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RESURGENCE OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN WEST AFRICA: ANALYSING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND CHALLENGES OF ECOWAS DEMOCRATIC INTERVENTION MECHANISM

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Abstract

The study examines the renewed surge of authoritarianism in West Africa, focusing on the recent political trajectories of Mali and Burkina Faso. Against the backdrop of successive military coups and democratic reversals across the region, the research investigates the drivers of this authoritarian shift, its implications for regional stability, and the effectiveness of ECOWAS mechanisms in addressing unconstitutional changes of government. A qualitative research design was adopted, drawing on semi-structured interviews with thirteen key informants including ECOWAS officials, public policy analysts, political scientists, and journalists. Data were thematically analyzed using NVivo to ensure systematic coding and interpretation. The findings indicate that persistent governance failures, entrenched insecurity, widespread public disillusionment with democratic institutions, and weak regional safeguards have collectively created fertile ground for military takeovers. The study also reveals a growing pattern of popular support for authoritarian regimes, often justified as corrective responses to ineffective civilian leadership. Moreover, the analysis highlights significant limitations within ECOWAS, including its reactive posture, inconsistent sanctions regime, and limited enforcement capacity, which undermine its credibility and deterrent effectiveness. Overall, the study underscores the need for strengthened early warning systems, firmer enforcement of democratic norms, enhanced regional cohesion, and renewed efforts to rebuild public trust to reinforce democratic resilience in West Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

West Africa has experienced renewed political turbulence in recent years, marked by recurrent military coups, democratic backsliding, and persistent governance fragilities. Despite transitions to multiparty democracy in the 1990s, weak institutions, entrenched elite dominance, and systemic instability continue to undermine democratic consolidation (Akubueze, 2024; Odusote, 2024). In response, ECOWAS established a normative governance framework, most notably the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which enshrines constitutional rule, prohibits unconstitutional changes of government, and commits the region to zero tolerance for military intervention (Salihu, 2016; Terzungwe, Ahmed, & Oluwaseun, 2024). Yet, since 2020, military regimes have re-emerged in

Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, signaling a reversal of democratic gains. These coups reflect deeper governance crises.

Military leaders often justify interventions as corrective responses to insecurity, corruption, and state failure, but the resulting regimes frequently exhibit authoritarian traits, including centralised power, restricted civil liberties, suspended constitutional order, and weakened accountability (Norman, 2024; Daffeh, 2024). Growing public support for military governments, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso, underscores widespread dissatisfaction with civilian leadership and eroding state legitimacy amid escalating insecurity (Oluyemi, 2024). ECOWAS' responses have been inconsistent. While earlier interventions in Sierra Leone (1997) and The Gambia (2017) successfully restored constitutional order, recent efforts have struggled to reverse military rule or prevent opportunistic constitutional amendments, as seen in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire (Akinkugbe, 2024). Repeated failures to deter coups or strengthen governance raise questions about the robustness of ECOWAS' enforcement mechanisms and member states' institutional capacity to uphold democratic norms.

This study provides a comparative analysis of the structural and political drivers of authoritarian resurgence in West Africa, focusing on Mali and Burkina Faso, which experienced multiple coups between 2020 and 2022. These cases highlight the interplay of insecurity, state fragility, social grievances, and regional responses. Drawing on scholarship in democratic governance, civil–military relations, and regional institutionalism, the study aims to: (i) identify structural and political determinants of authoritarian resurgence; (ii) assess implications for regional stability and democratic consolidation; and (iii) evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of ECOWAS' mechanisms, including the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

The study argues that addressing authoritarian resurgence requires more than reactive sanctions or post-coup interventions. It calls for recalibrated governance strategies, stronger preventive mechanisms, and deeper engagement with structural challenges state fragility, insecurity, elite incentives, and popular disillusionment that continue to shape political trajectories in West Africa.

RESEARCH GAP

Although research on political instability in Africa has expanded, significant gaps remain in understanding the recent wave of authoritarian resurgence in West Africa, particularly between 2019 and 2025. Much of the literature focuses on individual countries rather than identifying regional patterns. For instance, Fituni (2021) and Chingono (2010) analyzed sanctions and economic pressures in Zimbabwe and Sudan but did not examine how similar dynamics unfold concurrently across West African states experiencing democratic decline. Another gap concerns the limited attention given to ECOWAS. While studies often evaluate the African Union's responses to unconstitutional changes of government, ECOWAS the primary regional actor in West Africa remains underexplored. Scholars like Manirakiza (2016) and Hartmann (2022) note AU shortcomings but do not fully investigate ECOWAS's enforcement difficulties

under its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Coups in Mali and Burkina Faso exposed weaknesses in the organization's early-warning, preventive, and enforcement mechanisms, yet systematic analysis of these failures is scarce.

Existing studies also tend to emphasize reactive measures sanctions, suspensions, and post-coup negotiations while offering limited guidance on preventive institutional reforms. Success is often measured narrowly by whether democracy is restored, overlooking long-term impacts on legitimacy, consolidation, and regional stability.

This study addresses these gaps by examining structural, political, and institutional drivers of authoritarian resurgence through focused case studies of Mali and Burkina Faso. It evaluates ECOWAS's effectiveness, challenges, and reform opportunities, providing new insights into regional democratic resilience and the broader dynamics of authoritarian persistence in West Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodology employed in conducting the research, encompassing the research design, study area, population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, research instruments, instrument validity, and data analysis methods.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative explanatory research design to examine the resurgence of authoritarianism in West Africa and the effectiveness of ECOWAS' democratic interventions. This design allows the researcher to combine primary and secondary data, offering deeper insight into complex political issues than either method would provide alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Its strength lies in triangulation cross-validating evidence from multiple sources which enhances the credibility of the findings (Bryman, 2016). It is also useful for explaining not just what is happening politically, but why certain democratic shifts occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, explanatory designs come with challenges such as the difficulty of integrating different data sources and the significant time and expertise required (Patton, 2015). To address this, the study uses a clearly structured interview guide and organizes all data through thematic categorization to ensure consistency between primary and secondary insights.

This design is fitting because authoritarian resurgence in West Africa requires both historical context and current expert perspectives. Document analysis alone cannot capture evolving political attitudes, while interviews alone lack institutional depth. Combining both provides a holistic picture of democratic decline between 2019 and 2025.

Population and Sampling

The study's population includes ECOWAS officials, political analysts, scholars, civil society leaders, journalists, and representatives of international organizations involved in democracy and governance. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct relevance to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). This ensures expert-level contributions from individuals who understand regional governance dynamics.

Sample Size

The sample size was guided by data saturation—the point at which no new insights emerge (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Saturation was reached with 13 participants, drawn from ECOWAS officials, policy experts, scholars, and journalists. This number provided sufficient diversity while remaining manageable.

Methods of Data Collection

Both secondary and primary data were used. Secondary data came from ECOWAS protocols, communiqués, research reports, academic articles, and reputable media sources. Primary data was collected through remote semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility and accommodated participants across multiple countries (Salmons, 2015).

Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed: a document review checklist and a semi-structured interview guide. NVivo 14 software supported data organization and helped identify themes. Both instruments were pre-tested to ensure clarity and relevance.

Validity, Reliability, and Data Analysis

Validity was strengthened through careful source selection, triangulation, and pre-testing of the interview guide. Reliability was ensured by using a consistent interviewing process, recording and transcribing interviews, and maintaining detailed documentation.

Data were analyzed using content analysis for secondary materials and thematic analysis for interviews, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. NVivo 14 supported coding, theme development, and transparency. Ethical considerations including confidentiality and informed consent were strictly upheld throughout the study.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the study, based on qualitative data from key informants across West Africa. The research investigated the resurgence of authoritarianism in Mali and Burkina Faso, its implications for regional stability, ECOWAS's responses, challenges in enforcing democratic protocols, and potential strategies for safeguarding democracy. Insights were gathered through semi-structured interviews with thirteen strategically selected participants, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The chapter begins with an overview of participants' backgrounds, followed by findings organized by research objectives.

Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

The study engaged thirteen participants drawn from professional categories directly relevant to the research objectives: ECOWAS officials, public policy analysts, political scientists and regional security scholars, and journalists/media practitioners.

Table : Summary of Interviewees' Demographic Characteristics

Interviewee ID	Category	Professional Role	Location / Affiliation
R1	ECOWAS Official	Senior Governance Advisor	ECOWAS Commission, Abuja
R2	ECOWAS Official	Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Officer	ECOWAS Commission, Abuja

R3	Public Policy Analyst	Political Affairs Analyst	Abuja
R4	Public Policy Analyst	Political Affairs Analyst	Abuja
R5	Public Policy Analyst	Political Affairs Analyst	Abuja
R6	Political Scientist & Security Scholar	Professor	University Lecturer
R7	Political Scientist & Security Scholar	Ass. Professor	University Lecturer
R8	Political Scientist & Security Scholar	Ass. Professor	University Lecturer
R9	Political Scientist & Security Scholar	Senior Lecturer	University Lecturer
R10	Journalist / Media Practitioner	Investigative Reporter	Abuja-based
R11	Journalist / Media Practitioner	Investigative Reporter	Abuja-based News Network
R12	Journalist / Media Practitioner	Investigative Reporter	Abuja-based News Network
R13	Journalist / Media Practitioner	Investigative Reporter	Abuja-based News Network

Source: Author's Review, 2025.

Table 4.1 summarizes interviewees' demographic characteristics and affiliations. For confidentiality, respondents are coded: R1–R2 for ECOWAS officials, R3–R5 for public policy analysts, R6–R9 for political scientists and regional security scholars, and R10–R13 for journalists/media practitioners.

The ECOWAS officials, based in Abuja, occupy senior roles in governance and conflict prevention. Public policy analysts focus on democratic governance and policy reform. The political scientists and regional security scholars, all university lecturers, contribute expertise in Sahelian politics, civil-military relations, and regional stability. The journalists, all investigative reporters from Abuja-based networks, cover political transitions, coups, and ECOWAS interventions.

This composition was designed to capture diverse, informed perspectives on developments in Mali and Burkina Faso. Some participants expressed discomfort with audio recording; detailed notes were taken during interviews and later verified for accuracy. This approach was applied consistently across all interviews to ensure reliability while respecting participants' preferences.

Findings One

This section presents the findings of the study, analyzed using thematic coding in NVivo software. The research was guided by five central research questions, and responses were organized thematically in line with these questions. NVivo supported the systematic identification, organization, and coding of emerging themes and subthemes from the qualitative data.

Factors Contributing to the Rise of Authoritarianism in West Africa

To structure insights from the interviews, a project map generated in NVivo visually illustrates how key themes relate to the rise of authoritarianism in West Africa. As shown in Figure 4.1, the map highlights the interconnection of dominant factors such as governance failure, insecurity, institutional weaknesses, and public disillusionment.

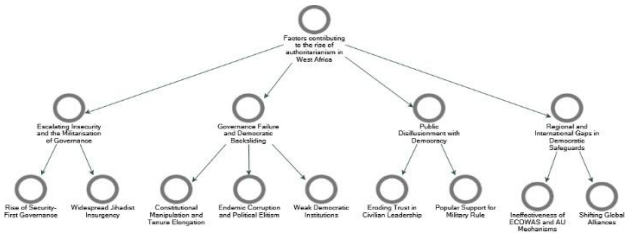


Figure 4.1. Project Map Showing Factors Contributing to the Rise of Authoritarianism in West Africa

Governance Failure and Democratic Backsliding

A consistent theme across interviews was the role of governance deficits in creating fertile ground for authoritarian resurgence. Participants emphasized poor service delivery, elite dominance, and weakened institutional credibility as drivers of public frustration and declining democratic resilience. This theme encompasses three subthemes: corruption and political elitism, weak democratic institutions, and constitutional manipulation, each reinforcing the legitimacy crisis faced by civilian governments.

Endemic Corruption and Political Elitism

Interviewees noted that entrenched corruption has eroded state legitimacy and deepened public distrust in elected leaders. Public office is often seen as a path to personal wealth rather than service, disconnecting rulers from citizens.

> "As R3 observed" When political elites see public office as an investment portfolio, and not a responsibility, citizens lose faith in democracy."

Respondents linked these patterns directly to military takeovers in Mali and Burkina Faso.

> "R6 remarked:"These coups didn't happen in a vacuum. They followed years of grand corruption and elitist detachment from national challenges."

The widening gap between rulers and the ruled undermines the social contract, opening space for authoritarian alternatives.

Weak Democratic Institutions

Participants also highlighted the failure of institutional safeguards, including the judiciary, parliaments, and electoral bodies. R7 explained:

> "Institutions meant to check executive power have been capture do rendered toothless. A compromised judiciary enables authoritarian drift."

R4 added that control over multiple institutions by incumbents makes democracy transactional, eroding public confidence.

Constitutional Manipulation and Tenure Elongation

Interviewees noted the recurrent trend of constitutional amendments to extend presidential terms as a gateway to authoritarianism. R1 stated:

> "When leaders tamper with term limits, they destroy a key pillar of democratic governance."

Such practices signal that democratic norm are flexible, emboldening both civilian and military actors. R9 observed: "Once Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire removed term limits, it suggested the constitution can be altered to suit those in power." Collectively, these patterns have weakened democratic expectations and increased the appeal of authoritarian alternatives across the region.

Escalating Insecurity and the Militarization of Governance

Participants identified the worsening security crisis as a major driver of authoritarian resurgence in West Africa, with prolonged state incapacity enabling militarization of governance. Respondents emphasized that civilian governments' failure to protect citizens from armed groups, especially jihadist insurgents, has eroded trust and empowered military actors positioning themselves as national saviors. This theme

is explored through two interconnected dimensions: jihadist insurgency and security-first governance.

Jihadist Insurgency

Interviewees highlighted that extremist groups have increasingly dominated territory and public perception, overwhelming state capacity in Mali, Burkina Faso, and neighbouring areas. Civilian administrations were criticized for failing to contain violence or build resilient local security structures. As R2 noted

> "When over half of your territory is outside government control, people just want safety no matter who provides it."

Respondents argued that this insecurity provided a pretext for military intervention, with armed forces framing their rule as a protective response rather than a power grab. R6 observed, "The threat of terrorism allowed soldiers to claim legitimacy not through elections, but as 'rescue missions.'" Communities affected by violence often viewed the military as more responsive than elected leaders.

Security-First Governance

Closely linked is the shift toward securitized governance, where counterterrorism and emergency measures overshadow participatory democracy. R5 explained, "The security agenda has crowded out all other policy concerns." Respondents noted that curfews, states of emergency, and restrictions on civil liberties have become commonplace, effectively replacing local governance structures with military authority. R8 warned,

> "Once the military becomes both security provider and policymaker, democracy loses its footing."

This institutional and cultural shift normalizes authoritarian practices, making military oversight appear not only acceptable but necessary in the eyes of many citizens.

Public Disillusionment with Democracy

Another key factor driving authoritarian resurgence, as highlighted by respondents, is widespread public disillusionment with democratic governance. Participants explained that years of unmet expectations in Mali and Burkina Faso have weakened trust in democratic institutions and increased acceptance of military intervention. Two closely connected themes emerged: declining trust in civilian leadership and growing support for military rule.

Eroding Trust in Civilian Leadership

Respondents consistently noted that poor service delivery, economic hardship, and entrenched corruption have undermined public confidence in elected governments. As R4 remarked, "People are tired. They've been voting for decades but see no real change just the same elites recycling themselves while insecurity and poverty worsen." R13 echoed this sentiment, stating that "years of broken promises, unemployment, and violence made people stop believing in ballots." Youth frustration is especially pronounced, with many viewings democracy as ineffective and as serving elite or external interests rather than citizens' needs (R6).

Rising Support for Military Rule

In this context, the military has gained legitimacy by presenting itself as a defender of sovereignty, dignity, and national pride, sometimes invoking anti-imperialist rhetoric. R11 observed,

> "The juntas speak the language of the people resistance, justice, independence. That resonates more than politicians' technocratic talk."

While citizens do not necessarily love authoritarian rule, many perceive it as a "lesser evil" amid failed democratic governance (R7). However, R8 cautioned, "Authoritarianism dressed in populism is still authoritarianism. When democracy fails, people trade rights for the illusion of security." This dynamic shows how popular frustration, combined with strategic military messaging, has normalized authoritarian alternatives in the public eye.

Regional and International Gaps in Democratic Safeguards

Participants consistently highlighted the weakness of regional and international mechanisms in preventing democratic breakdowns in West Africa. The perceived failures of ECOWAS, the AU, and other international actors have contributed to the resurgence of authoritarianism. This concern can be grouped into two dimensions: weak enforcement of democratic protocols and external inconsistencies influenced by geopolitical factors.

Weak Enforcement of Democratic Protocols

Many respondents criticized ECOWAS and the AU for lacking the political will and capacity to act decisively against unconstitutional power grabs. R2 stated,

> "We have strong documents like the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance but weak implementation. Member states violate them with impunity."

Sanctions, when applied, are often delayed or insufficient, sometimes harming ordinary citizens more than political elites, further eroding trust in regional institutions (R5; R10).

External Inconsistencies and Geopolitical Influences

Interviewees also highlighted the role of inconsistent international responses. As R6 observed, "Western governments condemn coups in some places and ignore them in others. That inconsistency fuels narratives that democracy is just a foreign agenda." Dependence on donor-driven democracy programs, alongside the growing influence of alternative partners like Russia, has weakened traditional powers' leverage and emboldened military regimes (R7; R12).

Overall, respondents argued that selective engagement and uneven enforcement have created a gap in democratic accountability, enabling authoritarian actors to consolidate power with minimal oversight.

Effects of Authoritarianism on Regional Stability

Thematic coding in NVivo identified five key themes, each with subthemes, illustrating the complex effects of military regimes and democratic backsliding on West Africa's political, security, and institutional landscape. A project map (Figure 2) visually represents these connections, showing how authoritarian rule undermines democratic norms, heightens insecurity, weakens regional institutions, alters geopolitical alliances, and worsens humanitarian conditions.

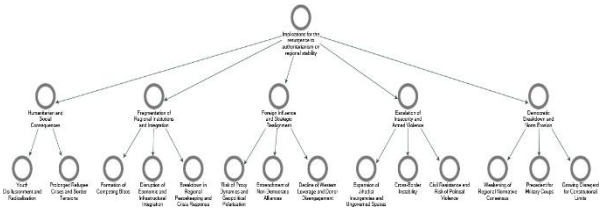


Figure 2. Project Map Showing the Effects of Authoritarianism on Regional Stability

Democratic Breakdown and Norm Erosion

A major consequence of authoritarian resurgence in West Africa is the erosion of democratic norms and the increasing acceptance of unconstitutional power grabs. NVivo analysis identified

three interconnected dynamics: the precedent set by military coups, disregard for constitutional limits, and weakening of regional normative consensus (see Figure 2).

Precedent for Military Coups

Respondents noted that recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger have normalized military intervention. The perception that such takeovers face little punishment undermines democratic resilience. R6 observed that "people increasingly see military rule as a solution rather than an exception," while R8 added that this normalization erodes the legitimacy of civilian institutions.

Disregard for Constitutional Limits

Civilian leaders have also adopted authoritarian practices, such as extending term limits or suppressing opposition, reflecting patterns seen in military regimes. R3 explained that these actions destabilize democratic norms, and R7 emphasized that such manipulations deepen political divisions, as observed in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

Weakening of Regional Normative Consensus

ECOWAS and Democratic Enforcement

Respondents reported that ECOWAS's capacity to uphold democratic standards is weakened by internal divisions and inconsistent action. R5 noted that some member states now "merely pay lip service to constitutional order," while R9 emphasized that fragmented enforcement emboldens anti-democratic actors and erodes the bloc's credibility. Overall, these dynamics create a permissive environment for authoritarian behavior, reflecting a deepening regional crisis in democratic governance.

Escalation of Insecurity and Armed Violence

Another key concern is that the rise of authoritarian regimes in West Africa has intensified insecurity and armed violence. NVivo analysis highlighted three linked issues: the expansion of jihadist insurgencies, rising political violence, and cross-border instability.

Expansion of Jihadist Insurgencies

Participants observed that military regimes often fail to implement inclusive security strategies, enabling extremist groups to gain ground, particularly in Sahelian border regions. R9 noted that jihadist influence has grown under military rule, while R7 highlighted that regimes focus on urban elites, leaving rural communities exposed. R11 added that excluding local populations from decision-making facilitates extremist recruitment.

Political Violence and Civil Resistance

Repressive measures protest bans, delayed transitions, and suppression of dissent heighten the risk of unrest. R3 warned that silencing citizens pushes them toward alternative forms of political expression, and R10 highlighted youth frustration in Burkina Faso, where support for strongmen is tempered by demands for genuine reforms.

Cross-Border Instability

Respondents emphasized the transnational spread of insecurity. R6 noted that instability in Mali has spilled into Burkina Faso, Niger, and beyond, while R4 observed that fragmented regional coordination,

weakened ECOWAS unity, and declining G5 Sahel cooperation have allowed militants to exploit gaps. Militarization and inward-looking policies by states further undermine collective counterinsurgency efforts, creating corridors for extremist activity and arms trafficking. authoritarian consolidation appears to exacerbate security challenges rather than contain them, destabilizing both national and regional governance structures.

Fragmentation of Regional Institutions and Integration

A key theme from the interviews is that the resurgence of authoritarianism is fragmenting West Africa's regional integration. NVivo analysis highlighted three interlinked dynamics: formation of competing political blocs, disruption of economic and infrastructural cooperation, and weakening of joint security mechanisms which is well explained by Figure2.

Formation of Competing Blocs

Respondents emphasized the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as both a practical and symbolic challenge to ECOWAS. R2 explained that the AES represents "a rewrite of governance rules away from constitutionalism," while R6 noted it signals a break from democratic obligations, undermining the regional consensus on governance.

Disruption of Economic and Infrastructural Integration

Military takeovers and resulting sanctions have stalled cross-border trade and infrastructure projects. R10 described stranded supply chains due to border closures, and R7 noted that initiatives like the Abidjan-Lagos corridor or the Sahel power pool are delayed as mistrust and regime protection take precedence over integration.

Weakening of Regional Peacekeeping and Crisis Response

Interviewees highlighted that shared security frameworks, such as ECOWAS standby forces and the G5 Sahel, have weakened. R4 observed a shift toward bilateral or external partnerships, while R8 noted that regional peacekeeping is now scattered and underfunded. respondents agreed that authoritarianism is undermining trust, alliances, and regional institutions, threatening both integration and collective security.

Foreign Influence and Strategic Realignment

The rise of authoritarian regimes in West Africa has coincided with and in many cases, been reinforced by a visible realignment in international alliances. As shown in Figure 2, participants highlighted three main subthemes under this dimension of the entrenchment of non-democratic alliances, the decline of Western leverage, and the risk of proxy dynamics and geopolitical polarization.

Entrenchment of Non-Democratic Alliances

Respondents consistently pointed to growing military and economic cooperation between Sahelian juntas and external authoritarian states such as Russia, China, and Turkey. These partnerships are typically framed by the regimes as alternatives to what they perceive as intrusive Western conditionalities. As R5 put it:

> "Military rulers are drawn to partners who won't ask questions about elections or term limits. Russia and China offer security and investment no democracy strings attached."

R12 noted the symbolism:

> "The shift isn't just tactical. It's ideological these regimes are building alliances that reflect their governance preferences."

The rise of Russian-linked entities such as the Wagner Group in Mali and Burkina Faso exemplifies how external actors are not only offering material support but also legitimizing the authoritarian turn under the banner of sovereignty and anti-imperialism.

Decline of Western Leverage and Donor Disengagement

At the same time, interviewees emphasized that Western powers are increasingly losing their strategic influence in the region. Respondents cited aid suspensions, visa restrictions, and diplomatic downgrades as signs of eroding relationships, which military governments often exploit to rally nationalist sentiment. R11 observed:

> "The U.S. and EU are losing ground. When they cut aid or criticize regimes, juntas turn it into fuel for anti-Western narratives."

R3 added:

> "Western leverage was tied to conditional funding. Now, these states have alternatives and are willing to walk away."

This decoupling from Western norms and capital flows has both immediate and long-term consequences for governance support, human rights monitoring, and civil society development.

Risk of Proxy Dynamics and Geopolitical Polarisation

A more alarming concern raised by several participants was that West Africa is becoming a theatre for proxy competition among global powers. The alignment of certain regimes with Russia, and the counter-positioning of others with France, the EU, or the U.S., is creating parallel spheres of influence that complicate diplomatic coordination.

R7 cautioned:

> "We're entering an era of soft Cold War dynamics where one camp backs the juntas and the other sides with democratic outliers."

R9 echoed this worry:

> "Geopolitical rivalries are replacing regional consensus. It's no longer just about West Africa's problems it's about global power games being played out locally."

Overall, the findings show that the region's democratic erosion is both driving and being driven by shifting external alliances. The increasing dependency on undemocratic powers further insulates military regimes from regional and global pressure to transition.

Humanitarian and Social Consequences

The entrenchment of military rule in Mali and Burkina Faso has deepened existing humanitarian and social vulnerabilities, particularly in conflict-affected and impoverished regions. As shown in Figure 2, respondents highlighted two key subthemes: internal displacement and humanitarian crises and youth disempowerment and civic disengagement.

Internal Displacement and Humanitarian Crises

Respondents described a rapidly worsening humanitarian situation. Security operations by the juntas often poorly coordinated and heavy-handed have increased displacement, restricted aid access, and led to more civilian harm.

R6 noted that IDP numbers continue to rise as civilians flee both extremist groups and military abuses. R10 added that aid workers are increasingly unable to operate because state authorities prioritize regime security over civilian protection. Many respondents stressed that humanitarian assistance is now politicized, with military leaders sometimes blocking aid due to mistrust of international actors. This has intensified

food shortages, health risks, and disruptions to schooling.

Youth Disempowerment and Civic Disengagement

The consolidation of authoritarian power has also weakened youth engagement in democratic processes. Several respondents observed growing disillusionment, with many young people either withdrawing from politics or embracing junta narratives.

As R13 put it, civic space has shrunk so deeply that elections no longer feel meaningful to youths. R8 added that some now view military rulers as saviors, largely because past democratic governments failed to deliver tangible improvements. Respondents also highlighted the influence of disinformation and populist messaging, which glorify militarism over civic values and further erode trust in democratic institutions.

Effectiveness of ECOWAS Mechanisms

This section evaluates ECOWAS's efforts to prevent authoritarianism and unconstitutional political transitions in the region. NVivo analysis and the project map in Figure 3 illustrate the organization's institutional strengths, recurrent shortcomings, and the political constraints that limit its ability to respond effectively to democratic backsliding in West Africa.

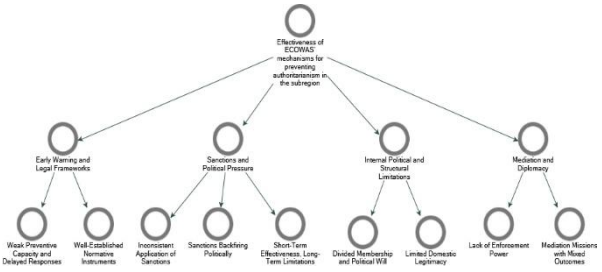


Figure 3. Project Map Showing Effectiveness of ECOWAS' Mechanisms in Preventing Authoritarianism in the Sub-Region

Early Warning and Legal Frameworks

While interviewees acknowledged that ECOWAS has laid a foundational legal architecture, they overwhelmingly viewed its preventive mechanisms as reactive, slow, and often symbolic.

Well-Established Normative Instruments

Many respondents acknowledged the strong normative basis of ECOWAS's legal instruments, especially the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which prohibits unconstitutional changes of government. Interviewees agreed that these tools have helped entrench democratic norms and provide legitimacy for suspensions, sanctions, and mediation. However, several stressed that the challenge lies not in the absence of rules but in the failure to activate them early. As R6 (Professor of Political Science) put it, "The normative framework is there. The problem is… the failure to activate them early enough." R3 (Policy Analyst) added that protocols "on paper" are ineffective if not invoked at the right moment.

A recurring theme was ECOWAS's weak preventive capacity and delayed responses. Despite early warning systems like ECOWARN, respondents noted that the organization often reacts only after coups or constitutional violations have already unfolded. This delay was linked to political sensitivities, institutional inertia, and the absence of a clear mechanism connecting early warning to early action. As R1 (ECOWAS Senior Governance Advisor) explained, intelligence is available, but converting it into diplomatic steps "remains a bottleneck." R8 (Assistant Professor) compared the situation to "watching a fire start" and responding only after the building collapses.

Examples such as Guinea (2021) and Niger (2023) were commonly cited as cases where clear warning signs were not followed by decisive action. Respondents argued that this pattern undermines ECOWAS's credibility and signals to potential coup plotters that early warnings carry little consequence. R11 (Investigative Journalist) noted that by the time ECOWAS reacts, juntas have already consolidated power and dismantled institutions.

Overall, the findings indicate a gap between ECOWAS's strong legal framework and its limited implementation capacity. Early warning rarely triggers early response, allowing authoritarian actors to entrench themselves. As R7 (Assistant Professor) summarized, "If ECOWAS wants to be taken seriously, it must bridge the gap between information and action." Strengthening ECOWARN, establishing predefined triggers, and bolstering political will are essential if ECOWAS hopes to shift from reactive to preventive engagement.

Sanctions and Political Pressure

This section explores how ECOWAS uses sanctions and political pressure to respond to unconstitutional regime changes. Although sanctions are now central to the bloc's enforcement strategy, respondents consistentsly argued that their application is uneven, their gains temporary, and their political impact sometimes counterproductive.

Inconsistent Application of Sanctions

A major concern was the lack of uniformity in how sanctions are imposed. While ECOWAS sanctioned Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, respondents noted that the timing and severity varied widely and often reflected political interests. As R7 (Professor) remarked, "One country is sanctioned within days, another takes months… that weakens ECOWAS's moral authority." R10 (Journalist) echoed this, noting that different treatment "makes people ask: is this about democracy or about politics?" Several interviewees linked these inconsistencies to power dynamics, arguing that influential states may receive lighter sanctions. R3 (Policy Analyst) warned that selective enforcement undermines the bloc's credibility.

Short-Term Impact, Long-Term Weaknesses

Respondents acknowledged that sanctions sometimes prompt short-term concessions such as transition pledges or negotiations. But these changes rarely last. Juntas often extend timelines or abandon commitments once immediate pressure fades. As R2 (Early Warning Officer) noted, sanctions may "nudge regimes into dialogue, but that's about it." R6 (Political Scientist) added that juntas exploit ECOWAS's limited enforcement capacity, complying only temporarily. Interviewees also stressed that sanctions lack monitoring and escalation mechanisms, reducing their deterrent value and allowing sanctioned states to seek alternative alliances.

Sanctions Backfiring Politically

Many respondents warned that sanctions can unintentionally strengthen military regimes. In Mali and Niger, broad economic measures have been used by juntas to portray ECOWAS as hostile or neo-colonial. R12 (Journalist) observed that sanctions often "hurt the people more than the generals," giving juntas fuel for propaganda. R5 (Analyst) added that when ordinary citizens struggle to access cash or medicine, it delegitimizes ECOWAS. As R8 (Lecturer) summarized,

"The public sees ECOWAS as punishing the poor while the juntas adapt."

To address these challenges, respondents recommended shifting from broad-based economic sanctions to more targeted measures such as travel bans, asset freezes, and restrictions on elite networks to minimize civilian suffering while maintaining political pressure.

Mediation and Diplomacy

While ECOWAS has regularly dispatched high-level mediation missions and facilitated negotiation frameworks, the effectiveness of these interventions has been undermined by weak enforcement power and shifting political dynamics within affected states.

Mediation Missions with Mixed Outcomes

Respondents acknowledged that ECOWAS has institutionalized mediation as a key conflict-resolution mechanism, deploying seasoned diplomats and former heads of state to engage with coup leaders and political stakeholders. However, the results have been inconsistent, often dependent on the willingness of the junta to cooperate and the domestic political context.

R1, a senior governance advisor at the ECOWAS Commission, reflected:

> "We have deployed mediators to Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, but outcomes vary. Some accept frameworks reluctantly; others ignore them outright."

R11, a journalist with regional focus, added:

> "The mediators are respected figures, but they have limited leverage. Once the junta consolidates power, it becomes harder to negotiate anything meaningful."

R4, a political affairs analyst, cited the case of Mali as an example:

> "The transition roadmap in Mali was initially accepted under pressure, but it has been revised multiple times. Mediation helped open the door, but it didn't guarantee follow-through."

Several respondents suggested that while ECOWAS mediation helps de-escalate immediate tensions, its long-term impact is undermined when there is no sustained monitoring, support, or enforcement of agreements.

Lack of Enforcement Power

A recurrent concern across interviews was that ECOWAS lacks any binding enforcement capability to ensure that its diplomatic resolutions are implemented. Unlike the African Union, which has a standby force in principle, ECOWAS often relies on voluntary compliance, moral persuasion, and the threat of sanctions to compel cooperation.

R9, a senior lecturer and regional security scholar, commented:

> "ECOWAS has no real stick. Once the junta senses domestic support, it can ignore commitments without fear of intervention."

This limitation was emphasized by R7, an associate professor with expertise in civil-military relations:

> "You can't negotiate without leverage. The military knows ECOWAS has no force or unified will to act decisively."

Respondents highlighted that the absence of a dedicated enforcement mechanism not only weakens ECOWAS's hand at the negotiation table but also sends the wrong signal to other potential coup plotters across the region. Without consequences, transitional charters become mere formalities rather than serious commitments.

R13, a media correspondent who covered the ECOWAS summit in Guinea, put it bluntly:

> "Every junta is now playing the same script. Promise a quick transition, wait out the noise, then entrench yourself. ECOWAS hasn't figured out how to counter that."

Respondents recommended pairing future mediation efforts with clear timelines, verification mechanisms, and credible penalties for defaulting parties. There were also calls for closer coordination with continental and international partners to align diplomatic responses and expand leverage.

Internal Political and Structural Limitations

The effectiveness of ECOWAS in curbing authoritarianism is also hampered by internal political and institutional challenges within the organization. Respondents highlighted growing divisions among member states, a weakening political consensus, and a deepening legitimacy crisis as key structural constraints that limit the capacity of ECOWAS to act decisively.

Divided Membership and Political Will

A central theme across interviews was the growing ideological and political fragmentation within ECOWAS. With an increasing number of member states governed by military juntas or civilian regimes exhibiting authoritarian tendencies, the bloc's capacity to speak and act with one voice has significantly eroded.

R3, a public policy analyst, noted:

> "You now have several ECOWAS members either ruled by the military or sympathetic to non-democratic norms. That makes unified action very difficult."

R8, an associate professor of political science, explained:

> "Authoritarian contagion is real. As more countries fall to coups or slide into authoritarianism, regional pressure against such tendencies weakens. It becomes self-defeating."

Respondents indicated that political will among member states is no longer consistent, especially when decisions might reflect back on their own democratic deficits. This internal contradiction has diluted the normative authority of ECOWAS and fostered a culture of selective enforcement.

Limited Domestic Legitimacy

Another structural limitation identified by respondents is the perception that ECOWAS often protects incumbents rather than democratic principles. This legitimacy gap particularly visible in countries with unpopular civilian governments undermines local support for ECOWAS interventions.

R10, a journalist covering West African political transitions, explained:

> "In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, people saw ECOWAS as defending corrupt elites. That perception helped the juntas rally public support against sanctions and mediation."

R6, a university professor specializing in Sahel politics, emphasized:

> "For ECOWAS to be effective, it must be seen as neutral and principled. Right now, its image is compromised by past inconsistencies and political alignments."

R12, another journalist, echoed these sentiments:

> "When citizens don't trust ECOWAS, even its good policies fall flat. Public opinion matters, especially in transitions."

Respondents warned that unless ECOWAS addresses its image and improves its engagement with civil society, its legitimacy will continue to decline, reducing the moral force of its democratic mandates. This has resulted into formal withdraw of three countries namely Mali. On 29 January 2025, Burkina

Faso, and Niger. The three nations which are in the central Sahel region, the insurgency-affected region have established their own coalition named Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The new effective departure date has presently been stretched to July 29, but January 29 will remain the official withdrawal date. The bloc is optimistic that the six months of transitory period will persuade the nations into coming back.

Challenges ECOWAS Faces in Implementing its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

This section responds to the fourth research question, which investigates the structural, political, and perceptual challenges that hinder ECOWAS's ability to enforce its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. NVivo analysis generated a visual representation (Figure 4) of the four main thematic domains as political will and member-state commitment, institutional constraints, regional fragmentation, and public/external perceptions.

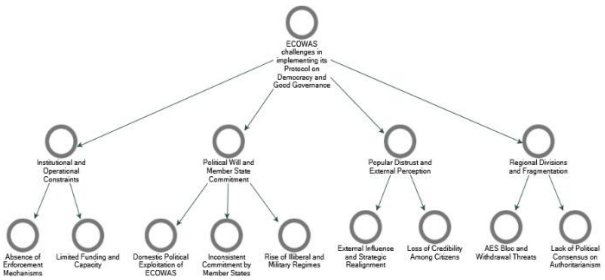


Figure 4. Project Map Showing Challenges ECOWAS Faces in Implementing Its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

Political Will and Member State Commitment

The lack of consistent political will among ECOWAS member states emerged as a foundational challenge to implementing the protocol. While the legal provisions are robust, their enforcement is constrained by uneven adherence, growing authoritarian tendencies, and the politicization of ECOWAS processes by domestic actors. This theme comprises three sub-themes: inconsistent commitment, the rise of illiberal regimes, and political instrumentalization of ECOWAS.

Inconsistent Commitment by Member States

Respondents highlighted a recurring pattern of member states publicly endorsing democratic values while violating them in practice. This includes amending constitutions for third-term bids, restricting press freedom, and undermining judicial independence acts that contradict the spirit of the protocol. This act led to the withdrawal of Mali and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS on 29 January 2025.

R5, a political analyst, remarked:

> "It's one thing to sign the protocol and another to respect it. Leaders often violate it and face no real consequences. That's the problem."

R2, an ECOWAS official, also noted:

> "The protocol depends on goodwill, but when leaders themselves are the violators, ECOWAS is caught in a bind. It can't discipline half of its members."

Such selective enforcement erodes both internal legitimacy and external credibility, weakening ECOWAS's normative foundation.

Rise of Illiberal and Military Regimes

Respondents expressed concern over the rapid rise of illiberal regimes and military juntas in the region. At the time of data collection, four ECOWAS countries Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger had experienced recent coups, marking a third of the bloc under unconstitutional rule. However, the focus of this study is on Mali and Burkina Faso.

R7, an associate professor of political science, observed:

> "When a third of your members are military regimes, you no longer have a credible moral anchor. That distorts decision-making and weakens consensus."

R9, a senior lecturer on regional security, added:

> "These regimes no longer feel bound by ECOWAS norms. They've even formed their own bloc, signaling a parallel political order."

This shift not only dilutes enforcement but signals a structural legitimacy crisis within ECOWAS, as authoritarian governments increasingly reject its authority outright.

Domestic Political Exploitation of ECOWAS

A nuanced challenge raised by multiple interviewees is the use of ECOWAS by incumbent regimes to advance domestic political agendas. Rather than acting as a neutral arbiter, ECOWAS is sometimes viewed as aligning with ruling parties, which compromises its credibility.

R12, a media practitioner, commented:

> "When ECOWAS supports elections marred by fraud or fails to speak up on repression, it's seen as taking sides. That perception sticks."

R6, a professor with expertise in governance in the Sahel, elaborated:

> "Governments instrumentalize ECOWAS as a legitimacy shield, especially when facing opposition or external criticism. That politicizes the organization's role."

This instrumentalization undermines the protocol's core goal of promoting democratic consolidation and increases resistance from civil society and opposition actors.

Regional Divisions and Fragmentation

A major obstacle to ECOWAS's effective enforcement of its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance is the growing political division across the region. Member states are increasingly split into competing blocs and differ widely in how they interpret democracy, weakening the shared commitment needed for collective action. Two themes stood out strongly: the rise of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the fading regional agreement on what counts as authoritarian rule.

AES Bloc and Growing Defiance

Respondents repeatedly described the formation of the AES bringing together Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as a turning point. Instead of simply leaving ECOWAS, these states created a rival bloc that openly challenges ECOWAS's authority and questions its legitimacy.

> R4, a public policy analyst, noted that "AES is more than a strategic alliance; it's a political statement against what they see as ECOWAS' double standards and Western alignment."
>
> R12, a journalist, added that the coordinated withdrawal signaled a deliberate rejection of ECOWAS'sgovernancenorms.
>
> R6, a professor, stressed that the new bloc "undermines any sense of collective obligation to democratic principles."

Several respondents warned that the AES could inspire other politically dissatisfied states to question ECOWAS, especially if the bloc gains external backing.

No shared definition of authoritarianism beyond the AES split, respondents described a deeper problem: ECOWAS member states no longer agree on what democratic governance means. Some uphold electoral rules but suppress the media; others respect term limits but restrict opposition. This inconsistency makes enforcement selective and politically charged. R8 pointed out that "there's no shared definition of democracy anymore." R2 added that ideological differences make regional sanctions difficult and often

unfair. R13 noted that this inconsistency allows juntas to dismiss ECOWAS's actions as biased or hypocritical. This lack of shared norms weakens the Protocol and leaves enforcement vulnerable to political interests. Many respondents suggested that ECOWAS urgently needs renewed dialogue to rebuild a common understanding of democracy possibly through a peer-review system or a dedicated regional summit on democratic convergence.

Popular Distrust and External Perception

The final theme centers on the growing legitimacy crisis and external alliances that weaken ECOWAS's ability to enforce its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Respondents stressed that declining public trust and the rise of partnerships with non-democratic powers have made it harder for ECOWAS to assert its authority.

Loss of Credibility Among Citizens

Many respondents noted that ECOWAS is increasingly viewed by citizens as elitist, externally influenced, or protective of unpopular governments. This perception makes its interventions less effective, especially where civilian leaders had already lost public support.

R10 explained that in places like Mali and Burkina Faso, "ECOWAS was seen as defending corrupt elites… people just saw it protecting the status quo."

R3 added that when sanctions hurt ordinary people but fail to pressure juntas, "ECOWAS loses moral ground. People feel betrayed by democracy and start siding with the military."

This loss of public trust weakens the protocol's implementation and makes it harder to rally citizens behind constitutional rule. Respondents suggested deeper engagement with civil society and clearer communication to rebuild credibility.

External Influence and Strategic Realignment

Respondents also highlighted a growing shift in which military regimes turn toward non-democratic powers especially Russia and China for military and economic support without democratic conditions. This realignment reduces ECOWAS's leverage.

R1 noted that if juntas can obtain "drones, mercenaries, and investment from Russia without reforming," they are far less likely to follow ECOWAS norms.

R9 observed a broader geopolitical shift, where some regimes adopt anti-Western positions to reject ECOWAS values. R11 added that these external alliances help juntas evade sanctions and introduce competing political models in the region. Without adapting to these new dynamics through coordinated diplomacy and stronger communication, respondents warned that ECOWAS's influence may continue to erode.

Enhancing ECOWAS's Role in Safeguarding Democracy

This section addresses the final research objective by highlighting practical steps respondents believe ECOWAS should take to better protect democracy and prevent unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa. Drawing from interview insights and NVivo thematic analysis, the project map (Figure 5) summarizes their key recommendations. Overall, respondents recognised ECOWAS's current limitations but emphasized forward-looking reforms stronger institutions, deeper engagement with citizens,

and more credible and consistent enforcement mechanisms.

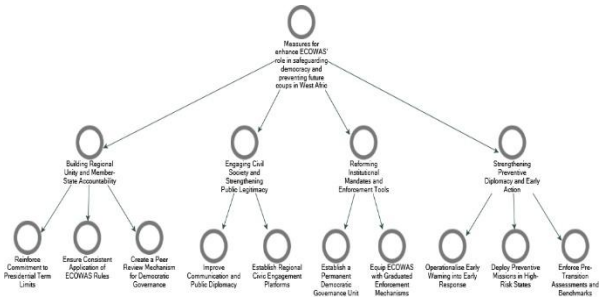


Figure 5 Project Map Showing Proposed Measures to Strengthen ECOWAS's Democratic Safeguards

Strengthening Preventive Diplomacy and Early Action

Respondents stressed that ECOWAS must shift from reacting to crises to preventing them, especially by activating its early warning system and deploying diplomacy before political tensions escalate. Many linked past failures to delayed responses and weak follow-through.

Operationalize Early Warning into Early Response

Although ECOWARN generates strong political risk alerts, respondents noted that warnings rarely translate into timely action. This gap weakens ECOWAS's credibility. R6 observed that ECOWAS often sees "disputed elections, constitutional changes, rising civil-military tension," yet responds only after a coup occurs. R2 added that while ECOWARN works, "there's a bottleneck between intelligence and action. "Respondents urged ECOWAS to connect early-warning data to automatic diplomatic steps such as rapid envoy deployment or formal pressure on governments showing early signs of democratic decline.

Deploy Preventive Missions in High-Risk States

Another strong recommendation was for ECOWAS to maintain a consistent presence in politically fragile countries. R4 argued for "standing missions or roving envoys" to deter military takeovers, while R8 noted that diplomacy must be continuous, not limited to election seasons or crises.These missions could involve respected African leaders tasked with monitoring, advising, and mediating long before institutions collapse.

Enforce Pre-Transition Benchmarks

Respondents also encouraged ECOWAS to set clear governance benchmarks such as judicial independence, security-sector control, and credible electoral timelines especially in transitional regimes. R1 argued that transitions need a firm checklist, not vague promises, and R13 stressed the need to define what a credibl*e* transition looks like, supported by regular follow-up. Such benchmarks would give ECOWAS stronger leverage and empower civil society to monitor compliance.

Reforming Institutional Mandates and Enforcement Tools

Respondents widely agreed that ECOWAS must overhaul its governance structures and adopt more effective enforcement tools. They argued that political compromises and weak institutional autonomy limit ECOWAS's ability to prevent democratic backsliding.

Create a Permanent Democratic Governance Unit

A key proposal was the establishment of a fully resourced, autonomous unit focused on democratic governance. sR3 called for a professional body to

monitor term limits, media freedom, and judicial independence. R5 added that such a unit could support electoral commissions, civil society, and political actors with training and technical assistance This would give ECOWAS a sustained presence in governance matters rather than episodic crisis engagement.

Adopt Graduated and Targeted Enforcement Mechanisms

Respondents criticized ECOWAS's reliance on broad sanctions, which often hurt citizens more than elites. They preferred a flexible, targeted system. R7 advocated a tiered approach from travel bans and asset freezes on coup leaders to suspension from specific ECOWAS programs. R12 added that selective measures such as restricting elite participation in regional meetings can send strong signals without harming ordinary people. Respondents emphasized that any enforcement must be transparent and applied consistently to rebuild trust and reduce perceptions of political bias.

Building Regional Unity and Member-State Accountability

Respondents stressed that restoring regional unity and enforcing accountability among member states is essential for strengthening ECOWAS's democratic mandate. Growing differences in governance practices especially with the rise of military juntas and authoritarian civilian leaders have weakened ECOWAS's shared norms. Participants proposed practical mechanisms to rebuild cohesion and ensure compliance.

Create a Peer Review Mechanism for Democratic Governance

A widely supported idea was the creation of a West African peer review system, modelled on the APRM, to regularly assess each state's democratic performance. R6 argued that "peer reviews would hold leaders accountable to one another it's harder to ignore peer pressure." R9 added that such reviews would expose early signs of democratic erosion, from media crackdowns to judicial capture. Respondents suggested involving civil society to strengthen independence and credibility.

Reinforce Commitment to Presidential Term Limits

Many identified term-limit manipulation as a key driver of democratic decline. They urged ECOWAS to adopt a firm no-third-term rule linked to automatic sanctions. R8 noted that "most coups start with leaders tampering with constitutions two terms max should be non-negotiable." R13 added that enforcing this rule would show that constitutional coups are as unacceptable as military ones.

Ensure Consistent Application of ECOWAS Rules

Selective enforcement was seen as a major source of distrust. Respondents stressed that rules must be applied uniformly. R11 asked why ECOWAS "sanctions one country and ignores another doing the same thing." R4 stated that consistency would make deterrence credible.

Engaging Civil Society and Strengthening Public Legitimacy

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that ECOWAS must rebuild its connection with ordinary

citizens. Without public trust, even strong protocols lose impact. Two priority strategies were highlighted.

Establish Regional Civic Engagement Platforms

Participants proposed ECOWAS-supported platforms bringing youth, women's groups, NGOs, and professional bodies into democratic monitoring and advocacy. R5 stated that "authoritarianism grows where people feel excluded ECOWAS must bring citizens, especially youth, into the fold." R7 added that civic groups can act as grassroots watchdogs and early warning actors.These platforms would help democratize ECOWAS's approach and counter junta narratives.

Improve Communication and Public Diplomacy

Respondents agreed that ECOWAS's public communication is weak, allowing misinformation and junta propaganda to dominate. R12 noted that "people only hear the junta's version ECOWAS must tell its own story." R10 added that citizens might support sanctions if they understood their purpose. They recommended a multilingual, community-based communication strategy using local media and influencers to reconnect ECOWAS with its citizens.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study reveals a coherent picture of authoritarian resurgence and democratic backsliding in West Africa, particularly in Mali and Burkina Faso. Interviewees emphasized that this resurgence is closely tied to historical and systemic governance deficits, including corruption, weak institutions, and tenure elongation. These factors create openings for unconstitutional regime changes, echoing Gyimah-Boadi's (2021) argument that elite capture and institutional manipulation enable military interventions under these guises of national salvation. Respondents further highlighted how regional influences and shifting public sentiment accelerate democratic erosion. Public disillusionment emerged as a key driver of instability. Citizens' frustration with ineffective elections and poor service delivery has fostered support for military regimes, as noted by Ojo (2023). This study extends this insight by showing that disillusionment is increasingly ideological: military rule is often viewed as more decisive and nationalist, especially when juntas adopt anti-imperialist rhetoric, challenging assumptions about the universality of liberal democracy.

The resurgence of authoritarianism has significant regional implications. Participants linked it to rising cross-border insecurity, weakened multilateral cooperation, and the formation of new alliances such as the Alliance of Sahel States. These dynamics, in line with Arthur (2025), reflect a collapse in regional normative cohesion, making coordinated crisis responses more difficult. Military-led regimes often exacerbate ungoverned spaces, inadvertently fueling jihadist expansion, illustrating that authoritarian approaches securitize politics without addressing root causes (Omilusi, 2024). Regarding ECOWAS, respondents noted that while its normative instruments like the ECOWARN platform and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol remain strong on paper, they are weakened by reactive approaches and inconsistent application.

Sanctions sometimes backfire, boosting public support for juntas and fostering anti-Western sentiment, aligning with Rwodzi's (2025) observation that external pressure without grassroots legitimacy

empowers authoritarian actors. Internal contradictions within ECOWAS, including inconsistent member commitment and alignment with illiberal regimes, further undermine enforcement and moral authority (CIA Oke, 2025). Many respondents argued that the organization is increasingly perceived as a protector of incumbents rather than democratic principles, eroding public trust.

The findings identify governance failure, insecurity, institutional weaknesses, and public disillusionment as key drivers of authoritarianism. Consequences include democratic breakdown, increased insecurity, institutional fragmentation, and shifting regional alliances. While ECOWAS possesses robust legal frameworks, their effectiveness is limited by inconsistent enforcement, internal contradictions, and declining legitimacy.

Finally, participants emphasized strategic reforms for ECOWAS, including enhancing early warning systems, strengthening enforcement, promoting civic engagement, and, crucially, restoring public legitimacy. As Cospite (2025) notes, the erosion of citizen faith undermines regional organizations; respondents stressed that ECOWAS must complement technical capacity with transparent, inclusive public diplomacy to safeguard democracy effectively and prevent future coups.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex drivers of authoritarian resurgence in West Africa, focusing on Mali and Burkina Faso. Insights from policymakers, scholars, and journalists show that unconstitutional regime changes stem from a mix of governance failures, chronic insecurity, and weakening institutions, pointing to systemic dysfunction rather than isolated military opportunism. Military regimes emerged amid public frustration with ineffective civilian leadership and the lure of security-focused governance in the face of persistent jihadist threats. While ECOWAS has normative tools, such as the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, its impact is limited by internal divisions, weak enforcement, and declining legitimacy. Sanctions and mediation have often been reactive, producing uneven results.

The study also reveals a growing gap between ECOWAS's democratic aspirations and public perception. Citizens in coup-affected states increasingly see the bloc as elitist, externally influenced, or selectively enforcing rules. The emergence of alternative arrangements, like the Alliance of Sahel States, further weakens regional consensus on constitutional governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Strengthen Early Warning and Preventive Diplomacy**

   ECOWAS should link its ECOWARN system to rapid diplomatic missions to address early signs of democratic erosion constitutional manipulation, electoral malpractice, or rising civil-military tensions before crises escalate.

2. **Reform Sanctions Framework**

   Sanctions should be consistent, proportional, and politically neutral. A tiered approach targeting ruling elites with measures such as asset freezes, visa bans, and project suspensions

can prevent sanctions from unintentionally bolstering authoritarian narratives.

3. **Establish a Democratic Governance Unit:**

   A dedicated unit within ECOWAS could monitor constitutional compliance, support electoral integrity, liaise with civil society, and conduct proactive research and capacity building, ensuring systematic rather than reactive engagement.

4. **Refine Normative Framework**

   The Supplementary Protocol should explicitly prohibit constitutional amendments that extend presidential terms, closing legal loopholes that enable authoritarian entrenchment.

5. **Enhance Mediation Effectiveness**

   Mediation agreements should include enforceable timelines, periodic reviews, and penalties for non-compliance to prevent repeated violations by junta leaders.

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