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Uncertainties in the Contemporary Political Landscape of West Africa amidst Global and Regional Challenges

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper analyzes the political instability in West Africa, exploring how historical legacies, military coups, and insurgent violence contribute to this instability. It also examines the role of external geopolitical influences and the limitations faced by regional organizations like ECOWAS in fostering stability.

Materials and Methods: The research adopts a historical and analytical approach, examining the colonial legacies, recent military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, and the rise of armed insurgent groups. It also investigates the external influences of powers like Russia and China, alongside regional efforts by ECOWAS to manage the political situation.

Findings: The research highlights that the persistence of military coups and insurgent violence is deeply rooted in the colonial past and exacerbated by weak democratic institutions. The resurgence of military

coups underscores the fragility of governance in the region, while the proliferation of armed groups intensifies security threats. External geopolitical actors such as Russia and China have reshaped political alliances in the region, complicating ECOWAS' efforts to foster cooperation.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: To achieve lasting political stability, West Africa needs to strengthen its democratic institutions, promote regional cooperation, and develop more effective strategies to counteract both internal security threats and external geopolitical influences. ECOWAS must enhance its capacity to mediate conflicts and unify states amidst growing geopolitical divides.

Keywords: *Political Instability, Coups, Violence, Ecowas, Security*

Jel Codes: *N47, 055, F52, P16, D74, F54*

INTRODUCTION

West Africa, rich in both history and natural resources, continues to face enduring political challenges rooted in its colonial past. European colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, established arbitrary borders that merged diverse ethnic and cultural groups into singular political entities. This process fostered long-standing tensions that still impact national unity and governance. The legacy of these divisions persists today, as many West African nations struggle with ethnic conflicts and regional disparities, undermining efforts to consolidate national cohesion (Michalopoulos 2016). The colonial powers also implemented centralized governance systems that marginalized traditional leadership structures, creating a disconnect between state authority and local governance.

Following independence in the 1950s and 1960s, nationalist movements led to the establishment of new sovereign states. However, the transition from colonialism to self-governance was marred by a series of military coups, authoritarian regimes, and political instability (Baltoi 2023). The failure to establish strong democratic institutions, combined with entrenched patronage politics, further impeded the potential for sustainable governance.

The 1990s and early 2000s saw a wave of democratization across West Africa. Many nations adopted multiparty systems, held competitive elections, and witnessed peaceful power transfers between political parties. This era brought optimism for the entrenchment of democracy in the region, with notable progress in countries like Ghana and Senegal. However, these democratic gains were uneven, with varying levels of resilience in the democratic institutions across the region (Van de Wall 2001). Despite these developments, West African politics remains marked by recurring issues such as military coups, corruption, and electoral violence.

Since gaining independence, many West African countries have experienced frequent political instability, characterized by military coups, authoritarian regimes, and fragile democratic systems. This trend has earned the region the reputation of a "coup belt," with nations like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea repeatedly witnessing military takeovers. For instance, Burkina Faso experienced two coups in 2022 alone. These upheavals often derail efforts to build robust democratic frameworks and foster political stability. Adding to these challenges is the increasing presence of insurgent and terrorist groups, particularly in the Sahel region. Armed factions, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and jihadist groups in Mali, exploit weak governance structures and security vacuums to further destabilize the region. For example, the rise of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has been a key driver of violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, creating a broader regional security crisis. These security threats have overwhelmed national governments and strained regional efforts to maintain peace and security.

The geopolitical dynamics in West Africa are further complicated by the involvement of external powers. Countries like Russia and China have increased their presence in the region. Russia's military presence, notably through the deployment of private military contractors like the Wagner Group in Mali, has reshaped local power structures, while China's heavy investments in infrastructure and economic development have influenced political alliances. In 2023, Niger's military government notably turned to Russian support, signaling the shifting allegiances in the wake of a coup. IMSISS (2024).

Meanwhile, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) continues to play a critical role in promoting regional cooperation and stability. However, ECOWAS faces significant challenges, particularly after its failure to prevent or effectively respond to the recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The suspension of these nations from ECOWAS

following their coups highlights the growing division among member states, compounded by external influences that complicate efforts to foster unity and regional cooperation.

West Africa's political landscape is shaped by historical legacies, internal instability, and external pressures. The region's future depends heavily on the ability of its governments to strengthen democratic institutions, foster regional collaboration, and tackle persistent security threats. (UN 2024) Effective management of international partnerships, particularly in the face of growing geopolitical competition, will be essential to determining the political and economic trajectory of West Africa. As insurgencies continue to escalate, and regional tensions grow, a coordinated and robust response will be crucial for ensuring long-term stability in the region.

Uncertainties: “The Coup Belt”

In recent years, West Africa has been engulfed in a wave of military coups, especially in countries like Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. These events have thrown the region's political landscape into a state of profound uncertainty, revealing the fragile nature of democratic institutions and the lingering influence of authoritarian practices. The motivations behind these coups are varied and complex, intertwining dissatisfaction with corrupt civilian governments, escalating security crises, and deep-rooted political instability. The international community, including regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has responded with condemnation, but their efforts to restore stability and democratic order have often fallen short. Despite these responses, the persistence of military regimes and their ability to consolidate power reflect both the limitations of international interventions and the evolving dynamics within these nations. (ecdm 2023)

International pressure, typically exerted through sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and suspension from regional organizations like ECOWAS or the African Union (AU), has often proven inadequate. For instance, ECOWAS has consistently imposed sanctions on Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso following their respective coups, yet these measures have had limited success in restoring civilian rule. One reason for the ineffectiveness of these pressures is the failure to address the internal socio-political grievances that fuel the coups in the first place, the population in these countries, particularly the youth, often perceives military intervention as a necessary evil to remove corrupt and ineffective civilian regimes UNDP (2023). The junta leaders have capitalized on this sentiment, gaining popular support domestically, which reduces the impact of international condemnation.

Furthermore, external actors, such as Russia and China, have provided military and economic alternatives to these regimes, diluting the influence of traditional Western powers and multilateral institutions. In Mali, for example, the ruling junta's alignment with Russia and the Wagner Group has diminished the leverage of ECOWAS and Western nations. This reliance on alternative foreign partnerships has enabled these regimes to sidestep international sanctions and shore up their domestic authority, further complicating efforts to restore democratic governance.

Since 2020, the resurgence of military coups in West and Central Africa has revived the troubling label of the "coup belt." In Burkina Faso, a military government that came to power in January 2022 was itself toppled by a faction of soldiers just months later, an event starkly described as a "coup within a coup." Meanwhile, in Mali, another coup attempt was narrowly averted, with the ruling junta born from a previous coup in August 2020 blaming the plot on an unnamed Western power. The political unrest has also spilled into neighboring countries, with Guinea-Bissau narrowly avoiding a coup attempt and The Gambia experiencing heightened political tensions that signal potential instability.

A critical factor behind the resilience of these military regimes is their ability to navigate the delicate balance between maintaining internal stability and resisting external pressure. Sanctions and diplomatic efforts alone have been insufficient because they fail to target the underlying economic and security concerns that motivate both the military and civilians. The international community's insistence on quick returns to democratic rule, often without addressing these deeper issues, has led to a disconnect between external demands and local realities. Aning K., Bjarnesen. J (2024)

Table 1: Successful Military Coups in West Africa since 1960, by Country

Country	Number of Successful Military Coups	Years	Year of Last Successful Coup
Benin	7	1963, 1965 (3), 1967, 1969, 1972	1972
Burkina Faso	7	1966, 1974, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1987, 2014, 2022, 2022	2022
Côte d'Ivoire	2	1999, 2002	2002
Gambia	1	1994	1994
Ghana	5	1966, 1972, 1978, 1979, 1981	1981
Guinea	3	1984, 2008, 2021	2008
Guinea-Bissau	4	1980, 1999, 2003, 2012	2012
Liberia	1	1980	1980
Mali	5	1968, 1991, 2012, 2020, 2021	2012
Mauritania	6	1978, 1979, 1980, 1984, 2005, 2008	2008
Niger	5	1974, 1996, 1999, 2010, 2023	2010
Nigeria	6	1966 (2), 1975, 1983, 1985, 1993	1993
Sierra Leone	5	1967, 1968, 1992, 1996, 1997	1997
Togo	2	1963, 1967	1967

Source: Shillington 2004; Barka and Ncube 2012; Media Sources

The table provides a stark and unsettling view of the historical and ongoing challenges of political stability in West Africa, highlighting the region's deep entrenchment in the phenomenon often referred to as the "coup belt." The data reveals a troubling pattern of recurrent military coups across several West African nations, underscoring the region's long-standing struggle with governance and democratic consolidation. The sheer number of successful coups, particularly in countries like Benin, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Ghana, reflects a persistent cycle of instability that has continually disrupted efforts to establish durable political institutions.

Burkina Faso emerges as a critical case study, with seven coups recorded since 1960, including the most recent in 2022. The recurrence of coups, even in the 21st century, illustrates the fragility of the country's political system and the ongoing challenges in achieving lasting governance solutions. Benin, with its seven successful coups, experienced the bulk of its instability during the 1960s and early 1970s. This pattern reflects the early post-independence turmoil that many African states faced as they transitioned from colonial rule to sovereign governance, often without stable frameworks to support democratic processes.

The table also highlights a resurgence of military coups in the last two decades, challenging the notion that West Africa had moved beyond its coup-prone past. Notably, Guinea and Mali both experienced coups in 2021, adding to the series of military interventions that have historically characterized their political landscapes. This recent surge points to ongoing vulnerabilities, including weak governance structures, pervasive corruption, and unresolved security issues, particularly in the face of insurgencies and external threats.

Mali's trajectory is particularly concerning, with coups in 2012 and 2020-2021, emphasizing how unresolved conflicts and governance challenges continue to fuel political instability. The country's inability to maintain civilian rule highlights the broader regional challenge of establishing effective governance amidst security crises. Niger's 2023 coup adds to the growing list of recent military interventions in the region, underscoring the persistence of this destabilizing trend. As Niger faces increasing threats from jihadist groups and internal political pressures, the coup further complicates the region's prospects for stability.

The widespread occurrence of coups across multiple countries in West Africa indicates a regional phenomenon rather than isolated incidents. The historical prevalence of military interventions, as seen in Nigeria (six coups), Mauritania (six coups), and Sierra Leone (five coups), reveals a pattern of political disruption that has had long-lasting effects on governance, economic development, and societal cohesion. The cumulative effect of these coups has been the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, leading to a cyclical pattern where military intervention is often seen as a viable if not inevitable solution to political crises. This undermines efforts to build strong, stable governments capable of addressing the complex challenges facing the region.

The table's data reflects the uncertainties that continue to plague the region's political landscape. The frequency and recent occurrence of military coups suggest that West Africa remains susceptible to these disruptions, with the underlying causes such as corruption, weak institutions, and security challenges still largely unaddressed. As such, the prospect for sustained democratic governance remains uncertain, with the risk of future coups a lingering threat.

Coups: Coincidences?

In Mali, the August 2020 coup that ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was justified by the military as a response to widespread public discontent. However, the continued instability and the slow pace of promised elections suggest that Mali's path to democracy remains fraught with uncertainty. Similarly, in Guinea, the September 2021 coup led by Col. Mamady Doumbouya was presented as a necessary intervention to save the nation from President Alpha Condé's increasingly authoritarian rule. Despite these claims, the long-term impact of Doumbouya's takeover on Guinea's democratic prospects remains unclear.

In Burkina Faso, the January 2022 coup, led by Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Damiba, was initially justified by the deteriorating security situation, with large portions of the country falling under the control of Islamist insurgents. Despite the military's promises to restore order, the ongoing instability and the indefinite postponement of elections have only deepened the uncertainty surrounding Burkina Faso's future.

These coups are not isolated events but are deeply rooted in the complex challenges facing West Africa. The combination of weak governance, pervasive corruption, and external threats such as jihadist insurgencies has created an environment where democratic institutions struggle to take root. As these nations continue to grapple with these issues, the path to long-term stability remains uncertain. Recent developments suggest that the region may be reverting to authoritarian practices, further complicating the prospects for democratic governance in the years to come. (FPRI 2023)

The uncertainties that dominate West Africa's political landscape are symptomatic of deeper structural issues that have long plagued the region. While there are occasional signs of progress, such as peace agreements and transitional dialogues, the overall trend points to a future where

instability and authoritarianism may continue to overshadow democratic prospects, leaving the region's political future shrouded in uncertainty.

Violence and Conflict: An Unending Story

Analyzing the contemporary political landscape in West Africa necessitates an understanding of the ongoing issues of violence and conflict, as recent events have highlighted the region's fragility and potential for unrest. The diverse forms of violence in West Africa are interconnected, creating a complex and evolving conflict landscape. Factors such as religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences contribute to the region's susceptibility to violence. Over the past decade, the nature of conflict in West Africa has evolved. Traditional, large-scale conflicts and civil wars have diminished in frequency and intensity, giving way to new threats (Brown B.J 2006).

The rise in election-related violence across West Africa has coincided with increased incidents of extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking, maritime piracy, and criminal activities. Additionally, conflicts in this region are frequently being fought on the periphery of state control by fragmented, militarily weaker insurgent groups, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Tuareg and Arab uprisings in Mali. (Security Council Report, 2011).

The democratization wave that swept West Africa in the 1990s ushered in a transformative period for governance. This shift diminished the acceptance of military coups and introduced new challenges like electoral violence. Nations that were once prone to coups, including Benin, Ghana, and Nigeria, began to see shifts in civil-military relations due to the emergence of multiparty elections throughout the region (Anyika, V.O., Ani, K.J. 2022).

However, the increase in elections has brought with it a corresponding rise in internal conflicts and election-related violence. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Togo have all experienced turmoil tied to elections. Nigeria, for instance, saw escalating election-related violence over time, with the 2011 elections alone resulting in communal violence that claimed around 800 lives, as reported by Human Rights Watch.

As elections became the recognized standard for legitimate power transfer, political competition intensified, often taking on a zero-sum nature due to the high stakes of controlling the state. State control is frequently equated with control over the economy and other resources, often for personal benefit. This dynamic has led political leaders to mobilize ethnic or religious bases using extremist rhetoric, which can escalate into violence. As a result, elections can act as catalysts for violence, rather than simply being a reflection of existing tensions. (ACLED, 2022).

Recent developments highlighted in "Managing Election Violence and Sustaining Peace and Security in West Africa" (GPPAC, 2023) indicate that military coups, social unrest, and diminishing public confidence in the electoral process have further destabilized numerous nations in the region. The deterioration of democratic processes has given rise to militarization and authoritarian responses to election disputes, jeopardizing peace and democratic consolidation.

Nigeria exemplifies how electoral violence has shaped the political landscape in West Africa. Despite being one of Africa's largest democracies, Nigeria's elections are frequently tainted by violence. (Ostien, 2009). For example, the 2023 general elections were marked by significant violence, particularly in the northern and central regions where Boko Haram operates, resulting in over 100 deaths and the displacement of hundreds of people. Structural and non-structural factors, such as poverty, youth unemployment, ethnic rivalry, and political exclusion, commonly trigger electoral violence in Nigeria. The 2023 elections saw historically low voter

turnout, at just 27%, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the electoral system. Voter intimidation, ballot-box theft, and violent suppression of post-election protests further exposed deep-rooted problems in Nigeria's electoral framework.

Côte d'Ivoire offers another stark example of how electoral violence can destabilize a nation. The 2010 presidential election led to severe violence when then-president Laurent Gbagbo refused to concede defeat to Alassane Ouattara. Political and ethnic divisions, with Ouattara drawing support from the north and Gbagbo from the south, resulted in widespread violence that left over 3,000 dead and displaced more than a million people. The conflict in Côte d'Ivoire underscores the risks of ethnic polarization in elections. Atrocities committed by both sides during the violence resulted in long-term social and economic damage. Key political figures were later indicted by the International Criminal Court.

Countries such as Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso have also seen elections postponed due to security concerns, with electoral violence continuing to pose a significant threat to peace and democratic stability. Mali and Guinea both experienced military coups, with election-related unrest acting as a catalyst. These instances reflect a broader regional pattern, where elections often result in conflict rather than peaceful power transitions.

One of the most significant consequences of electoral violence is the displacement of populations. In Togo's 2005 elections, 500 people were killed, and 40,000 were displaced. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 crisis led to over a million people fleeing their homes, creating long-term humanitarian crises that affected neighboring countries and placed additional strain on regional resources.

This broadening scope of violence, along with a recent surge in coups d'état, has heightened fears that instability could spread from the Sahel into coastal countries. Consequently, West Africa faces serious political challenges that threaten regional stability. (Alexandre, M. 2015).

Conversely, in North Africa, the aftermath of the Arab Spring has taken a different trajectory. The uprisings in Algeria and Tunisia did not lead to prolonged violence, and the 2020 ceasefire in Libya, followed by the formation of a Government of National Unity, has brought a measure of stability, despite repeated delays in holding new elections (ACLED 2022). The crisis in the Sahel, however, has deepened, signaling an increasingly entrenched pattern of instability. The escalation of conflict in the region has led to widespread violence and growing humanitarian challenges, threatening to make this period the deadliest since the Sahel crisis began. The instability in the Sahel is multifaceted, with Mali and Burkina Faso at the heart of the escalating violence. The conflict has extended beyond traditional battlegrounds, reaching into civilian areas where atrocities are occurring with alarming regularity. The involvement of various armed groups, including Malian state forces, Russian Wagner Group mercenaries, Burkinabe state forces, and jihadist militants such as the Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), has exacerbated the crisis. The distinction between combatants and noncombatants has increasingly blurred, resulting in a surge of civilian casualties. (Stocker. S 2023)

In Mali, the partnership between the transitional government and Wagner mercenaries has led to a significant rise in violence against civilians. The withdrawal of French forces, who previously provided a stabilizing presence, has created a security vacuum that militant groups like IS Sahel have quickly exploited. This shift in power dynamics has emboldened these groups, leading to unprecedented attacks on Tuareg militias and associated communities in northeastern Mali. Similarly, Burkina Faso has experienced widespread violence, with JNIM conducting extensive offensives across the country

The promises made by military-led governments in Burkina Faso and Mali to restore security increasingly conflict with the harsh realities on the ground, where militant groups continue to expand their influence. The persistent instability and violence in the Sahel underscore the region's uncertain future. The involvement of foreign mercenaries, the withdrawal of international forces, and ongoing insurgencies have created a complex and volatile environment, where the prospects for peace and stability remain uncertain. As the conflict persists, the Sahel faces a bleak future, marked by continued violence and a deepening humanitarian crisis.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) encompassing Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is at a pivotal stage in its effort to achieve deeper economic integration. Despite accounting for 16% of West Africa's total population, these nations contribute just 7% to the region's GDP, underscoring the significant economic challenges they face. This economic underperformance is compounded by high dependency on limited sectors like transit trade and agriculture, alongside the looming threat of tariffs following their exit from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). These economic difficulties are closely tied to the region's political instability, but the relationship between these two factors requires a deeper exploration to fully understand the implications.

The Sahel region's fragile economic conditions directly influence its political landscape, and this connection is crucial for understanding the broader geopolitical dynamics. The economies of the AES member states are marked by high unemployment, underdeveloped industries, and low levels of intra-regional trade. Poverty rates in these nations are among the highest in West Africa, with significant portions of the population living in extreme deprivation. This economic stagnation weakens the social contract between governments and citizens, leading to political instability.

The discontent driven by economic hardship often manifests in public dissatisfaction with governance, creating an environment ripe for political upheaval. Mali and Burkina Faso, for instance, have witnessed multiple coups in recent years. These coups are not isolated political events but are deeply connected to the economic grievances of their populations, who feel neglected by regimes that fail to address their socio-economic needs. Moreover, as these governments struggle to manage their economies, insurgent groups capitalize on the public's disillusionment, further destabilizing the region.

Political instability, in turn, deepens economic fragility. Investors are deterred by governance instability, which restricts foreign direct investment (FDI) that could otherwise help revitalize these economies. This lack of investment creates a vicious cycle where governments become increasingly dependent on foreign aid or military alliances for survival, further eroding their autonomy. The AES's shift away from ECOWAS to form new partnerships with countries like Russia illustrates their search for alternative security and economic arrangements, although these new alignments come with political and economic trade-offs.

The direct link between weak economies and political fragility becomes more evident when one considers how trade barriers, high transit costs, and tariffs affect the region's economic development. Without robust economic integration, which could mitigate the impact of these trade barriers, the AES countries face further marginalization from regional trade networks. The erosion of economic stability weakens the government's ability to provide basic services and maintain public order, creating an environment where insurgencies can flourish.

Comparing the AES to other regional economic integration frameworks, particularly ECOWAS, offers valuable insights into the potential limitations and challenges of the AES initiative. ECOWAS, as a long-established regional organization, has developed a comprehensive system that fosters economic cooperation, political stability, and conflict resolution across West Africa. By leaving ECOWAS, AES countries have distanced themselves from a well-established framework of economic and security support, which could have long-term repercussions.

One significant advantage of ECOWAS is its economic stability mechanisms, such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), which helps stabilize currency exchange rates and control inflation. The absence of these stabilizers may pose a serious challenge for the AES countries, which could face economic isolation and sanctions. Moreover, ECOWAS provides a collective security framework that helps its member states manage threats from insurgencies and terrorism threats that remain prevalent in the Sahel. In contrast, the AES's reliance on external actors like Russia for security could expose them to greater political vulnerabilities, as such partnerships often come with strings attached.

The AES's focus on infrastructure projects like the Nigeria-Morocco Gas Pipeline represents a potential avenue for future economic growth, but these initiatives are still in their early stages. Niger, for example, stands to benefit from its 51% share in intra-regional exports, particularly in agriculture, but this will only materialize if the AES can successfully reduce the costs of transit trade and overcome the challenges posed by its departure from ECOWAS. Furthermore, the AES's ability to form new partnerships with external actors such as Morocco and China could help offset the economic isolation resulting from its withdrawal from ECOWAS. However, achieving a level of institutional depth comparable to ECOWAS will take time and requires substantial political commitment.

The AES's evolving geopolitical strategy, which includes forming new alliances with Russia and China, reflects a broader shift in the region's global alignments. Russia has increased its influence in the AES states, particularly through military partnerships. The 2023 Russia–Africa Summit solidified Russia's military and economic involvement in the region, with countries like Mali and Burkina Faso seeking military support from the Wagner Group. This represents a significant pivot away from traditional Western alliances, particularly those with France, which are increasingly viewed as exploitative and unbalanced. The removal of French military and business presence from these countries is emblematic of their efforts to assert greater sovereignty and redefine their international partnerships.

While Russia's engagement has focused primarily on security, China has taken a different approach, emphasizing economic investment and infrastructure development. China's large-scale financing of infrastructure projects such as railways and ports positions it as a key player in West Africa's long-term economic future. However, China's investments, while beneficial in the short term, depend heavily on political stability. If the AES countries cannot address their internal governance challenges, the benefits of these partnerships may not be fully realized.

The AES's ability to navigate these new global alliances will be critical for its future success. While Russia provides immediate military support, China's long-term investments offer more sustainable opportunities for economic growth. However, these partnerships come with inherent risks, including increased dependency on external powers and the potential for political interference.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) faces a complex intersection of economic and political challenges. On one hand, its emphasis on economic integration, bolstered by infrastructure

projects and new global partnerships, presents opportunities for regional growth. On the other hand, the political instability that arises from deep-seated economic fragility threatens to undermine these efforts. The decision to exit ECOWAS complicates matters further by removing the safety nets that the regional organization provided in terms of economic stability and security.

For the AES to succeed, it must not only strengthen its economic foundations but also stabilize its political institutions. Economic fragility and political instability are deeply interconnected, and failing to address one will inevitably affect the other. The AES's future will depend on its ability to strike a balance between internal reform and external alliances, while ensuring that economic development is inclusive and politically sustainable.

What the Future Holds

The political and security future of West Africa remains clouded by significant uncertainties. The resurgence of military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, coupled with the persistent threat of jihadist insurgencies, presents a bleak outlook for democratic governance in the region. The failure of regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to effectively curb these military interventions raises questions about the future stability of the region.

The international community's influence, once seen as a stabilizing factor, appears to be waning as authoritarian regimes and military juntas assert control despite external pressure. Moreover, the withdrawal of foreign peacekeeping forces from key conflict areas, such as Mali, has created a vacuum that extremist groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State Sahel Province have been quick to exploit. This, combined with ongoing governance issues such as corruption, weak state institutions, and economic disparities, suggests that political instability may remain a persistent challenge.

Amidst this turmoil, there have been a few glimmers of hope. Senegal's successful peace agreement with rebels in the Casamance region marked the end of Africa's longest-running insurgency, providing a rare instance of conflict resolution in a region otherwise mired in instability (Fall A. 2020). Similarly, Chad, following the death of its long-time leader Idriss Déby in combat, saw a fragile return to stability as his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, took control of a transitional military council. However, the peace achieved through a dialogue in Doha, which included some but not all rebel factions, remains tenuous, leaving the future of Chad's political landscape uncertain. (ISS 2024)

Some big question worth considering though is that "Are these military interventions so bad?", Considering the state in which the concerned countries were and even the state of other countries in the so-called democratic rule are, some see the military's intervention as a breath of fresh air, coupled with the fact that they actually have the popular support of the people or at least the youth demography. Also, have we seen the last of this resurgence of coups in West African? The performance of these military governments will go a long way in shaping the narrative going forward.

In the long term, regional cooperation, particularly in areas of counterterrorism, economic integration, and democratic governance, will be crucial in determining whether West Africa can break free from its cycle of instability.

Conclusion

West Africa's political landscape is at a critical juncture. The colonial past has left enduring scars that still shape governance, while military coups and insurgencies continue to destabilize fragile democratic institutions. The rise of extremist groups and the widespread availability of small arms present ongoing security challenges that make political stability increasingly difficult. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has been pivotal in fostering cooperation and stability, now faces significant challenges due to the exclusion of three coup-affected states. Despite efforts to reintegrate these nations, progress has been slow, casting uncertainty over the organization's future role. However, it will be crucial to watch how the alliance of military-led states evolves and the influence of foreign powers in this dynamic.

While these challenges are significant, recent developments offer hope for future stability. Senegal's peace agreement with the Casamance rebels, for instance, is a noteworthy success, marking the end of one of Africa's longest-running insurgencies. Similarly, Chad's transition towards stability after Idriss Déby's death, with a peace dialogue brokered in Doha, shows that there are viable paths to conflict resolution in the region. These examples highlight that, while instability persists, opportunities for peace and democratic progress exist.

Moving forward, the region must focus on concrete actions that build on these successes and address the root causes of its instability. First, political reform efforts should prioritize the decentralization of power, enabling local governments to better manage regional grievances, especially in ethnically diverse nations. Strengthening democratic institutions requires comprehensive electoral reforms to reduce the potential for election-related violence, with ECOWAS playing a more proactive role in mediating and monitoring elections.

Second, enhancing regional cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism and economic integration, is vital. ECOWAS should develop targeted strategies to address insurgencies in the Sahel, including joint military operations and intelligence-sharing platforms. Moreover, regional economic initiatives, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), offer a blueprint for diversifying economies and reducing the region's dependence on limited sectors like agriculture and resource extraction. By promoting economic stability, the region can address some of the underlying social issues that fuel conflict, such as unemployment and poverty.

Lastly, external actors such as Russia, China, and the European Union must be engaged strategically to support, rather than undermine, West Africa's sovereignty and development goals. ECOWAS and individual West African states need to ensure that foreign involvement strengthens, rather than destabilizes, governance frameworks.

In conclusion, while West Africa faces profound uncertainties, its resilience and recent peace agreements indicate that positive change is possible. However, achieving long-term stability will require robust political reforms, enhanced regional cooperation, and the judicious engagement of external powers. Without these, the region risks remaining trapped in a cycle of instability, where governance is continually undermined by military interventions and insurgent violence.

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