ECOWAS, her interventions in West Africa have seemed multilateral in advancing stability and democratization within the framework of the ECOWAS; and backed by the African Union (AU) and United Nations Organization (Olukayode Dauda Bakare, 2019). In his exposé, Bakare raised the question of the extent of Nigeria's variegations within the dynamics of her foreign policy from unilateralism to multilateralism in the maintenance of peace and stability in West Africa. Several examples have been used to discern what could pass as Nigeria's unilateral and multilateral engagements. For instance:

- a. The peacekeeping operations in Liberia did not last long in the first instance until a new wave of crises erupted in 1999 lasting till 2003 when the ECOMOG largely populated by Nigerian soldiers, acting as a rapid response force, was dispatched to bring the situation under control. The seeming multilateral content of the ECOMOG was that it was supported by the US Navy and Marines (Bakare, 2019: 3);
- b. The peacekeeping in Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia between 2002 and 2003 were also carried out in close cooperation with the UN, France and US (Ulriksen Stale, 2010: 370). The 2002/2003 ECOMOG intervention had more regional dimension than the 1990 to 1997 exclusively Nigeria-led peacekeeping force which activities were marred with rivalries, poor logistics, financial constraints, corruptive actions by Nigerian troops and the lack of joint command control;
- c. Yet, Nigeria's continued ability at peacekeeping came into doubt with spates of domestic challenges, such as terrorism in Northern Nigeria, kidnappings, banditry and attacks by the militias in the Niger Delta region. It were such that President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the withdrawal of Nigerian troops stationed in Guinea-Bissau to rather come home and tackle current domestic security challenges; and advised the President of Guinea-Bissau to pursue constitutional means at resolving the situation in his country; and
- d. Generally, the ECOWAS failed in peacekeeping efforts making France to quickly mobilize its troops to rescue the Malian government from the clutches of the Islamic militia and a Tuareg rebellion. This was a role the ECOWAS led by Nigeria would have played and executed.

It then becomes commonsensical why some ECOWAS member-nations lost hope in its effectiveness and ability at tackling insecurity in the subregion. These failures were replicated in the Gambia (2016-2017) and Cote d'Ivoire (2002) succession-induced disturbances; and in Nigeria's and ECOWAS' counter-terrorism initiatives (Bakare, 2019: 4-7).

On the Rationality of ECOEXIT, Good Governance and Democratic Processes

Particularizing on the West African subregion with the ECOWAS as its common denominator, there are evidently no true democracies. Therefore, the suspensions, the sanctions and direct military threats have been mere clandestine politicking. Assuming the conduct of civilian elections and becoming voted into power are the only symbolisms for being perfectly democratic, then there have been conducted no flawless elections and succession processes in Africa. Electoral processes have been fraught with lack of transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and zero tolerance for opposition or political pluralism. In the words of Abubakar Usman (2024: 3):

Democracy encompasses more than merely conducting elections. While free and fair electoral processes are crucial, democracy is also the maintenance of the rule of law, safeguarding human rights, ensuring independent judiciary and fostering active civil society participation.

From the Cape of South Africa to the Mediterranean coastlines of North Africa, there are a lack of indicators for good governance and democratic processes in the ECOWAS. Rehearsing Freedom House Dataset, only two ECOWAS countries, namely, Cabo Verde and Ghana are classified as "Free" while the others are classified as "Partly Free" or "Not Free". Those categorized as 'partly free' scored 43% while Burkina Faso categorized as 'not free' scored 30% nexus the parametres for measuring good governance. The disparity in rating between Nigeria and Burkina Faso with a 13% points' difference is comparatively minimal in spite of Nigeria's portrayal of itself as the champion of democracy within the ECOWAS. Nigeria scored 20 out of 40 in political rights and 23 out of 60 in civil liberties toleration, equally portraying her challenges in measuring up to democratic standards (Dataset Parametres, 2024: 4).

In the Reports of the Economist Intelligence Unit Political Regimes (EIUPRs 2023) Dataset portrayed ECOWAS nations as either "authoritarian regimes" or "hybrid regimes" with only Cabo Verde and Ghana classified as "flawless democracies". Either labeled as "hybrid regime" or "electoral autocracy", what distinguishes Nigeria from the military-led Sahel States is leadership by elected autocrats (Dataset Parametres). A country's democratic status, such as Nigeria, from the foregoing categorizations cannot be guaranteed, bandied or modeled about. What obtains among ECOWAS nations are periodically organized but rigged elections or constitutional coups *d'etat*.

The question that has been raised is whether these flawed democracies in West Africa are sufficiently democratic to pass judgment on other countries in the region based on democratic principles.

Although democracy is adjudged the best denominator for governance, it should not be pursued at the expense of regional peace, harmony and stability; and used by bigger democracies, such as Nigeria and Ghana, to intimidate smaller states, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger which do not have robust financial and resource endowment standings. Paying lipservice to democratic tenets by the ECOWAS would mean their enhancing and institutionalizing flawed democracies which assumed leadership constitutionally through rigged elections. It is to the extent that these malpractices seem the norm; and those nations that have perfected these acts export the uncouth knowledge to other nations. The Nigerian example is laughable

such that her present (2025) President, Ahmed Bola Tinubu screamed “Emilokun” (it is my turn to rule); and did all, including rigging the elections through vote buying and ballot boxes snatching to arson. The seemingly powerless or demoralized citizens of Nigeria were so piqued at events that they would have supported a military coup *d’etat*.

But if there are improvements in governance to the appreciation of national populations the citizens would not readily rally round the coupists as were the cases in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The prevalence of poor governance, absence of rule of law, lack of electoral rights and civil liberties rights simply created opportunities for military takeovers. Using the World Bank Dataset on Governance (2022), the Sahel States outranked most of the so-called democracies on indicators presented below using the Republics of Nigeria and Burkina Faso as case studies.

Table 1: **Metrics and Indicators for Good Governance on Points**

Indicators	Nigeria	Burkina Faso
1. Political stability	7.5	8.0
2. Government effectiveness	14.1	21.2
3. Regulatory quality	12.2	34.4
4. Rule of law	19.8	28.3
5. Control of corruption	14.6	51.8

(World Bank Dataset on Governance culled from Abubakar Usman, 2024: 5).

Unless the leadership in the remaining member states of the ECOWAS begin to deliver tangible results to their citizens more countries are at the risk of experiencing military coups. Democracy should be conceptualized beyond mere elections and voting; and strive to enhance other crucial democratic values across the West African subregion. Since Burkina Faso (as shown in Table 1 above) was rated higher than Nigeria in 2022 on a comparative of indicators for good governance, it becomes necessary to examine the events that led to the Burkina Faso coup *d’etat*.

The Burkina Faso Coup *d’etat*

In a Working Paper, Brouley, Harding and Isbell raised the question of how coups *d’etat* could affect social trust. It engaged in analyses from the philosophical and psychoanalytical perspectives; and concluded that coups could be conceptualized as adaptive responses to vulnerability (Thomas Brouley, Robin Harding and Thomas Isbell, 2024: 1). This would include obvious threats and/or perceived ones to individuals or groups who after having gone through some stocktaking or self-appraisals underwent crises of generativity; and decided to “strike a blow and die” often exhibited through revolts/resistance or the staging of coups *d’etat* (Okoko and Godcan-Eze, 2020: 139-153).

Coups represent moments of violent competition for the control of power between the elite (civilian and military). This has always created uncertainty in the minds of the populace on the capabilities of the State as a provider of security and essential services or its ability to protect them. Consequently, as a result of failures of the elite in governance vis-à-vis conflicts, coupists have always leveraged on the low-ebbed social trust to conduct strikes aimed at correcting the imbalances in governance and expectations. Elite macro-level competitions always trickle down to the grassroots’ micro-level where the citizens live, are affected and their responses are consecutively induced (Brouley, Harding and Isbell, 2024: 1).

The coup *d'état* in Burkina Faso was carried out by the military elite, led by Captain Ibrahim Traore, in response to threats from non-State armed groups. It became obvious that from Guinea Bissau to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Republics, there grew the urgent need to restore their territorial integrities and sovereignties; and put their countries again back on the track of economic development. The civilian ruling elite proved incapable of dealing with the increasing security threats in the States by various armed groups. Resultantly, Bettina (2024: 1-4) said:

The armed groups have had a severe impact on social, cultural and economic rights, civil liberties and political participation. Since 2017, more than 120 attacks on schools have been reported, half of these in 2019, and 2500 schools have been closed due to the security situation, with catastrophic consequences for access to education. Between 1 [million] and 1.5 million people have been internally displaced. Thousands are seeking refuge [from Burkina Faso] in neighbouring Mali, itself a crisis-ridden country.

The fight against terrorism was given as the principal motivation in the transition to civilian rule charters of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. According to Engels (2024):

If the principal justification for the putsch is the ongoing security crises, two questions emerge. First, why does the military seize state power if it is not to strive for any political and economic change but just for what it is supposed to do anyway (fighting terrorism, restoring the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty)?

The civilian governments of these countries seemed complicit as collaborators with the non-State armed groups since they did not give the military commanders of their nations the free hand in carrying out strategic actions that would have been effective in combating insecurity. Additionally, the people of Burkina Faso also suspected the army, especially the high command, as being also complicit (Bettina Engels, 2024, 5). The summation among the Burkinabe was that the ruling class cared little about whether people had access to food, education and healthcare. The question has been: If a car has broken down, would it be repaired by merely changing its driver? Rehearsing Engels, it did not and, still does not matter too, to many Burkinabe if it is a civilian or military person that is in power (Bettina Engels, 2024, 11).

Double Standards in the ECOWAS

Both military and institutional or constitutional coups *d'état* have always threatened the political stability of nations. Yet, the question that has often been raised is: Why do nations whose leadership came to power through constitutional coups always pounce on those whose leadership came to power through military coups? Why do they always ride on the crest of the unpopularity of military coups? It is also street knowledge that constitutional coups *d'état* also often provoked uprisings from national populations; and served, and still serves, as grounds for military coups. Moreover, constitutional coups perpetrated through rigged elections and the destruction of snatched ballot boxes are rife than military takeovers. Laurent Gbagbo, the President of Cote d'Ivoire, stated that any constitutional amendment with the intent of power or tenure elongation qualifies also as a coup.

Another form of undemocratic indicator is the transfer of power to a son or relative. Termed 'Dynastic Coup', it is also intended at elongation or the preservation of power within the family or lineage of the

present ruler. It often occurs when the substantive President is aged, ailing or deceased. Rehearsing the Liberian President, George Mannah Weah, Ambrose Monboe (2023: 3) recorded:

As long as ECOWAS tolerates institutional coups that allow lifetime presidencies, there will always be military coups And we cannot condemn military coups when we do not condemn those who carry out institutional coups.

These are duplicities perpetrated as intentional and/or conscious acts. The survival of democracy in Africa will be assured if the ECOWAS and African Union (AU) would treat all constitutional takeover of power through fraudulent elections and voting; and unconstitutional takeover of power by the military, as the same.

The normative frameworks that guide responses to unconstitutional changes of government are clearly stated in the Constitutive Acts of the ECOWAS and African Union; and the identified four types of changes that are regarded as undemocratic are:

- i. Military coups;
- ii. Intervention by mercenaries;
- iii. Seizure of power by armed dissident groups and rebel movements; and
- iv. Refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power after a free and fair, and regular election (European Parliamentary Research, 2017).

In 2023, the Peace and Security Council (PSC) was created within the African Union framework to handle cases of unconstitutional changes of government (UCG). Although a ratified framework adopted and signed by 51 countries in Africa; and principally aimed at promoting liberal democracy and human rights, it recognized constitutional coups *d'état* as equally unconstitutional regime changes. This has been against the fact that unconstitutional changes of governments have been rife in Africa without notable actions by the AU against the perpetrators. Of course, that would not be possible since most of them ably form the leadership of the African Union.

The ECOWAS equally has a Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance that complements the AU framework. Although there have been deprecations on military and constitutional coups, or any acts that threaten political stability, to what extent has the ECOWAS been effective in implementing the tenets of its framework against unconstitutional changes of government (M. Diallo, 2005). The ECOWAS bloc sanctioned and suspended the military-led Republics of Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Mali and Niger but has not been able to do anything against the numerous constitutional or institutional and dynastic succession (father to son or relative) coups. Did ECOWAS take punitive measures against Alpha Conde of Guinea, Faure Gnassingbe of Togo and Alassane Quatara of Cote d’Ivoire? All these persons served variously in their capacities as the Chairmen of the ECOWAS. President Bola Ahmed Adekunle Tinubu of Nigeria, who is the current Chairman (2025) of ECOWAS, won a controversial election after which a five-man judicial panel of the Presidential Election Petition Court declared him winner in spite of glaring irregularities and orchestrated glitches.

The African Union and ECOWAS have shown disregard for the very tenets of democracy by paying lipservice to them. The attendances at the inauguration of leaders who came to power through constitutional

coups are periodic political jamborees of the absurd. Indeed, a “Comedy of Errors”, these leaders have perfected the art of amending constitutions in order to elongate their tenures in office (Africanews, 2019).

Now that ECOEXIT is a reality, it becomes imperative to examine the possible terms of divorce, of especially the Sahel States, from ECOWAS in the next section.

ECOEXIT and Terms of Divorce

Responding to the question of Manon Laplace and Nadoun Coulibaly - What next after ECOWAS parts ways with Sahel States?, would entail an examination of the effects and after effects on the exiting States and ECOWAS. A *fait accompli*, the divorce has been slated to be negotiated over a six-month period. The involvements are:

1. The three Sahel States officially ceased to be ECOWAS members on January 29, 2025, although the ECOWAS Parliament had insisted on a transition period that would have run till July 29, 2025. This was still in anticipation of more mediation efforts;
2. Among the points of divorce to be considered in the terms of separation are political and economic relations between the Sahel State and ECOWAS, to include:
 - a. What will happen to free movement of goods, capital and people which are major cornerstones of regional integration? The AES Confederation announced itself as a visa-free area for the nationals of the three agglomerating States. But stated that the nationals within the original ECOWAS bloc have the right to travel, reside/settle and leave the territory of the Confederation in line with its regulations;
 - b. What will be the fate of some 130 Malian, Burkinabe and Nigerien nationals employed in ECOWAS institutions? What will be the fate of the six members, each from the Sahel States, who are members of the ECOWAS Parliament? Will they remain employed if their nations separate from the ECOWAS? These are some of the contending post-ECOEXIT;
 - c. Will ECOEXIT affect regional projects, such as the West African Power Pool (WAPP) intended to connect Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger to Nigeria; the North backbone projects; and the regional electricity market where-off Cote d'Ivoire sells electricity to Mali and Burkina Faso, while Nigeria supplies Niger, all under the ECOWAS umbrella?
 - d. Same goes for some agricultural and health initiatives run by specialized agencies of ECOWAS (Manon Laplace and Nadoun Coulibaly, 2024). In essence, projects financed and implemented by the ECOWAS bloc will be beset by setbacks;
 - e. Will the private sector in the Sahel States still get funding from the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID)? What will be the overall effect on the EBID since the Sahel States account about a quarter of its market and hold approximately 6.38% of its capital? ECOEXIT will mean losing the Sahel States' markets and shareholders that will definitely restrict the EBID's scope, alter the composition of its executive committee and its standing as a development financier;
 - f. Will the Sahel States repay their EBID loans and on time? EBID committed about CFA 192.4 billion (about \$303 million) to Burkina Faso, CFA 99.9 billion to Niger and CFA 238 billion to Mali. Burkina Faso and Niger are up-to-date on their repayments while Mali is not; and
 - g. The separation will deal a blow to the advancements so far made in the political and economic integration of the West African subregional bloc. Unlike the eight-member West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) that shares the CFA franc, ECOWAS was until ECOEXIT viewed as a model, no matter how imperfectly it has performed, in regional integration.

Against the background that ECOWAS took concrete form in the introduction of an ECOWAS passport; and that the Confederation of Sahel States in turn declared a common market, currency and passport for their nationals, it would mean that new tariffs, customs and border controls are to be introduced in the subregion (Laplace and Coulibaly, 2024).

Concluding Remarks

The paper went to great lengths to establish the rationale for ECOEXIT from various perspectives. First, being the *raison d'être* for separation by the Sahel States; second, from the civil populations of the exiting States vis-à-vis reactions to perceived elite quarrels which misdirected attention away from fighting insecurity; and generally, the costs and benefits for membership of the ECOWAS for the Sahel States.

The ECOWAS failed in operationalizing the ideals for which it was set up in 1975, such as having a common market, currency, tariff and customs duties chargeable in trading and migrations; and in legalities in a common ECOWAS Court and Parliament. Consequent on these failures, some of which were avoidable as remote causes, the immediate causes that prompted the exiting of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were the undiplomatic sanctions imposed on, and threats of military action against, them. Citing this highhandedness, they severed relations with the 50 year-old ECOWAS; and created the Confederation of Sahel States Alliance (AES) on July 6, 2024.

A parallel bloc to the 'old' ECOWAS, it announced the creation of a mutual defense pact in 2023 against possible threats of armed rebellion, terrorism, banditry or external aggression. The Confederation also created an AES Investment Bank with a stabilization fund for the launch of a single currency. The aim of the confederating States is to create an Alliance of the peoples, instead of an ECOWAS which directives and constructions have over the years been dictated to it by powers that are foreign to Africa and which also exploited them.

It was also pointed out that the prevalence of violence and instability caused by armed groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS) compelled the military leaders to conduct takeovers in their respective States. To them, pursuing homegrown efforts in anti-terrorism and anti-neocolonialism are the best. It will be recalled that pursuant to this, the Sahel States set up a joint/mutual defense pact and asked the French, Germany, US and the United Nations to withdraw their armies from their territories. Yet, it has not been ascertained, as stated, the extent to which their efforts have tackled terrorism, banditry and violence.

The paper examined the effects of ECOEXIT and noted that it disrupted the free movement of people, especially people from the exiting nations in the West African subregion. The ECOWAS Court, Parliament, tariff and customs activities have equally been disrupted. Moreover, the Sahel States in their Alliance set up parallel agencies to those of the ECOWAS; and laid bare the fallacies in all the protocols of the ECOWAS that bandied about the upholding of democracy and good governance.

Nigeria's big roles in the ECOWAS' architecture was examined and found to be commendable but failed in upholding the tenets of democracy and good governance. Other than being the biggest contributor to the ECOWAS fund, it played crucial roles in peacekeeping in the subregion. For instance, between 1994 and 1999, Nigeria's contributions to peacekeeping rose substantially from \$4 billion to \$12 billion. Yet, instead of prosecuting the effort, Nigeria's senior military officers transformed the peacekeeping operations code-named ECOMOG in Liberia and Sierra Leone into avenues for enrichment. The ECOMOG failed and was recalled to Nigeria.

The paper also sought to rationalize ECOEXIT and found out that the imposition of sanctions and threats of military action by ECOWAS against the exiting nations were mere politicking and grandstanding. The nations of the 'old' ECOWAS had at one time or the other been involved in constitutional and dynastic coups *d'état*; and paid lipservice to the protocols on good democratic practices and governance. Elections into political offices were shams. Evenso, Burkina Faso outranked Nigeria in the World Bank Dataset on Governance in 2022; and, therefore, did not have the right to impose sanctions on Burkina Faso under the aegis of the 'old' ECOWAS.

The paper excerpted on the Burkina Faso coup and noted that it was as a result of the feeling of vulnerability since it could not get help either from the ECOWAS or France and the other Western powers that had military bases in it; or that their efforts were not enough. There was the need to restore Burkina Faso's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Also pointed out were cases of duplicities and double standards of the ECOWAS often supported by the 'passiveness' of the African Union (AU). Constitutional and dynastic successions to political leadership positions were also coups. The perpetrators, often the bigwigs of ECOWAS, are not known to have been punished ever, but always jumped on minor members to impose sanctions and issued threats.

The paper examined the terms of separation vis-à-vis what happens and remains after ECOEXIT between the Sahel States and the 'old' ECOWAS. This is against the background that although the exit was confirmed on January 29, 2025, the 'old' ECOWAS asked for a window till July 29, 2025, for more mediation. The terms of separation revolved around the free movement of people, goods and capital. Certain questions were raised nexus what will happen to members of the Sahel Alliance who are employed in ECOWAS agencies, sit in ECOWAS Parliament and their private sectors that raise funds from the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), among others. ECOEXIT presented, indeed, very complex challenges but a reality.

REFERENCES

- Africanews, 2019, "African Presidents Resist Term Limits: Guinea, Burundi, Cameroon, Rwanda, Uganda", <https://www.africanews.com/2019/10/21/>.
- Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2024, July 4.
- Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 2024.
- Bakare, Olukayode Dauda, 2019, "An Assessment of the Role of Nigeria in ECOWAS' Security Architecture and Democratization Efforts in West Africa: from Unilateralism to Multilateralism, 1999-2018", *International Journal of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education (IJSSHE)*, Vol. 3, No. 2.
- Blazenews, 2024, "Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso Military Leaders Meet, Sign Treaties to Create Single Bank, Currency", July.
- Brouley, Thomas, Harding, Robin and Isbell, Thomas, 2024, "Coups and Social Trust from a Natural Experiment in Burkina Faso", Working paper No. 204, July.
- Channelstv, 2025, "Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso Insist on ECOWAS Withdrawal", January 27.
- Dataset Parametres, 2024, February 21.
- Diallo, M., 2005, "The ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol and Defence and Security Forces Relationships to Political Power"; <https://www.oecd.org/swac/publications/pdf/>.
- Engels, Bettina, 2024, "Transition now? Another Coup *d'état* in Burkina Faso?", *Review of African Political Economy*, May 18.

European Parliamentary Research, 2017.

Ewokor, Chris and Rukanga, Bassilloh, 2024, “West African Bloc Risks Disintegration if Juntas Quit”, BBC News, Abuja and Nairobi.

Laplace, Manon and Coulibaly, Nadoun, 2024, “Terms of Divorce; What next after ECOWAS Parts Ways with Sahel States”, Africa in 2025, December 20; <https://www.theafricareport.com/371>).

Monboe, Ambrose, 2023, “By Double Standards, the African Union and ECOWAS Threaten the Continent’s Political Stability”, October 26.

Okoko, Charles Okeke and Godcan-Eze, C. I. E., 2020, “Psychoanalysis of Secessionists, Militants, Insurgents and Terrorists in Nigeria: A Historicization”, *Ebonyi State University Research Insight, Multidisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Issues*, Vol. 3, Issues 1 and 2.

Okoko, Charles Okeke, 2025, “Nigeria’s Role and Membership in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS): A Cost-Benefit Analysis of a Sub-Regional Integration, 1975-2024”, *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research* (Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK), Vol.13, No.1.

Pichon, Eric, 2024, “Sahelexit in West Africa: Implications for ECOWAS and the EU”, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS BRI \(2024\); Briefing 26-04-2024;](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI_(2024);_Briefing_26-04-2024;) retrieved: 03-10-2024; Posted: May 21.

Reports of the Economist Intelligence Unit Political Regimes (EIUPRs) 2023.

Stale, Ulriksen, 2010, “Webs of War: Managing Regional Conflict Formations in West Africa and Central Africa” in Harpviken B. Kristen (ed.), *Troubled Regions and Failing States: The Clustering and Contagion of Armed Conflict*, Bingley, United Kingdom: Emerald group Publishing Ltd.

Usman, Abubakar, 2024, “Will ‘Sahelexit’ Encourage More Coups among ECOWAS Members, [www.researchgate.net publications/378971931](http://www.researchgate.net/publications/378971931); 15-03-2024; retrieved 03-10-2024.

Usman, Abubakar, 2024, “ECOWAS Members Talk a Good game But Aren’t very Democratic”, February 21; www.researchgate.net/publication; retrieved 5/10/2024.

Vanguard News, “Niger Adopts Hausa as National Language Replacing French”, April 10, 2025; <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025>; retrieved 10 April 2025.

World Bank Dataset on Governance, 2022.

Zane, Damian, 2024, “Junta Chiefs Turn Their Backs on West African Bloc”, BBC News, July 6.