FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 12.02.2026 | Taofik Oyewo Hussain

Not every crisis needs a gun

ECOWAS must rethink its response to West Africa's coups. Durable peace will not come from ultimatums, but from inclusion, reform and public trust

While the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) lifted all sanctions on Guinea in January 2026 after a transition process was deemed complete following a presidential election, such 'success stories' remain rare and often mask continued governance.

West Africa has seen a wave of military coups in recent years, from Mali and Guinea to Burkina Faso, Niger and Guinea-Bissau. The region's main political and economic bloc, ECOWAS, has responded by trying to position itself as the guarantor of democratic order. But its default reflex – sanctions, ultimatums and threats of force – has done little to reverse the region's democratic slide. Instead, it has exposed a deeper problem: ECOWAS is trying to enforce democracy with blunt instruments while neglecting the political roots of instability.

An uneven record

Founded in 1975, ECOWAS brings together 15 countries to promote regional integration, collective security and political stability. It has played key roles in mediating conflicts and overseeing elections, and it holds a formal mandate to oppose unconstitutional changes of government. On paper, this makes it West Africa's democratic guardian. In practice, however, its record has been uneven.

It has shown both bold stances and missed opportunities, often without a coherent long-term strategy. The result is a widening trust gap between the organisation and West African citizens — and growing doubt over whether coercion alone can defend democracy in the region. Going forward, ECOWAS needs a more strategic and inclusive approach, combining reform, early diplomacy, civic engagement and support for legitimate transitions — not just sanctions and threats.

Mali's back-to-back coups in August 2020 and May 2021 prompted swift

ECOWAS action. The bloc suspended Mali's membership and demanded a timeline for civilian transition, without invoking force. It insisted on a new civilian prime minister and reaffirmed elections by February 2022. By late 2021, ECOWAS hardened its approach. When Mali's military postponed elections, the bloc imposed travel bans and asset freezes. In January 2022, it sealed borders, suspended financial transactions and withdrew ambassadors. Mali's interim leaders pushed back, threatening to leave ECOWAS. Despite pressure, the junta remained in power and delayed elections again.

Time and again, ECOWAS has relied on sanctions, threats and suspensions. But despite repeated use, these tools haven't actually restored any ousted government.

Meanwhile, Niger's July 2023 coup triggered one of ECOWAS's strongest responses. The bloc issued an ultimatum demanding the reinstatement of President Mohamed Bazoum or face the prospect of military action. ECOWAS activated a standby force and imposed strict sanctions, including border closures, the suspension of aid, asset freezes and travel bans on junta leaders. But unity soon frayed. As ECOWAS's deadline expired, Mali and Burkina Faso pledged military support for Niger's junta, undermining the threat of intervention. ECOWAS thus faced an internal split, with its credibility shaken and its options limited. Meanwhile, the sanctions hit Niger's economy and its over 25 million people hard.

In Guinea-Bissau, the challenge took a different form. Following elections held on 23 November 2025, which observers widely described as free and transparent, the electoral process was disrupted before final results were announced. A group of military officers seized power and detained opposition figures, while President Umaro Sissoco Embaló temporarily left the country amid allegations that the crisis amounted to a self-coup intended to pre-empt electoral defeat.

The bloc sent a high-level mediation team and warned of targeted sanctions if demands weren't met. Initially firm, ECOWAS later shifted to supporting a transitional government, essentially undermining its earlier position, accepting a delay in honouring the election results. This highlighted the bloc's dilemma over how to respond when coups come from within rather than from soldiers with guns.

The limits of sanctions and threats

Time and again, ECOWAS has relied on sanctions, threats and suspensions. But despite repeated use, these tools haven't actually restored any ousted government. In Niger, Mali and Guinea-Bissau, juntas remain in power; transitions have been delayed indefinitely. This inconsistency was evident in Niger, where most ECOWAS sanctions were lifted in February 2024 despite the absence of a clear democratic transition, even as economic conditions continued to deteriorate and European Union measures remained in place. As a result, ECOWAS's credibility is increasingly questioned. The bloc has appeared harsh on coup leaders but soft on presidents who extend term limits or suppress dissent. And citizens are left to wonder why the bloc defends elections but tolerates authoritarian drift.

Public opinion reflects this disillusionment. In Mali and Niger, many initially supported the coups, seeing them as relief from ineffective, corrupt civilian rule. Support for democracy remains high, but trust in democratic institutions is eroding. Sanctions may also backfire geopolitically. As ECOWAS isolates coup regimes, they've grown closer to Russia and other alternative allies. This has included deeper security and diplomatic alignment with Russia, as well as reduced engagement with Western partners and regional neighbours, weakening ECOWAS's leverage and fragmenting collective regional responses. Meanwhile, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have already exited ECOWAS, significantly weakening regional integration and undercutting ECOWAS's influence.

Towards a balanced strategy

ECOWAS' record reflects both resolve and rigidity. Condemning coups is essential, but relying primarily on sanctions and military threats has yielded limited results. Going forward, the bloc needs a more strategic and inclusive approach that addresses the political conditions enabling repeated breakdowns of democratic order.

First, ECOWAS should reform and enforce its democracy charter more consistently. This means upholding term limits, penalising constitutional manipulation and applying equal standards across all member states, rather than reacting only to overt military takeovers. Failure to address presidential overreach has weakened ECOWAS' moral authority and allowed democratic erosion to precede coups with little consequence.

Second, ECOWAS must invest more seriously in early diplomacy and civic engagement. The bloc has underused its Conflict Early Warning Mechanism, human rights court and peace missions, despite their

potential to identify and defuse political crises before they escalate. Proactive mediation, rather than post-coup punishment, would strengthen prevention and reduce reliance on coercive tools.

Third, ECOWAS should place greater emphasis on civil society, independent media and youth participation in democratic rebuilding. Local actors are central to legitimacy, particularly in contexts where public trust in political elites has eroded. When citizens feel represented and heard, the appeal of military intervention as a corrective force is significantly reduced.

Durable peace will come not from ultimatums, but from inclusion, reform and restoring public trust.

Fourth, support for political transitions should involve not only pressure but also incentives. Targeted debt relief, trade facilitation, and institutional support for states that restore and respect democratic norms could alter the cost–benefit calculations of junta leaders. A calibrated mix of sanctions and incentives would make compliance more attractive than defiance.

Finally, ECOWAS must rebuild trust. It needs to be seen not merely as a union of presidents, but as a credible defender of democratic aspirations. This requires transparency, consistency and accountability within the organisation itself, particularly in how rules are applied across member states.

Beyond the region, Europe and other Western partners also have a stake in this process. West Africa is the European Union's largest trading partner in sub-Saharan Africa, while the EU remains West Africa's most significant trading partner. Political instability and prolonged sanctions regimes disrupt trade, investment, migration governance and security cooperation. Rather than relying on parallel sanctions or unilateral engagement with junta-led states, European partners could support ECOWAS by aligning diplomatic pressure, funding preventive diplomacy and strengthening regional institutions. A more capable and credible ECOWAS is not only in West Africa's interest, but also in Europe's long-term economic and security interests.

West Africa's democratic crisis demands more than condemnation. ECOWAS' instinct to punish coups is understandable, but its methods haven't worked. Military threats have gone unenforced. Sanctions have punished the public. And transitions remain shaky. To stay relevant, ECOWAS must rethink its role. Not every crisis needs a gun. Some require listening. Others, patience. Durable peace will come not from

ultimatums, but from inclusion, reform and restoring public trust.



Taofik Oyewo Hussain
Abuja

Taofik Oyewo Hussain is a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Abuja. His work focuses on aid, conflict and development.