

RESTORING CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT WITH MILITARY MIGHT: THE ECOWAS DILEMMA

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Abstract

This paper examined the dilemma faced by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in utilizing military might to restore democratically elected civilian governments, particularly in the wake of the resurgence of military rule in the sub-region. Although not a recent phenomenon, the resurgence of military interventions and unlawful take-over in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and especially in the Niger Republic have occupied the front burner in many quarters and have re-ignited scholarly and diplomatic debates on how best such an ugly trend could be arrested. Of particular interest to this paper is the military option considered by ECOWAS in restoring civilian governments in the sub-region. Therefore, this article assesses the short-term and long-term effects of joint military options in restoring civilian government in West Africa. The article provided a historical background to military take-over, ECOWAS military interventions in the past, and the consequences of such actions. The paper posited that ECOWAS must carefully weigh the political, economic, and security considerations of utilizing military force to restore civilian government in a sub-region that is volatile and ravaged by mammoth security challenges. Such a military option would further destabilize the region and cause unconceivable security and economic challenges. The paper recommends that the diplomatic option should be embraced while economic sanctions are imposed on the military junta in Niger.

Keywords: Resurging military intervention, unlawful take-over, interventionist's policy, civilian government, ECOWAS.

Introduction

The West African subregion remains a flashpoint of insecurity on the African continent. Violent conflicts, insurgencies, separatist agitations, terrorism, violent extremism, illegal migration, the proliferation of small and light weapons, human trafficking, and illicit drug abuse among others are prominent in the subregion (Osaghae, 2021). Coupled with these, is the phenomenon of military intervention and illegitimate means of regime change. Although not peculiar to the region, West Africa presents a veritable landscape for the study of multiple

military coups and counter-counter coups. Alex Thompson observes that between 1952 and 1990, there were a total of 71 coups across 60 per cent of African states; of which Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Nigeria (West African countries) “were locked into a regular rhythm of coup and counter-coup (Thompson, 2004 p. 131). More dramatic were failed coups in Nigeria in 1988, 1990, and 1992, and the eventual palace coup of 1993, which ushered in one of the most despotic rulers the sub-region and the African continent has ever produced. Sierra Leone, on the other hand, has an age-long tradition of political instability, occasioned by incessant military coups (Ajayi, 2005). The small West African country witnessed two coups in three days in 1967 and a third one in 1968. The continent witnessed a respite during the late 1990s and first nineteen years of the millennium owing to global antagonism to unlawful change of power and as a result of the second and third waves of democracy, although was still embroiled in pockets of conflicts and insurgent activities.

However, the recent surge in military intervention in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger in the space of three years (2020 – July 2023) has called for scholarly interrogation into the factors responsible for such upsurge. Although scholars have made bulging attempts to situate military intervention within the context of enduring theories, such attempts need to be revisited. Civil control over the military, which is the custodian of state violence implies that the former is compliant with the civilians, but the case is not the same here (Thompson, 2004). Scholars such as Samuel Huntington, S.E. Finer, Morris Janowitz, Lucian Pye, Dipo Kolawole, Kunle Amuwo, and the like have attempted to provide an intellectual cognitive map to underpin the causes of military intervention. A harvest of their thoughts has attributed military intervention in politics to altruism, nationalism, selfish interest, ideological goals, the politics of decline, and the decline of politics (Thompson, 2004; Kolawole, 2005; Amuwo, 2005; Osaghae, 2015).

Of interest to this paper is the reaction of the West African regional body – ECOWAS to the resurgence of extra-constitutional take-over of power by the military apparatus of the state in the region. On assuming office as ECOWAS Chairman on the 9th of July 2023 at Guinea-Bissau, President Bola Ahmed Tinubu of Nigeria unequivocally expressed his displeasure to the unlawful takeover of power in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso; promising future resistance of such extra-constitutional means of power change (The Punch, 2023; Ndah-Issa, 2023). Under his Anti-coup, Anti-terrorism, and later at the Nairobi Declaration, Pro-Democracy initiatives, the ECOWAS leadership was bent on maintaining constitutional democracy in the sub-region (Elumoye, 2023; Premium Times, 2023).

A few days later, on the 26th of July 2023 precisely, the military staged a coup in Niger, which ousted President Mohamed Bazoum (Daily Trust, 2023). In response, the ECOWAS leadership handed the coup plotters a seven-day deadline to restore democracy in that nation or face military intervention if they did not take action within that timeframe (The Cable, 2023; Bankole, 2023).

This threat has been perceived from a variety of angles as having the potential to be harmful to a sub-region that is already struggling with numerous security issues. The fact that the General Abdourahmane Tchiani-led junta has the support of the majority of Nigeriens, the leader of Russia, as well as the leaders of the juntas in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, as the

Wayner forces, who have warned ECOWAS against the dire repercussions of its planned military option, makes it even more concerning (Punch, 2023; This Day, 2023). The potential for such deployment to trigger a significant humanitarian catastrophe throughout the entire Sahel region, including the West African sub-region is conceivable.

To this end, this article assesses the short-term and long-term effects of ECOWAS' joint military options in restoring civilian government in the West African sub-region. The article provided a historical background to ECOWAS military interventions in the past in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Cote-D'Ivoire, Mali and the Gambia, and the consequences of such actions.

History of Military Take-over in West Africa

The occurrence of military coups in West Africa can be traced to the early 1960s after the region gained independence from the shackles of colonialism. According to Maina (2022), military incursions into the political space of the Western African sub region during this period were motivated by ineffective civilian governments, the prevalence of corruption, and, in some instances, the expansion of communism.

According to Badmus (2023), The first Military coup in the West African sub-region occurred in Togo in 1963 when President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated and his government overthrown. Boisbouvier (2021), in an earlier account, explained that President Sylvanus Olympio was killed within the precincts of the American embassy. According to the statement, Sergeant Eyadema boasted that he shot the President with his own hands. The report also added the assassination of President Sylvanus Olympio was masterminded by France. In another account, Time Magazine (1963) reported that President Sylvanus Olympio was killed because he stubbornly refused to expand the Togolese Armed forces beyond a company of two hundred and fifty men. Consequently, Togolese veterans who fought in Indo-China and Algeria conspired with some mutinous soldiers to assassinate the President.

Following the 1963 Togolese coup, the military struck Nigeria on the 15th of January 1966. Siollun (2016), in his report, explained that a group of UK-trained military majors terminated the democratic government of Nigeria in a bloody and violent military coup. According to Siollun (2016), the coup leaders described the coup as a brief revolution that was temporary to end corruption and ethnic rivalry in Nigeria. However, the pattern of the killings of politicians in the coup gave it a partisan appearance that led to a counter-coup by Northern officers in the Nigerian Army. Following the two coups in 1966, Nigeria experienced two attempted and three successful coups, the last being in 1993.

Multi-democracy was ended in Sierra Leone four days after a new parliament was elected on the 18th of March, 1967. The military led by Brigadier David Lasena overthrew the government but survived only three days in office before he was overthrown by another group of military officers. According to Fisher (1969), the coupists created the National Reformation Council (NRC) with five army and two police officers as members.

On the 19th of April 1992, President Joseph Momoh's government was terminated in another coup masterminded by Captain Valentine Strasser, who created the National Provincial

Ruling Council (NPRC). According to Momodu (2017), the events that led to the 1992 coup in Sierra Leone started in March 1991 when Foday Sakoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), supported by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia led by Charles Taylor, attempted to overthrow the government of President Joseph Momoh. Momodu (2017) noted that this failed attempt to overthrow President Momoh triggered the bloody civil war in Sierra Leone, which was funded mainly by "blood money mined with slave labour". According to the Human Rights Report (1999), the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) cited rampant corruption, fiscal Mismanagement and nepotism as reasons why they waged war on the Ruling All Peoples Congress (APC) government led by President Momoh that came into power in 1967.

In 1974, the wave of the military overthrow of civilian governments birthed in the Republic of Niger. The fourteen-year rule of President Hamani Dioni was terminated by Col. Senyi Koutche. According to Aljazeera News (2023), Col Senyo Kouchi suspended the country's constitution and dissolved the National Assembly. The toppling of the democratically elected government of Mohammed Bazoum by Gen. Omar Tchiani on Wednesday, July 26, 2023, marks the fourth military takeover of government since the first military putsch in 1974. Badmus (2023), citing security sources, reported that soldiers from the Nigerien presidential guard detained President Mohammed Bazoum inside the presidential palace.

On the 12th of April, 1980, President William Richard Tolbert Jr. of Liberia was toppled and executed in a bloody military coup masterminded by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe. This military putsch resulted in the protracted war in Liberia that lasted over a decade. Badmus (2023). According to Okolo (1981), the reasons offered by Master Sergeant Samuel Doe and his cohorts for the takeover of the government include the neglect of the pedestrian contingents, rampant and unbridled corruption, illegal searches and seizures, skyrocketing costs of living and poor health conditions.

The first Military-backed takeover of government in the West African country of Guinea Bissau took place on the 14th of November 1980 when Prime Minister Vieira, supported by the military, overthrew the government of President Luis Cabrel, who was the first president of Guinea Bissau when it became independent in 1974. Vieira was appointed Prime Minister in 1978. (Aljazeera News, 2009). Racial strife between the Mullato population of Cape Verde and blacks of Guinea Bissau was said to be the remote reason for the coup.

The several decades of economic growth and democratic stability of Cote d'Ivoire were shattered on the 24th December 1999 by Gen. Robert Guei when he terminated the government of President Henri Bedie. Ambassador Jackson, in an interview with Tauber (2019), revealed that the political climate in the prosperous country became unconducive for political opposition with ethnic tension rising. According to AFP NEWS (2020), the military-organized elections in the year 2000 were widely criticized for being fraudulent. Former Prime Minister Allassane Ouattara and former President Konen Besie were prevented from contesting on the grounds of nationality and legal issues. Laurent Gbagbo was eventually declared winner and proclaimed President. However, according to AFP NEWS (2020), northern soldiers who were opposed to President Gbagbo's regime rebelled in 2002, claiming marginalization.

Mauritania, a founding member of the Ecowas regional block, have experienced over six military coups within the past fifty years. The country exited Ecowas in the year 2000 without stating any official reason, but a Ref World Report (1999) posits that Mauritania was not disposed of with the move of members to transform the regional block to more of a monetary and customs union.

According to Aljazeera's (2008) report, the 2005 military takeover of governance appears to be the most profound because it ended over twenty years of dictatorial rule by laying a foundation for democratic transition. Besaid (2019) explained that the strings of military takeover of government in Mauritania began after its independence in 1960. Bensaïd (2019) further explained that the country's first president, Mouktar Ould Daddah, was toppled in 1978, after eighteen years in power by Col Mustafa Ould Salek. He concluded that the military appears to be the norm rather than an exception in Mauritania.

ECOWAS's Military Interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote D'Ivoire, Mali and The Gambia

ECOWAS military interventionists' initiative was a response measure to the Liberian civil war in 1989/1990. The former Freed Slave Settlement was plunged into a political crisis and eventually civil war led by Charles Tylor ostensibly in protest of the despotism of President Samuel Doe (a Native Liberian), who himself came into power through an insurgency against President William Tolbert (an Americo-Liberian) (Ajayi, 2005). The war resulted in the death of between 150,000 and 250,000 people, the majority of the country's population was displaced, while the region was thrown into a severe humanitarian crisis (Center for Justice and Accountability, 2023).

In a similar vein, Sierra Leone, a neighbouring country was enmeshed in a political imbroglio arising from incessant ethnic and civil-military rivalry, which resulted in two coups in three days (Ajayi, 2005). The climax of such was severe political unrest between 1992 and 1997, which claimed an estimated 15,000 lives and displaced 2.2 million people out of the 4.5 human population of the country (The Guardian, 1997).

Ajayi (2005, p. 147) expressed that "the carnage and wanton destruction that followed the Liberian Civil War, and the breakdown of law and order that followed the overthrow of the constitutional order in Sierran Leone prompted external intervention to check the ugly situation" At the 13th session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government at the Gambia, held between 28-30 of May 1990, Nigeria's military ruler, General Ibrahim Babangida campaigned for a Community Standing Mediation Committee to intervene in the Liberian dispute and where ever such dispute arose (Bekoe & Mengistu, 2002; Ajayi, 2005). The aftermath of the proposal was the inauguration of the Standing Mediation Committee, which in turn established the ECOWAS cease-fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Membership of the Committee included Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, the Gambia and Sierra Leone.

The newly formed ECOMOG was able to enforce peace in both Liberia and Sierra Leone to the admiration of the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U now A.U), The United Nations (U.N), and the United States, with Nigeria playing an immense role. ECOMOG successfully

brokered peace in Liberia and ultimately returned the country to the democratic path in August 1996 through Abuja Acord. Concerning Sierra Leone, the Group disarmed the Koromah-led junta and restored the ousted democratic government of Ahmed Tijan Kabbah. Subsequently, the sub-regional body through ECOMOG has carried out similar operations in Guinea-Bissau (1999), Liberia (2003), Cote D'Ivoire (2003), the threat of intervention in Cote D'Ivoire (2011), Mali (2013), and the Gambia (2013) (Daily Trust, 2023). Concerning Guinea Bissau, in 1998, after hostilities broke out following a coup attempt, ECOMOG was sent to Guinea-Bissau. The conflict between coup leaders in charge of the armed forces and government forces supported by Senegal and Guinea (Daily Trust, 2023). However, in November 1998, a peace accord was struck that stipulated a national unity government and fresh elections in 1999. The deal was not, however, put into effect, and violence started up again in May 1999.

In the case of Cote d'Ivoire, at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011, Cote d'Ivoire, a country in the West African sub-region, had several post-election conflicts. These took place after the incumbent president, Laurent Gbagbo, claimed to have defeated Alassane Ouattara, a candidate for the opposition party, in the December election. The nation's first election since Gbagbo took office in 2000 was held under Yussuf Bakayoko's leadership as chairman of the *Commission Electorale Independente* (CEI), the nation's electoral commission. Alassane Ouattara won the Ivorian election in the second round with 54.1% of the vote over Laurent Gbagbo's 45.9%, according to preliminary figures announced by Mr. Bakayoka on December 2 (VoA, 2011).

After the alleged cancellation of results from seven northern regions, the Ivorian Constitutional Council overturned the earlier announced result by CEI and declared Gbagbo the winner of the presidential election on December 3, changing the course of events (BBC News, 2010). Gbagbo now has 51.45% of the vote to 48.55% of the total votes cast. Widespread disapproval of this development came from both inside and beyond the nation. In response to this event, Mr. Ouattara maintained that the CEI had correctly identified him as the substantive winner of the election and characterized the Constitutional Council's move as a misuse of power that could damage the reputation of the nation (BBC News, 2010).

The swearing-in of Ouattara and Gbagbo on December 4 at two different locations, as well as the sequence of protests that followed, laid the groundwork for the nation's brutal civil war. It is noteworthy that Ouattara had the support of the international community, which includes the United Nations, European Union, African Union, ECOWAS, and former colonial power France. It is also important to remember that between December 2010 and March 2011, the nation had several clashes that left 44 dead on December 20 in Abidjan and 33 dead between January 3 and 6 in Duekoue, the capital city of the Ivory Coast (CBC News, 2010). A new peace agreement was concluded in Abuja in November 1999. This agreement called for the withdrawal of troops from Guinea and Senegal and the deployment of ECOMOG soldiers to maintain peace.

In Mali, a coup in 2012 resulted in a collapse of law and order. Armed groups seized control of the nation's north by taking advantage of the disarray. To aid the Malian government in its conflict with rebels, ECOWAS took command of the African-led International Support

Mission in Mali (AFISMA) in 2013 (Daily Trust, 2013). A resolution passed by the UN Security Council gave the mission a one-year initial mandate. A large number of other West African nations, notably Gabon, Ivory Coast, Niger, and Burkina Faso, also backed the expedition. Nigeria provided the majority of the troops of 1,300. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) subsequently replaced AFISMA.

In the case of The Gambia, the tiny West African nation was spared a repeat of the 2003 Ivorian crisis because of what seemed to be a trifecta of international conspiracies, ECOWAS military threat, and mediation. Yahaya Jammeh, the president of the country for 22 years and one of the longest-serving leaders in Africa, made frantic attempts to cling to power after first conceding a loss in the presidential election on December 1, 2019, to his closest competitor, Adamma Barrow. Jammeh publicly admitted defeat in a nationwide broadcast after originally calling the election results on December 1 'the will of God' and offered his congratulations to the president-elect (Daily Trust, 2023).

President Jammeh's U-turn on his earlier decision to recognize the freeness and fairness of the election two weeks after first doing so, however, changed the course of events. Jammeh demanded new elections to be held by someone who feared God because the election, which was widely accepted as free and fair, was conducted with major irregularities. Numerous local and foreign critics expressed their disapproval of the situation. The stage was prepared for what appeared to be a civil war following two unsuccessful mediation attempts by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, who sent the ECOWAS Mediation Team to the Gambia. Nevertheless, Jammeh finally agreed to resign and leave for exile in Equatorial Guinea following two days of negotiations with Guinean President Alfa Conne. This occurred a few days after his official term came to an end. Adamma Barrow had already taken the oath of office in neighbouring Senegal.

The Niger Coup and Matters Arising

The Nigerien coup, masterminded by the presidential guards led by Gen. Tchiani, cited President Bazoum's failure to address the country's security and economic challenges as reasons for the military Putsch. Niger has had a repeated history of military coups since its independence from France in 1960. (Aljazeera 2023). According to Plummer (2023), President Bazoum was the first democratically elected president to succeed another in Niger since its independence. Plummer further explained that Western countries regard the country as a strategic ally and bulwark against the spread of Russian Influence in the Sahel. The US State Department describes Niger as important as a Linchpin for the stability of the Sahel.

Despite its poor and parlous state, Niger is critical to the West. Masani (2023) posits that Niger has been a Western ally in their fight against Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and has received millions of dollars in military aid from the United States and the European Union. Secondly, the European Union sees Niger as a buffer country in the prevention of irregular migrants from Africa. The German government reported that about one hundred and fifty thousand irregular migrants transit through Niger to European Union countries annually. More importantly, Masani (2023) stated that Niger is a significant exporter of Uranium to the West. According to the World Nuclear Association, Niger provides five percent of the world's highest-grade Uranium.

According to Choudhury (2023), the recent coup in Niger should be seen as a mix of simmering tension and historical underpinnings. He averred that prior to the coup, there were allegations of electoral fraud and considerable disenchantment and dissatisfaction with how the government of President Bazoum was managing the security and economic situations. The coup in Niger, as it is, poses a threat to critical trans-Saharan development projects, many of which involve Niger. According to the Conversation (2023), the Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline that runs through Niger is under threat. The pipeline aims to connect gas from Nigeria to other countries in the West Africa subregion, Morocco, and Europe. The Conversation also identified the trans-Saharan road project as another infrastructure under threat due to the coup.

The Nigerien coup may likely result in regional instability, especially in the Sahel area. It may create a power vacuum that may fester into new political crises that could spill over to neighbouring countries. According to Yousif (2023), armed gangs affiliated with Al Qaeda and the Islamist State are active in the Sahel regions, embarking on sporadic attacks while engaging in illegal economic activities, posing challenges to legitimate authorities. Furthermore, the coup may portend a potential loss in managing migration and counter-terrorism. Suleiman (2023) named four potential effects of the Nigerien coup in the West African sub-region and the Sahel. Mentioned are threats to cross-border projects, the weakening of the ECOWAS regional bloc, a shift in global power relations that may result in global confrontations, and the derailing of cooperative efforts among countries in the Sahel. In Suleiman's view, none of these scenarios will result in positive outcomes, citing food insecurity, humanitarian crises, transnational crime, environmental disasters, widening poverty, and population displacement (Suleiman, 2023).

The coup in Niger may likely exacerbate the ethnic divide and tension in the country. In another discourse, the Conversation (2023) recalled that ethnicity and legitimacy were twin issues that trailed the elections that threw up Bazoum as President in the last election. President Bazoum, it was noted, was from the Arab minority ethnic group generally seen or labelled as foreigners by the majority Hausas. Gen. Tchiani, who led the Putsch, is of Hausa majority stock. Akinterinwa (2023) posited that the ECOWAS is divided against themselves. According to him, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea support the coup in Niger. At the same time, other Francophone ECOWAS member states are either quiet or have expressed support for the regional body. In Akinterinwa's view, ECOWAS may be killing and dismantling itself with its decision to apply military force to restore democratic order in Niger.

Interestingly, the coup in Niger has created a new vista for the United States and Russia to advance their interests in the Sahel. According to Armstrong (2023), the United States has cooperated with Niger in security and economic growth. As a result, Niger has been a beneficiary of aid from the United States. At the same time, it also maintains a significant military presence in the country to counter the threat of terrorism. Conversely, Fojegeba (2023) stated that Russia has maintained its presence in the Sahel by deploying the Wagner Group in some West African states to support regimes that are sympathetic to its economic interests. He posited that Russia's ties with Niger provide it access to its strategic mineral resources and also an opportunity to align with the new military leadership to secure its economic interests. According to Fomjegeba (2023), the latest coup in Niger offers Russia an opportunity to

counterbalance the influence of the United States and France and expand its influence in the West African sub-region.

Weighing the Options: The 'Legitimate' Intervention Dilemma

ECOWAS's initial response to the July 26 military intervention in the Republic of Niger is just one, as it is consistent with global antagonism to unlawful change of power. In particular, Article II, Item 3 of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol in Security Sector Governance in West Africa of 2001 stipulated that:

No serving member of the armed forces may seek to run for elective political office. Every accession to power must be made through free, fair, and transparent elections. - Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means" (WANSED, 2005, p. 8).

It is believed that ECOWAS's stance on the coup in Niger was in accordance with its standing protocol and within global reasoning. Besides, the Chairman of the sub-regional had earlier condemned the recent trajectory of unlawful take-over of power in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. The Protocol also includes an apparatus for responding to such unconstitutional changes of government, the provisions on the democratic governance of ECOWAS members, including on elections, the neutrality of the judiciary, and the impartiality of the security forces (Mills. 2022; WANSED, 2002). But even though all ECOWAS members are signatories to the protocol, some are failing to adhere to these stipulations.

For instance, what was the reaction of ECOWAS's leadership to the unconstitutional elongation of office that has characterized some countries in the region? Osaghae raises this pertinent question "Were ECOWAS (and civil society leaders) when the Guinean overthrown president, Alpha Conde breached the constitutional sanctity of fixed tenures, one of the tenets of democratic governance?" (2021, p. 18). Although, this is not in a way a justification for the unlawful take-over of power in the West African sub-region!

One significant feature of the coup in Niger, unlike the ones in other countries in the region in recent years, was the global attention commanded. Beyond ECOWAS's response, former colonial masters, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and the European Union have all issued strong statements on the coup. While the West issued strong condemnations after the putsch, Russia on the other hand, and leaders of the juntas in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso warned ECOWAS against a military action, which they said would have dire consequences.

The foregoing makes the military option considered by ECOWAS a dire one. As posited by Akinteriwa (2023) ECOWAS's military option in Nigeria would further divide the body exacerbating the polarization of the regional bloc. Another implication is that ECOWAS military option would further destabilize the Sahel region, militarize owing to the strategic location of Niger. The Sahel is replete with mammoth security challenges posed by the Libya war, and the activities of violent terrorist fighters affiliated with Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State West Africa Province, and Boko Haram. Osaghae puts succinctly that

The fact that West Africa has been host to civil wars, violent unrest, and violent crimes of armed robbery and recently kidnapping has made the region susceptible to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. Conjunction and the outbreak of civil war in Libya, which led to massive displacements and migration to Nigeria, Mali, Nige, and other parts of the Sahel, occasioned a new and more recent wave of proliferation (2021, p. 29-30).

The purported military intervention would further worsen the security challenges in the Sahel. In a similar vein, the Conversation (2023), observed that the ethnic tension and rivalry in the Nigerian polity may be exacerbated by ECOWAS's planned military invasion.

Beyond the effect on the region, the legality of such military interference would be a gross violation of Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter, which "prohibits threat or use of force and calls on all Members to respect the sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of other States" (UN Charter, undated, p. 2). Nevertheless, the UN is opposed to an unconstitutional change of government. Following the military coup in Sudan, UN Secretary-General António Guterres addressed the media on October 26, 2021, referring to "an epidemic" of coups d'état and lamenting the absence of "effective deterrence" from the Security Council, noting that the Council faces many challenges in taking strong decisions (UNSC Report, 2022).

However, it must be noted that allowing military take-over to fester in the region would no doubt distort the progress made on democratization and good governance by the regional body in the past years. The inability of ECOWAS to reverse the coup in Niger will have disastrous effects on the nation, the Sahel, and Coastal West Africa. Economic growth and democratic progress will be hindered. One of the six most impoverished countries in Africa, Niger also boasts the highest birthrate in the world. It has difficulties from a stagnating economy, rising young unemployment, and climate change, and heavily relies on foreign aid to meet its budgetary demands (Carson 2023).

Conclusion/Recommendations

ECOWAS is in a dilemma. The sub-regional body is enmeshed betwixt two opinions: the first is to tow the path of military intervention, and the second is the diplomatic route. While this paper condemns unlawful take-over of power in strong terms, it is posited that ECOWAS should adopt more proactive measures in preventing military take-over in the region. Leaders in the sub-region should show more commitment to the welfare of their people and promote good governance. Embracing a military option in a bid to restore civilian government in Niger and in other West African countries may be counter-productive, owing to the festering insecurity challenges and the interest from certain international quarters. This paper recommends further that the diplomatic option should be embraced while economic sanctions be imposed on the military junta in Niger.

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