

**MILITARY COUPS AND THE CRISIS OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA:
ASSESSING ECOWAS' INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS (2010 - 2024)**

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Abstract

Since 2010, West Africa has experienced a resurgence of military coups, which has significantly disrupted governance and regional cooperation. This development raises questions about the effectiveness of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in upholding its democratic principles and its objective of maintaining regional integration. Although ECOWAS has established a normative framework that condemns unconstitutional changes of government, the recurring coups in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger reveal a significant gap between its declared commitments and its capacity for effective enforcement. This study examines ECOWAS's responses to coups between 2010 and 2024 and evaluates the implications for regional cohesion. Employing a qualitative comparative case study approach, the research analyses official ECOWAS communiqués, policy instruments, and existing scholarly literature. The findings indicate that while ECOWAS has maintained its normative commitments, the implementation of these principles has been inconsistent. This inconsistency has weakened the organization's deterrence capacity and gradually eroded its legitimacy among member states and regional populations. The study contributes to broader scholarly discussions on regional governance, democratic consolidation, and the stability of postcolonial states. It demonstrates that repeated military interventions have gradually transformed ECOWAS from an organization primarily focused on regional integration into one increasingly preoccupied with crisis management. These transformations have important implications for the future of regional cooperation and peace in West Africa.

Introduction

The regional integration of West Africa has always been conceptualized as a project that is both economic and political in nature, and which seeks to promote collective development, political stability, and democratic governance among member states. Since its founding in 1975, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has grown from being a largely economic cooperation initiative to a regional organization that has a specific mandate to promote peace, security, and constitutional governance. This shift was institutionalized through key documents such as the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security and the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which together positioned ECOWAS as a normative leader among African regional organizations.

However, despite these institutional gains, the recent resurgence of military coups in West Africa since 2010 has revealed the underlying contradictions of the region's integration project. The coups in Mali (2012, 2020, and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have all taken place in quick succession, threatening not only the national political order but also the authority and credibility of ECOWAS as a regional guarantor of democratic values. These events have taken place against the backdrop of rising public discontent with civilian governments, the persistence of insecurity threats from terrorism and insurgency, and rising geopolitical rivalries involving external actors. Consequently, military coups have increasingly been justified within national contexts as corrective or stabilizing interventions, which has further complicated the normative position of ECOWAS against unconstitutional changes of government.

The measures adopted by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in response to these coups have generally followed a predictable pattern, including the suspension of affected countries from decision-making bodies, the imposition of economic and diplomatic sanctions, and the initiation of mediation efforts aimed at restoring constitutional order. However, the effectiveness of these measures has been mixed. In some instances, sanctions have failed to serve as effective catalysts for rapid transitions to civilian rule, while prolonged negotiations have inadvertently contributed to the legitimization of military regimes rather than their reversal.

This paper contends that the continued occurrence of military coups in West Africa is a reflection not only of the failure of governance in the region but also of a crisis of regional integration, in which the effectiveness of ECOWAS as a regional institution has been progressively eroded. While the organization has shown a consistent commitment to the norm of rejecting military coups, it has been limited in its capacity to enforce its policies by the political fragmentation, economic interdependence, and lack of public legitimacy. As a result, ECOWAS has increasingly become a crisis management institution rather than a proactive force for integration and democratic consolidation.

The major research question of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the institutional responses of ECOWAS to military coups between 2010 and 2024 and to explore the implications of these responses for regional integration in West Africa. This paper will seek to answer two major research questions: First, how effective have the sanctions, suspension, and mediation efforts of ECOWAS been in responding to military coups? Second, what do these responses reveal about the nature and limitations of regional integration in West Africa?

Through the qualitative comparative case study approach, this research makes a contribution to the interdisciplinary body of literature on African regionalism, civil-military relations, and democratic governance. This research positions ECOWAS in the context of debates on the ability of regional organizations in the Global South to promote democratic values in situations of political instability and external pressure. This article also provides policy-relevant information on how ECOWAS can readjust its approach to restore its credibility and enhance regional integration in a situation of repeated military intervention.

The rest of this article is organized as follows. Section Two describes the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research. Section Three examines the normative and legal framework of ECOWAS on democracy and constitutional governance. Section Four describes the methodology and case selection. Section Five provides a comparative analysis of ECOWAS' handling of coup cases. Section Six interprets the implications of the findings for regional integration, and the final section concludes with recommendations for institutional transformation.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach of this research is interdisciplinary, combining concepts from regional integration theory, institutional effectiveness, and civil-military relations. The comparative lessons from African and Asian regional experiences are also considered. This is consistent with the increasing body of literature that conceives of regional organizations in the Global South as more than just economic institutions, but as politically embedded institutions that are shaped by historical legacies, security threats, and postcolonial state dynamics.

2.1 Military Intervention and Civil - Military Relations in the Global South

The role of military intervention in politics has remained a constant phenomenon in the formation and governance of states in postcolonial societies. The classical theory of civil-military relations views military coups as being driven by factors such as the lack of civilian control, legitimacy crises, and institutional weakness (Huntington, 1957; Finer, 1962). In Africa, these factors have been compounded by the colonial administrative legacy, patrimonialism, and the lack of institutionalization of democratic values (Ake, 1996).

Similar trends have also been witnessed in some parts of Asia, especially Southeast and South Asia, where the military has traditionally placed itself at the forefront as the protector of the unity and stability of the state. Instances from Thailand, Myanmar, and Pakistan have demonstrated how military institutions have justified their intervention in politics based on the rationale of state failure, corruption, or threats to security (Croissant et al., 2013; Chambers, 2019). These similarities highlight the fact that military coups are not unique events in the politics of individual nations but are instead situated within a wider regional and institutional context that either enables or disables military rule.

From an interdisciplinary approach, military coups can thus be seen not only as instances of domestic political failure but also as challenges to the mechanisms of regional governance. The ability of regional organizations to discourage, punish, and reverse military coups is inextricably linked to the institutional power, capacity, and legitimacy of these organizations.

2.2 Regional Integration Theory beyond Euro-Centrism

The classical theories of regional integration, especially neo-functionalism, highlight economic interdependence, supranational institutions, and spillover effects as the engines of deepening integration (Haas, 1958). Although these theories were originally designed to explain European integration, there has been an increasing debate about their relevance to regions like Africa and Asia, where processes of regional integration are characterized by sovereignty sensitivities, insecurity of regimes, and diverse capacities of states (Soderbaum, 2016).

In Africa, regional integration has been pursued simultaneously with deep commitments to state sovereignty and non-intervention, leading to what has been termed "integration without supranationality" (Bach, 2016). ECOWAS is a partial exception to this rule, having established relatively strong political and security institutions compared to other regional organizations in Africa. However, its experience is not dissimilar to that of Asian regional organizations, especially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has emphasized consensus, non-intervention, and regime stability over coercive enforcement of democratic standards (Acharya, 2014).

The African-Asian comparison highlights a common dilemma between the goals of regional integration and the preservation of regimes, especially in the face of military interventions that violate the constitutional order. Although ASEAN's handling of the Myanmar coup of 2021 indicated the weakness of non-intervention, the more interventionist stance of ECOWAS indicates a different but equally constrained form of regional enforcement. This comparison indicates that regional integration in the Global South is often constrained by very narrow political margins, which are determined by elite bargaining rather than supranational authority.

2.3 Institutional Effectiveness and Norm Enforcement

Institutional effectiveness in regional organizations can be conceptualized using three interconnected aspects: normative consistency, enforcement capacity, and legitimacy (Tallberg et al., 2018). Normative consistency is the degree of rule and principle clarity and consistency, while enforcement capacity is the ability to use sanctions or incentives. Legitimacy is the level of acceptance of the organization by both member states and the regional population.

ECOWAS has been very consistent in its norms with its zero-tolerance policy on unconstitutional changes of government, as enshrined in the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. However, evidence from Africa and Asia suggests that norm articulation is not enough to guarantee compliance. The lack of strong action by ASEAN against military rule in Myanmar and the institutional paralysis of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in the face of democratic regression in member states shows that without strong enforcement capacity, regional organizations lack credibility (Acharya, 2018; Dash, 2017).

In the West African situation, the lack of strong enforcement capacity by ECOWAS has been due to economic interdependence, political divisions within ECOWAS member states, and popular opposition to sanctions that are seen to negatively affect civilian populations. This has weakened the deterrent effect of ECOWAS's measures and its legitimacy, especially in countries affected by coups where military regimes have used nationalist and anti-regional feelings to mobilize support.

2.4 Analytical Framework

Based on the above theoretical approaches, this research evaluates the institutional effectiveness of ECOWAS in dealing with military coups using a comparative analytical approach that focuses on the following aspects:

1. Responsive norm – the level of consistency and timeliness of ECOWAS' condemnation and legal measures;
2. Enforcement measures – the extent and effectiveness of sanctions, suspension, and mediation;
3. Integration results – the effects of these measures on regional integration and cohesion.

By placing ECOWAS in the context of African-Asian discussions on regional governance and military intervention, this approach transcends region-specific theories and focuses on the structural constraints common to regional organizations in the Global South. In this way, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary literature on the complex nexus of security, sovereignty, and democracy in regional institutions facing challenges of political instability.

ECOWAS and ASEAN Responses to Military Coups (ECOWAS and ASEAN offer two contrasting but instructive models of regional responses to military intervention in the Global South).

ECOWAS has taken a strong stand, stepping in with clear rules that are set in stone. These rules say no to governments changing hands illegally, and if it happens, they can dole out punishments, kick them out for a bit, or, if things get really bad, even send in a group to keep the peace. This comes from what the organization went through historically, especially the long civil wars and state shutdowns in places like Liberia and Sierra Leone. Those events really pushed ECOWAS to focus on security as a core part of its integration model.

ASEAN, on the other hand, has always put a lot of value on things like a country's right to govern itself, not getting involved in other nations' internal affairs, and making decisions all together. ASEAN's way of dealing with Myanmar's 2021 military coup was pretty much just talking things out, not really pushing for anything with teeth. This shows us how limited that kind of approach can be when you're up against a military that's really dug in.

ECOWAS might seem to have stronger ideas about how things should be, and ASEAN takes a more careful, step-by-step approach. But really, both groups run into the same kinds of problems: they can't always make sure rules are followed, there are often fights within their own political teams, and people in places where there have been coups just don't trust them as much anymore.

When you look at regional groups in Africa and Asia, it's clear they're not just running on official rules. Instead, what really makes them tick is the political desire of the people involved, the power playing out in the region, and how each member country figures out what's best for itself.

3. ECOWAS Normative and Legal Framework on Democracy and Constitutional Governance.

ECOWAS tackles military coups using some pretty well-developed rules and laws, which sets it apart from lots of other regional groups in the Global South. This setup shows how the organization is slowly moving away from just working together on money stuff. It's now more about how countries are run and keeping things safe in West Africa, mainly because of all the ongoing fights, dictatorships, and weak governments.

3.1 Evolution of ECOWAS' Democratic Norms

The legal basis of the involvement of ECOWAS in matters of governance and constitutional issues can be found in the Revised ECOWAS Treaty of 1993, which broadened the mandate of the organization from economic integration to other areas. Article 4 of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty states that "Member States shall be guided by principles such as the promotion and consolidation of a democratic system of governance in each Member State" (ECOWAS, 1993, Art. 4).

This new approach to the organization's involvement in matters of governance was further strengthened by the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security of 1999, which acknowledged that political instability and unconstitutional governance were direct threats to the peace and security of the region.

3.2 The 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

The key document of the anti-coup strategy of ECOWAS is the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, adopted in 2001. This document sets a zero-tolerance policy towards unconstitutional changes of government and makes a direct link between democratic governance and regional stability and integration.

Article 1 of the Protocol states that "every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections" (ECOWAS, 2001, Art. 1[b]). More importantly, Article 1(c) provides that "any accession to or exercise of power by unconstitutional means is prohibited," thus providing the legal foundation for the sanctions and suspensions imposed by ECOWAS in the aftermath of military coups.

The Protocol also gives ECOWAS the legal capacity to act collectively in the event of a disruption of constitutional order. Article 45 provides that the organization may impose sanctions, including suspension from decision-making bodies within ECOWAS, in the event of a coup or unconstitutional takeover (ECOWAS, 2001).

3.3 Sanctions, Suspension and Enforcement Mechanisms

In practice, ECOWAS has used a strategy of political suspension, economic sanctions, border closure, and diplomatic isolation to pressure military regimes. This strategy is not only punitive for unconstitutional actions but also aims to prevent future interventions and reaffirm regional norms.

However, the use of sanctions has also highlighted important limitations. Although ECOWAS has a legal framework that enables collective enforcement, it has a very limited framework regarding proportionality, duration, and humanitarian safeguards. This has resulted in sanctions that have caused considerable suffering to the civilian population, fueling internal opposition to ECOWAS and allowing military regimes to portray regional pressure as foreign coercion.

The Niger crisis of 2023 highlighted these challenges. While ECOWAS used its legal mandate to suspend Niger and threaten further action, the divisions within ECOWAS member states and opposition from the regional public highlighted the difference between legal mandate and enforcement capacity.

3.4 Legal Strength and Institutional Constraints

From a broader African-Asian perspective, ECOWAS' legal framework is significantly stronger than that of ASEAN, which lacks binding rules explicitly condemning military coups. However, having robust laws alone has not guaranteed consistent results. The repeated occurrence of coups indicates that ECOWAS' ability to enforce its mandates is constrained by political negotiations, economic interdependence, and uneven commitment among its member states.

While ECOWAS' protocols present an ambitious vision for democratic regionalism, their uneven implementation highlights a deeper crisis of institutional authority. This gap between legal standards and political realities lies at the heart of the challenges facing regional integration in West Africa.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study approach to explore how effectively ECOWAS has responded to military coups in West Africa between 2010 and 2024. Qualitative methods are especially well-suited for examining institutional behavior, the enforcement of norms, and the political contexts in which these actions occur, rather than aiming for statistically generalizable results (Creswell & Poth, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005). Because regional governance in West Africa is complex and shaped by political contingencies, this approach allows for a more detailed and nuanced understanding of how ECOWAS' interventions influence both crisis management and broader regional integration.

4.1 Research Design

The study is structured as a comparative, within-region analysis of how ECOWAS has responded to selected military interventions. Using a comparative case study approach allows researchers to uncover patterns, similarities, and differences across cases, while still accounting for the unique political and social context of each situation (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2018). Rather than exploring why coups occur, the focus here is on how ECOWAS acts and enforces its policies, which directly aligns with the study's research questions and theoretical framework. This approach is particularly well-suited for studying regional organizations, where actions are shaped by collective decision-making, legal obligations, and political negotiations among member states (Tallberg et al., 2018).

4.2 Case Selection

This study focuses on four principal cases: Mali (2012, 2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). These cases were chosen using purposive sampling, a common strategy in qualitative research that prioritizes conceptual relevance and analytical depth (Patton, 2015).

Three criteria guided the selection. First, each case involves a clear instance of unconstitutional military takeover, as defined by ECOWAS' legal framework, ensuring strong internal validity. Second, all cases fall within the 2010–2024 period, which witnessed a notable resurgence of military interventions in West Africa. Third, the selected cases prompted distinct and escalating responses from ECOWAS, making them suitable for meaningful comparison of enforcement strategies and outcomes. Niger (2023) is especially significant, representing an unprecedented escalation in ECOWAS' enforcement posture and exposing internal divisions within the organization, thereby providing a critical lens for assessing institutional limits (Yin, 2018).

4.3 Data Sources

To strengthen credibility, the analysis draws on multiple qualitative data sources, allowing for data triangulation (Denzin, 2012). Primary sources include ECOWAS official communiqués, summit declarations, protocols, and press releases issued in response to each coup. These documents provide direct insight into ECOWAS' normative positions, legal reasoning, and enforcement decisions.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports from regional and international organizations, and reputable media coverage. Academic studies offer theoretical grounding and contextual interpretation, while policy reports and media accounts help trace timelines, domestic reactions, and compliance outcomes. Combining institutional documents with independent analyses reduces potential bias from relying on a single source (Bowen, 2009).

4.4 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, each case is examined individually to document the nature of the military intervention and ECOWAS' immediate institutional response. Second, cases are compared to identify patterns in normative consistency, enforcement mechanisms, and outcomes, guided by the analytical framework outlined in Section Two. Third, the findings are interpreted through the lens of regional integration theory and comparative African–Asian perspectives.

Effectiveness is assessed along a continuum rather than as a binary outcome, recognizing that institutional performance can vary across short-term compliance, medium-term political transitions, and long-term integration effects (Söderbaum, 2016; Tallberg et al., 2018).

4.5 Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity

This study does not aim for statistical generalization; rather, it seeks analytical insights that contribute to broader theoretical discussions on regional governance in the Global South (Yin, 2018). While relying primarily on documentary sources may limit access to informal negotiations and elite bargaining processes, this limitation is mitigated through strategies such as comparative analysis, data triangulation, and careful, transparent case selection.

Throughout the research, a reflexive approach is maintained, acknowledging that assessments of institutional “effectiveness” are inherently normative and shaped not only by official mandates but also by societal expectations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This conscious reflexivity enhances the interpretive depth of the study while preserving analytical clarity and rigor.

5. Case Analysis: ECOWAS Responses to Military Coups in Mali

Mali provides a critical lens for evaluating ECOWAS’ effectiveness in responding to military coups. The country’s repeated crises – from 2012 to 2021 – have exerted sustained pressure on ECOWAS’ enforcement mechanisms and normative principles, making Mali a persistent benchmark for the organization’s commitment to democracy and regional cohesion.

5.1 The 2012 Coup and ECOWAS’ Early Intervention

In 2012, Mali experienced a military coup against a backdrop of escalating insecurity in the north, where insurgent and separatist groups exploited the state’s weakening authority. ECOWAS responded swiftly, condemning the coup, suspending Mali from the organization, and imposing a combination of economic and diplomatic sanctions. These measures were accompanied by mediation efforts aimed at restoring constitutional governance (ECOWAS, 2012). At the time, ECOWAS’ actions were widely regarded as a demonstration of institutional resolve and normative consistency. The sanctions contributed to the establishment of a civilian-led transitional government, reflecting some immediate success.

However, the 2012 response also revealed early limitations. ECOWAS’ effectiveness depended heavily on elite negotiations and support from external actors such as France and the African Union to stabilize Mali’s political landscape (Boas & Torheim, 2013). This reliance highlighted the gap between normative authority and practical enforcement capacity, a theme that would recur in subsequent interventions.

5.1.2 The 2020 Coup and the Limits of Deterrence

The military coup in August 2020 signaled a significant shift in ECOWAS’s approach toward Mali. Despite nearly ten years of efforts to uphold norms and strengthen institutional frameworks, the event exposed the limited impact of ECOWAS’s previous actions in deterring such developments. Once again, ECOWAS responded by suspending Mali from regional activities and implementing sanctions, while strongly urging a prompt return to civilian governance (ECOWAS, 2020).

However, internal backing for the coup, fueled by widespread frustration over corruption and poor governance, made it more challenging for ECOWAS to enforce their measures. Many people in Mali began to view the sanctions as punitive actions that targeted everyday citizens rather than the political leaders responsible, undermining ECOWAS’s credibility. This perception eroded the organization’s legitimacy and granted the military rulers greater influence in talks regarding the country’s transition timetable (Thurston, 2021).

5.1.3 The 2021 Coup and Institutional Fatigue

The second coup in less than a year, occurring in May 2021, highlighted what can be described as institutional fatigue within ECOWAS. While the organization reiterated its condemnation and maintained Mali’s suspension, its response appeared less decisive and increasingly constrained compared to earlier interventions. Prolonged negotiations over transition timelines and leadership arrangements signaled a shift from enforcement toward accommodation (ECOWAS, 2021).

This episode exposed a core tension in ECOWAS’ approach: although the organization remained normatively committed to democratic governance, its capacity to compel compliance had weakened. The repetition of coups in Mali suggested that ECOWAS’ sanctions regime had become predictable and less effective as a deterrent. At the same time, the growing involvement of external security partners diminished ECOWAS’ leverage over domestic political outcomes, further constraining its influence (International Crisis Group, 2022).

5.1.4 Implications for Institutional Effectiveness and Regional Integration

The Malian case demonstrates a consistent pattern of normative commitment coupled with declining enforcement effectiveness. While ECOWAS repeatedly applied its legal framework, it was unable to prevent the gradual normalization of military governance. This erosion of enforcement effectiveness had wider consequences for regional integration, undermining ECOWAS' credibility and sending a signal to other militaries in the region that sanctions could be weathered or circumvented.

From a comparative African–Asian perspective, Mali's experience mirrors trends observed in parts of Southeast and South Asia, where repeated military interventions persist despite regional and international condemnation. In both contexts, structural constraints limit the capacity of regional organizations to enforce democratic norms when domestic legitimacy shifts in favor of military actors (Acharya, 2014).

Overall, the Malian case illustrates how recurrent military coups can transform a regional organization from a proactive driver of integration into a reactive crisis-management body, with significant implications for long-term regional cohesion and democratic consolidation.

5.2 Guinea (2021): Normative Clarity, Limited Leverage

The military coup in Guinea in September 2021 presented a significant test for ECOWAS's anti-coup framework. Following the removal of President Alpha Condé, ECOWAS responded promptly by suspending Guinea from the organization and imposing targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes against military leaders (ECOWAS, 2021a). These actions reflected the organization's firm normative stance and adherence to its zero-tolerance policy toward unconstitutional changes of government.

Despite these measures, enforcement proved largely ineffective. The Guinean military resisted ECOWAS's calls for a swift transition, instead proposing extended timelines that were repeatedly negotiated rather than enforced. Unlike Mali, Guinea did not face immediate security threats, yet ECOWAS struggled to assert meaningful influence. This highlights that enforcement challenges are shaped not only by security considerations but also by political negotiation dynamics and limited regional leverage (International Crisis Group, 2022a).

The Guinea case illustrates a recurring pattern in West Africa: sanctions without robust enforcement mechanisms tend to produce prolonged transitions, normalize military governance, and gradually erode regional authority and credibility.

5.3 Burkina Faso (2022): Repetition and Regional Desensitization

In 2022, Burkina Faso experienced two military coups, reflecting rising insecurity and widespread public disillusionment with civilian leadership. ECOWAS responded by suspending the country and pursuing diplomatic mediation, but refrained from imposing extensive economic sanctions (ECOWAS, 2022). This more cautious approach indicates a shift toward context-sensitive enforcement, balancing normative commitments with concerns about exacerbating humanitarian or security crises.

The Burkina Faso experience also reveals a form of regional desensitization to military interventions. Repeated coups appear to diminish the shock value of unconstitutional power grabs, weakening the deterrent effect of ECOWAS' legal principles. Similar patterns are observed in parts of Asia, where repeated military interventions have gradually rendered regional responses more symbolic than substantive (Acharya, 2018).

5.4 Niger (2023): The Limits of Regional Enforcement

The military coup in Niger in July 2023 represents a pivotal case for evaluating ECOWAS' institutional capacity. In contrast to earlier incidents, ECOWAS implemented comprehensive measures, including extensive economic sanctions, border closures, financial restrictions, and an explicit warning of potential military intervention to restore constitutional governance (ECOWAS, 2023).

Despite this unprecedented firmness, the organization's ability to enforce compliance remained limited. Internal disagreements among member states, resistance from neighboring governments aligned with the military, and widespread domestic opposition in Niger undermined the credibility of ECOWAS' threats. Rather than compelling a swift transition, these actions deepened regional divisions and exposed tensions within the organization itself (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The Niger crisis underscores a critical lesson: even robust legal frameworks and enforcement tools are ineffective without political unity and public legitimacy. This parallels ASEAN's struggles to respond decisively to

Myanmar's military regime, highlighting shared structural constraints faced by regional organizations in the Global South (Acharya, 2014).

Taken together, the Niger case reinforces the central argument of this study: ECOWAS' challenge extends beyond articulating clear norms. The organization now operates increasingly as a reactive, crisis-management institution, struggling to assert authority and maintain cohesion, at the expense of its original mandate to drive long-term regional integration.

6. Discussion

This section synthesizes findings from the four case studies and situates them within broader theoretical debates on regional integration, institutional effectiveness, and civil–military relations in the Global South. Rather than treating the cases as isolated events, the discussion highlights recurring patterns and structural constraints that shape ECOWAS' responses to military coups and, by extension, the trajectory of regional integration in West Africa.

6.1 Normative Consistency and the Limits of Deterrence

Across Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, ECOWAS consistently demonstrated normative clarity. In each case, the organization condemned the military takeover, suspended the affected state, and invoked its legal framework against unconstitutional changes of government. This supports institutionalist arguments that African regional organizations have developed increasingly robust normative architectures for democratic governance (Soderbaum, 2016).

However, the cases also reveal a persistent gap between norm articulation and actual deterrence. Despite repeated sanctions and suspensions, military interventions continued, often in rapid succession. This underscores that norms alone are insufficient to alter elite behavior when domestic legitimacy, security crises, and regime survival outweigh the costs of regional sanctions (Tallberg et al., 2018). Mali's repeated coups and Guinea's protracted transition illustrate how predictable enforcement mechanisms may lose deterrent value over time.

6.2 Enforcement Capacity and Institutional Constraints

The comparative analysis shows that ECOWAS' effectiveness is constrained less by legal weakness than by enforcement capacity. While ECOWAS possesses more explicit anti-coup instruments than many regional organizations – including ASEAN – its ability to translate legal authority into compliance remains uneven. Factors such as economic interdependence, divergent political interests, and fears of regional escalation consistently dilute enforcement outcomes.

The Niger case exemplifies these limitations. ECOWAS' unprecedented threat of military intervention represented a major escalation, yet it failed to restore constitutional order. Instead, the threat exposed internal divisions and undermined regional cohesion. Comparative African–Asian scholarship indicates that regional organizations often retreat from coercive enforcement when political unity falters, as evidenced in ASEAN's response to Myanmar (Acharya, 2014).

6.3 Legitimacy, Public Perception, and Regional Authority

A recurring theme across the cases is the erosion of institutional legitimacy, particularly among populations in coup-affected states. In Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, ECOWAS sanctions were increasingly framed by military authorities and segments of the public as externally imposed and socially harmful. This dynamic weakened ECOWAS' moral authority and transformed enforcement measures into politically contested instruments.

Theoretically, this aligns with legitimacy-centered approaches to institutional effectiveness, which stress that compliance depends not only on coercion but also on social acceptance and perceived fairness (Tallberg et al., 2018). The West African experience mirrors Asian contexts where regional organizations similarly lack popular legitimacy, limiting their influence over domestic political outcomes (Acharya, 2018).

6.4 Regional Integration under Conditions of Recurrent Military Rule

From a regional integration perspective, these findings challenge linear neo-functionalist assumptions, which expect institutional spillover and deepening cooperation over time (Haas, 1958). Instead, ECOWAS' experience reflects a fragmented integration trajectory, characterized by episodic enforcement, crisis management, and institutional overstretch.

Repeated military interventions have repositioned ECOWAS from an integration-driven organization into a crisis-response institution, prioritizing political stabilization over long-term economic and social integration. This shift aligns with African regionalism literature emphasizing the coexistence of integration ambitions and sovereignty preservation (Bach, 2016), and resonates with Asian regional experiences, where regime security often takes precedence over normative enforcement.

6.5 Comparative African - Asian Insights

A comparative perspective highlights both divergence and convergence. ECOWAS is normatively stronger and more interventionist than ASEAN, yet both face similar structural limitations. In both regions, military institutions retain significant domestic legitimacy, and member states are reluctant to cede sovereignty for enforcement purposes.

This comparison reinforces the study's interdisciplinary contribution: regional organizations in the Global South are constrained not by the absence of norms, but by the political conditions under which those norms operate. Recognizing these constraints is essential for rethinking theory and policy on regional integration beyond Eurocentric models, and for understanding why legal and normative frameworks may succeed in articulation but struggle in implementation.

7. Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry important policy implications for ECOWAS, its member states, and regional organizations across Africa and Asia confronting recurrent military intervention. Rather than advocating the abandonment of democratic norms, the evidence points to the need for a strategic recalibration of enforcement mechanisms, legitimacy-building efforts, and regional integration priorities.

7.1 Rethinking Sanctions as Primary Enforcement Tools

The repeated use of broad economic sanctions in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger has demonstrated diminishing returns. While sanctions signal normative condemnation, they have often failed to produce timely compliance and, in some cases, undermined ECOWAS' legitimacy by imposing disproportionate costs on civilian populations.

Policymakers should therefore reconsider sanctions as a default response and move toward more targeted, conditional measures, such as individualized sanctions against coup leaders and clearly sequenced transition benchmarks. This approach aligns with evidence from both African and Asian contexts, where broad sanctions tend to entrench authoritarian actors rather than incentivize political compromise (Acharya, 2018; Tallberg et al., 2018). More precise enforcement mechanisms could preserve normative clarity while reducing social backlash.

7.2 Strengthening Preventive Governance Mechanisms

The cases analyzed suggest that ECOWAS' interventions are largely reactive, occurring after military takeovers have already consolidated power. A key policy implication is the need to invest in preventive governance, including early-warning mechanisms, electoral mediation, and sustained engagement with civil-military institutions before crises escalate.

Preventive approaches are consistent with regional integration theory, which emphasizes institution-building and trust formation over episodic enforcement (Soderbaum, 2016). By addressing governance deficits and political exclusion early, ECOWAS could reduce the conditions under which military intervention becomes politically acceptable.

7.3 Rebuilding Public Legitimacy and Regional Ownership

One of the most striking findings is the erosion of public support for ECOWAS in coup-affected states. This underscores the need for direct engagement with regional publics, rather than operating solely through elite diplomacy. Enhancing transparency around decision-making, communicating the humanitarian rationale behind enforcement measures, and partnering with civil society could help rebuild legitimacy.

Comparative experiences from Asia demonstrate that regional organizations lacking popular legitimacy struggle to influence domestic political trajectories, regardless of formal authority (Acharya, 2014). Reframing ECOWAS as a people-centered institution, rather than a punitive external actor, is therefore essential for long-term effectiveness.

7.4 Managing Enforcement Unity among Member States

The Niger crisis revealed that ECOWAS' enforcement capacity is heavily dependent on internal political cohesion. Divisions among member states weaken enforcement and embolden military regimes. Policymakers should prioritize mechanisms that foster internal consensus before escalation, including structured consultation processes and graduated response frameworks.

From a comparative perspective, both African and Asian regional organizations face similar challenges in balancing collective action with sovereignty concerns. Recognizing these political realities does not negate enforcement but highlights the need for unity-preserving strategies (Bach, 2016).

7.5 Implications for Regional Integration Strategy

Finally, the findings suggest that ECOWAS' growing focus on crisis management risks crowding out its broader integration agenda. While security governance is unavoidable, long-term regional integration requires renewed attention to economic cooperation, social mobility, and institutional development.

Policymakers should seek to re-anchor democratic enforcement within a wider integration strategy, ensuring that political stability supports, rather than substitutes for, regional development. This integrated approach aligns with interdisciplinary African–Asian scholarship, which views regionalism as a long-term political project rather than a series of ad hoc interventions (Soderbaum, 2016; Acharya, 2018).

8. Conclusion

This article set out to assess the effectiveness of ECOWAS' institutional responses to military coups in West Africa between 2010 and 2024 and to examine what these responses reveal about the broader crisis of regional integration. Through a comparative analysis of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the study demonstrates that while ECOWAS possesses a robust normative and legal framework condemning unconstitutional changes of government, its capacity to translate these norms into sustained compliance has steadily weakened.

The findings reveal a persistent pattern of normative consistency coupled with declining enforcement effectiveness. In each case, ECOWAS acted swiftly to condemn military takeovers, suspend affected states, and implement sanctions. Yet repeated coups, prolonged transitions, and escalating resistance suggest that these measures have lost much of their deterrent power. Rather than reversing military rule, ECOWAS interventions increasingly result in negotiated accommodations, inadvertently normalizing extended periods of military governance.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to debates on regional integration and institutional effectiveness by highlighting the limitations of norm-based enforcement in contexts where domestic legitimacy, security pressures, and sovereignty concerns outweigh regional obligations. The African – Asian comparative lens further underscores that these challenges are not unique to West Africa but reflect broader structural constraints facing regional organizations across the Global South.

Crucially, the article argues that ECOWAS' current dilemma is not one of legal inadequacy but of institutional authority and cohesion. The Niger crisis, in particular, revealed the limits of coercive enforcement in the absence of political unity and public legitimacy. As ECOWAS increasingly assumes the role of a crisis-management institution, its original integration mandate risks being overshadowed by short-term stabilization efforts.

Looking forward, the sustainability of regional integration in West Africa will depend on ECOWAS' ability to recalibrate its approach – moving beyond reactive sanctions toward preventive governance, targeted enforcement, and legitimacy-building strategies. Strengthening regional integration requires not only defending democratic norms but also addressing the political and social conditions that make military intervention appear acceptable or even desirable to domestic audiences.

Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating public opinion data, elite interviews, or comparative quantitative assessments of regional enforcement outcomes across Africa and Asia. Such work would further illuminate how regional organizations can balance sovereignty, security, and democracy in an era marked by recurrent political instability.

In conclusion, military coups in West Africa represent more than episodic political disruptions; they constitute significant stress tests for regional governance and integration. The experience of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) over the past decade provides important lessons – not only for Africa but also

for regional organizations globally – regarding the limits and possibilities of collective action in defending democratic order under conditions of persistent instability.

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