



## The decay and withering away of ECOWAS's role in West African Regional security

Saley Idrissa Ibrahim<sup>1</sup>, Zarina Othman<sup>1</sup>, Nor Azizan Idris<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Program of Strategic Studies and International Relations, School of History, Politics and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Correspondence: Saley Idrissa Ibrahim (email: mutabaruka33@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

With the end of the Cold War, many countries accelerated their move towards regionalism. Although this was a common phenomenon for many Western countries such as those in the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), it was considered new for developing regions like those in Southeast Asia and West Africa. Comparatively, in Asia, regional institutions like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has existed for almost five decades since 1967. ASEAN's role in managing regional conflicts has been partly praised by many, although its 'non-interference' principle remains debatable. Unlike ASEAN, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been heavily criticized for its failure to make West Africa a more prosperous and stable region. It has in fact decayed in its efficiency and has become more dependent in the area of collective regional security management in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This trend has already started for a few years before the end of the last millennium. Currently, ECOWAS has clearly lost its vitality compared to its active security record of the early 1990s. Neo-realism was adopted in this study to explain the current West African situation. The findings highlighted the contributing factors that served as strong determinants of ECOWAS continued decline, and that gave way to extra-regional forces finding ready loopholes to encroach upon its regional sovereignty and weaken its independent initiatives. The article provides some innovative suggestions to help improve the institution in the long-run with the aim of contributing to a more prosperous and stable West Africa.

**Keywords:** ECOWAS, ECOWAS' security dilemma, France's neo-imperialism, neo-realism, symptoms of ECOWAS decay, the Nigerian dream

### Introduction

As the new millennium entered into its second decade, many political and security events took place pointing to a steady decline of the efficiency of ECOWAS in dealing with regional issues. Security threats of all sorts - economic, political, social, and military dimensions - have increased in the West African region and the regional organization seems to be losing its momentum in dealing with them. In the past, ECOWAS has emerged as the most developed and complex sub-regional organization in Africa. It was originally chartered as a regional integration and co-operation grouping on 28 May 1975 with customs union and common market as its main objectives. It comprises fifteen countries at different levels of development and at diverse stages of state formation and nation building<sup>1</sup>.

Unfortunately, the ECOWAS of the 1990s that was acclaimed as the most effective African grouping in handling regional conflicts is no longer the ECOWAS of today. The optimism and resilience that had characterized this organization have been changed into obvious pessimism and impotence that jeopardize its sovereignty, vitality, zeal and stated regional ambitions. Despite the fact that it appears to continue to operate officially as per normal, walking towards its objectives, the reality remains unimpressive. Most

people and governments seem indifferent to the operation of ECOWAS with not much discussion about the expectations and hopes invested in it. Therefore, one cannot expect too much from ECOWAS in terms of effectiveness in peace and security, in particular, if we define 'peace' as not only the mere absence of war but also the elimination of all conditions that cause human suffering such as structural, cultural and physical violence. In addition, if we define 'security' in military and non-military terms, it becomes obvious that any pretence of ECOWAS to effectiveness in peace and security is far above and beyond the capacity of the regional organization<sup>2</sup>.

### **ECOWAS' persistent security dilemma in the new millennium**

Economically in terms of development and social welfare, in contrast to the regional institution's objectives, the states within ECOWAS have either remained stagnant or have degraded further. Socially, violation of human rights, social frustration, ethnic and religious tensions are on the rise in most of the states. In most of the countries, a high proportion of the population lives in poverty. In some cases, like Benin, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone, more than 70 % of the population survives on 1 or 2 dollars a day<sup>3</sup> (Human Development Report, 2006). The low level of welfare creates popular discontent. The industrialized states provide foreign aid to all of the West African countries. Official development assistance constitutes about 15-20 per cent of GDP in many cases, but it has not had any decisive effect on living conditions<sup>4</sup>.

There also reigns the conspicuous fact of political and security instability that continues to mushroom all across the region. Rebellions and insurgencies have become more persistent than ever in particular after sophisticated weapons have become scattered around since the fall of Libya's Kaddafi. Even though ECOWAS has not had a stellar track-record of addressing the problems which have entrapped its members, any blame for the organization must be directed, however, to the governments it represents because they have persistently misgoverned<sup>5</sup>. Automatically, the actions of individual states in this manner impinge upon the performance and efficiency of ECOWAS as a regional grouping.

Some of the key factors behind such decay in the efficiency of ECOWAS security performance and its overall vitality as a regional institution can be expounded as follows:

### **The dominance of neo-realism over neo-liberal institutionalism**

The principles of ECOWAS in working towards achieving maximum political and security stability in West Africa have been mostly based on neo-liberal approaches. The essence of this school of political thought lies in individual states coordinating their efforts for the attainment of absolute collective gains through a regional institution. This means the fifteen ECOWAS member states are legally and morally obliged to uphold their commitment to consecrate their efforts to collectively prevent, to manage regional security problems and maintain the peace and stability of each member. Among its objectives since 1975, the harmonization of national policies in all areas that are relevant to the progressive integration of national economies<sup>6</sup> has been emphasized.

On 24 July 1993, a treaty was signed by all ECOWAS members. It lays the burden of settling regional conflicts on the treaty members. To this end there is also a Mutual Defence Protocol: a non-standing army deployed in the region as a Security Mechanism (ECOMOG) has been developed within ECOWAS. This has allowed for the development of peacekeeping/peace enforcement capabilities<sup>7</sup>.

However, many states from within and outside the region have been adopting and in fact executing policies that are neo-realist rather than neo-liberalist in their nature in addressing current security problems. Individualism rather than a collective approach seems to dominate the West African security and political spectrum. The emphasis does not indicate a greater consideration of the issue of relative gains in cooperation among regional states. Nevertheless, on many occasions individual national interest appears to be strong in determining the individual ECOWAS member state's preferences for political

choices and actions. At present, Nigeria and other governments make different kinds of agreements with both foreign companies and governments and it is in their interest to continue to do so. Stable, unchanged conditions are in the interest of those who are in control today<sup>8</sup>.

Consequently, this undermines the role of ECOWAS in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in acting as a collective bloc geared towards safeguarding and promoting its regional interest and sovereignty. The institution has practically become a 'talking shop' akin to the defunct OIC, if not worse. The best evidence of this decline of ECOWAS' influence on its members lies in the theoretical and practical initiatives adopted to deal with the current security problems that troubled several of its member countries. A neo-realist sort of indifference towards the internal security problems of other members seems to be the adopted policy by those states that feel that they are not directly affected.

### **The encroachment of extra-regional powers**

On the other hand, other extra regional powers have been assured that the West African region is getting out of the institutional surveillance of its guardian ECOWAS. Therefore, the US, and France in particular have been aggressive in securing their individual neo-realist interests at the expense of ECOWAS. France, Britain and the US have, in different ways, supported the development of ECOWAS... The most important explanation for global attention is perhaps an awareness of the supply of natural resources in Africa and West Africa. The continent is becoming a vital arena of strategic and geopolitical importance for the US, EU, China, India and other emerging powers<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, ECOWAS has lost its collective voice to cope with this new challenge in a neo-liberal unified action for the sake of its collective regional interests.

The following points will further substantiate the authenticity of this trend as they give ECOWAS the look of a thirsty regional organization chasing a mirage while losing its grip on its region.

### **The withering away of regional leadership**

During the 1990s the West African region was endowed with zealously active leaders. They were at the top of the organization's decision-making known as the Authority of the Heads of State and Government. It is the legislative and supervisory organ of the community. It therefore has the general direction and control of the community's executive functions and defines the norms and rules, which are binding for all other organs<sup>10</sup>. The most famous of its leaders during that vital decade were such charismatic personalities as Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria, Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire, Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, and Abdou Diouf of Senegal. It was their combined efforts, although at most time competing, that ushered in the enthusiasm with which ECOWAS operated in addressing the tragic events in the failing states of its region during that particular decade. The events here refer to the renowned civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau. Despite the involvement of extra regional powers and international organizations in those West African conflicts, ECOWAS remained the torch bearer on the stage throughout the crises. It made tremendous sacrifices in lives and logistics in the management of the conflicts in more than three different West African countries.

### **The first symptoms of ECOWAS' decay**

From the beginning of the Ivorian civil war (Cote d'Ivoire) at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1999), ECOWAS security management efficiency and enthusiasm began to be obvious. From the onset of the new millennium until today, there is no one single African leader who has favourably captured the attention of any international or regional spotlight as a zealous nationalist leader. In West Africa, it is a noticed habit that an active leader of any particular country is easily singled out and his name echoes

across the region, especially among the common masses. Today, it is hard even for many educated citizens to easily name few current presidents or prime ministers of some West African states apart from those of their own.

Nigerian leaders used to be the most prominent in taking strong steps in the direction of ECOWAS in dealing with intra-state conflicts and other security issues. However, due to the withering away of active leaders combined with other factors, the regional institution began to shy away from the burden of managing regional conflicts. In the golden age of ECOWAS in the 1990s, extra regional powers with stakes in the region had to resort to clandestine strategies in their support for a particular party involved in any West African conflict. One of the reasons for this was that for a decade after the ending of the Cold War, both the remaining superpowers and the other great 6 powers had less incentive and displayed less will to intervene in security affairs outside their own region<sup>11</sup>.

Today, the new millennium and the decline of ECOWAS regional resilience have emboldened such powers, especially the former colonial master France, to interfere in its regional problems quite aggressively without much reservation.

### **The Nigerian dream**

Nigeria had a dream of becoming a major power, well-industrialized, economically lively, and politically vital as the leader of West Africa. After its civil war of 1967 to 1970, it had the vision that only through a strong and economically integrated West Africa could its dreams come to pass. Ever since its own civil war, Nigeria had been claiming its role as a leading state on the continent<sup>12</sup>. That was the motive that energized its ambitious political leadership to strive to establish the mechanism necessary for regional success. That mechanism was ECOWAS which Nigeria single-handedly and meticulously succeeded in establishing, with the institution's headquarter within the borders of its soil. Consequently during the 1990s, no member country has made the tremendous sacrifices made by Nigeria in the management of the African continent's worst civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, plus the bloody and violent conflicts in Guinea-Bissau. That zealous and ambitious effort was what qualified ECOWAS to receive its appraisal as the best African regional organization in conflict management.

### **The disillusion of the Nigerian dream**

To the dismay of the Nigerian efforts in West Africa, its regional dream has been disillusioned in the new millennium. Today, Nigeria stands out as the most internally destabilized ECOWAS member state. It has become overwhelmingly engulfed in an uncountable number of internal crises that are going from bad to worse with the dawning of every morning sun. High political corruption, economic breakdown, violent religious and ethnic clashes, organized secessionist and separatist armed movements, widespread social frustration, daily organized armed crimes and robberies, a stagnant educational system, and decayed social infrastructures, have all become integrated features of the Nigerian society that bear no sign of relief.

This stands out as the most obvious indicator that ECOWAS has lost the vehement leadership of its regional superpower. Its performance has been badly affected by the instability of Nigeria and its sinking into the mire of endemic internal crises. Overall, the Nigerian economy accounts for more than half of the economic activity of West Africa, and developments in the Nigerian economy are of importance for the whole region. The risk of internal disintegration in Nigeria is not without importance and would, if it occurred, also have a negative effect on the whole of West Africa<sup>13</sup>.

## **ECOWAS vs. French neo-imperialism**

The new millennium that marked the decay of ECOWAS in regional security management, has given France a tremendous opportunity to reassert its imperialist influence on its former colonies. When ECOWAS was formed in the years of West African political independence, France spared no efforts to prevent the organization from coming to life. Nonetheless, ECOWAS was victorious and was well-aware of the francophone plots against it. But today, France has finally turned the table and has made ECOWAS its subservient satellite.

## **ECOWAS vs. France in the Ivory Coast civil war**

During the recent violent Ivorian civil war right at the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, ECOWAS's initiatives in managing the conflict were unimpressive. Its delegates, leaders and expected peacekeeping forces were humiliated by the then Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo. On one occasion, ECOWAS sent a team of three high delegates. Namely, "President of Cape Verde Pedro Pires, President of Sierra Leone Ernest Koroma and President of Benin Yayi Boni – and one AU representative – Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga – which held talks with Gbagbo but achieved no concrete results"<sup>14</sup>.

After many years of humiliation and inefficiency in ECOWAS conflict management initiatives in the Ivory Coast, France had to step in with few of its strong soldiers backed up by 30 tanks to intervene and take a side in the conflict. It was through this illegitimate French unilateral military action unsanctioned by neither ECOWAS, nor the African Union (AU), nor even the UN that the conflict came to an end with the capture of Gbagbo by French soldiers and giving him up to his opponents. The French action was later acclaimed as "good" even though it violated the international law of regional conflict resolution. Its action clearly hijacked ECOWAS' sovereignty and regional leadership in conflict management in its own region. An almost 40 years-old regional organization of fifteen member countries was unable to do what a single extra-regional country did in the matter of hours. Thus, it is perfectly correct to say that "when Nigeria coughs, ECOWAS catches fever". That was because Nigeria did not give due attention to the Ivorian Crisis. Rather, it laid its eyes mostly on the Francophone members of ECOWAS to dance to the tune of the war.

## **The Mali conflict and French neo-imperialism**

Côte d'Ivoire is not the only example where ECOWAS's sovereignty, inefficiency, and region have been violated and hijacked by an extra-regional power. Right after the fall of Libya's Gaddafi in 2011, some of his former ethnic Tuareg mercenary regiments left Libya to return to their country of origin Mali, with heavy weapons superior to those which the Malian military possessed. The convoys traveled through southwest Libya, through Niger, through the so-called Passage of the Savior and the north of the region of Aïr, before entering Mali<sup>15</sup>. Since independence in the 1960s, this ethnic group has continued fighting the central government with the call for secession among other demands.

Without delay, the returning professional fighters, in an alliance with well-trained Islamic fighters under the leadership of local militias and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, humiliated the Malian army in a series of battles and occupied three thirds of the entire state within the framework of a few days in 2012. They declared the independent state of AZAWAD for the Tuareg ethnicity and appealed for international recognition. However, the secular elements within the alliance were soon driven out of all the major towns of northern Mali by the Islamists who established an Islamic emirate and implemented Shari'a law. Parts of the Tuareg leadership, which signed a power-sharing agreement in March 2012 with three jihadist militias -- al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa -- have already fled across the unguarded Nigerien border, where they will try to regroup.

Given Niger's weak government structures, they also pose a serious security threat to the country as a whole<sup>16</sup>.

One of the serious ramifications of this development was the overthrow of the democratic Malian government of President Amadou Toumani Touré by a military junta in violation of ECOWAS's political declaration that bans such actions. The Declaration made a strong announcement against military coups across the region. The ECOWAS initiative goes hand in hand with that of the AU – the two primary policy instruments guiding the actions of the AU on military coups – acknowledge that strict adherence to 'the principles of good governance, transparency and human rights' and the 'strengthening of democratic institutions' will considerably reduce the risks of unconstitutional changes of government on the continent<sup>17</sup>.

### **ECOWAS' initiatives in the Malian crisis**

These political and security events stood out as new tests for ECOWAS' regional resilience to undo the military coup and to reintegrate northern Mali. At the beginning the institution demonstrated strong will and solidarity under the leadership of the Ivorian president Alassane Outara and was able to coerce the military junta to relinquish power and return to democracy. A civilian leader was appointed for a transitional term, although the army was given a significant role to play in the course of the internal crisis in the north. But, if indeed ECOWAS has managed to reestablish the constitutional order in Bamako, the African supranational institution does not dispose of sufficient logistics, experience, or preparation to advance beyond Mopti, the southern border of Azawad, a desert territory that covers more than a million square kilometers<sup>18</sup>.

The AU as well as the UN voiced out their full political, economic, and military support to ECOWAS in its endeavour to drive the Islamists out of the north in order to reassert the national integrity and sovereignty of Mali. Regional mediators attempted to help resolve the conflict, but their efforts yielded no tangible results. By late 2012, West African leaders had agreed to send 3,000 soldiers to halt the insurgents' advance, but the soldiers' arrival lagged. Earlier this month, the jihadist groups marched into the town of Konna. They seemed primed to make the short hop to Ségou, which is home to a Malian military base and airstrip, and then onward to Bamako, Mali's capital<sup>19</sup>.

### **The lack of collective regional will of ECOWAS member-states**

ECOWAS's initiatives were no more than rhetoric as a whole year had passed without neither meeting the number of troops needed nor the necessary finance required. In a clear evidence of ECOWAS's declining efficiency in collective conflict management, in the initial stage, only Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal expressed their willingness to send troops to Mali. The majority of its members did not contribute troops for the cause of ending the conflict, and even those who did contribute, their contribution was rather insignificant. This is despite the fact that ECOWAS was assumed to have had a standing army since the 1990s. The Task Force is composed of 2,773 personnel from the pre-determined units including 200 police personnel. It is composed of a Headquarters, two infantry battalions (West and East Battalions) and a Logistics Battalion. On order, the Task Force is to deploy within 30 days and be self sustained for 90 days<sup>20</sup>.

### **The French neo-realist hegemony vs. ECOWAS inefficiency**

The similarity of the Ivory Coast incident that gave France an unfair advantage in the West African region was to be repeated in Mali. On January 11, France, impatient for the African-led intervention, responded to Bamako's pleas for help with air strikes and, soon after, with ground troops<sup>21</sup>. The disregard for

ECOWAS sovereignty was made without any warrant from ECOWAS, the AU, or the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, France regarded its unilateral action as legitimate under the pretext that the Malian government had officially requested its intervention.

Neo-liberalism strongly opposes unilateral military actions. Neo-liberalists are firmly in favor of cooperative multilateralism and are openly against the pre-emptive and unilateral use of force as is condoned in the 2002 Bush Doctrine. Most neo-liberals would believe that the US-led war with Iraq did more to undermine the legitimacy and influence of global and regional security institutions<sup>22</sup>. In contrast to France, ECOWAS itself had been demanding a legitimate mandate from the Security Council to start its operation in Mali.

There was no protest by ECOWAS which felt rather relieved of the burden of war with a fearsome Islamic adversary. The outcome was the fact that ECOWAS became a free rider and France took the leadership of the operation backed by 2,000 troops from its semi protectorate, Chad. Ironically, Chad is not an ECOWAS member and is considered one of the poorest countries in the world that has been ravaged by armed rebellions for decades. It sent troops three times bigger than any other ECOWAS member had sent. Its soldiers and those of France were the only fighters who were actually engaged on the battle field in Northern Mali.

### **ECOWAS indecisiveness & the alienation of the African mind**

ECOWAS had been dragging its feet to the conflict for 12 months, expressing that it wanted the UN to take most of the burden. On the other side, Mali itself was not cooperating enough with the regional organization. Many inconsistencies marked ECOWAS decisions. The UN had to give an ultimatum of 45 days for the grouping to come up with a war plan before any action could be taken by the Security Council. In a summit of the 15 members, 10,000 troops were decided to be gathered for deployment. However, only 3300 were approved. Moreover, until one month before France made its move, only Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Burkina Faso pledged to contribute with soldiers. After battles in the north had gone far, and the Islamists were dislodged from all the towns they had occupied, ECOWAS members such as Togo, Benin and Guinea approved sending troops to the Malian capital, Bamako. The ECOWAS decision to deploy its combatants to Bamako was hence seen as an attempt to keep an eye on the coup leaders and, if necessary, be in a position to control them... This situation was then cleverly exploited by the military junta to mobilize part of the public against ECOWAS<sup>23</sup>.

In the 1990s, ECOWAS troops were welcomed as heroes in the streets of Liberian Monrovia, Sierra Leone's Freetown, as well as in Guinea-Bissau. In the second decade of the new millennium, it was rather the French army that was welcomed with flowers in the streets of the Ivorian capital Abidjan, as well as in the streets of Mali along with their Chadian allies. Mohammadou Issoufou, the president of Niger, was devotedly pleading for France to make its troops' stay in Mali permanently due to the admiration accorded to them as invincible heroes by West Africans, and particularly by the Malians. On behalf of ECOWAS, the legitimate regional organization dedicated for West African security and stability, no flowers were thrown, and no comments worthy of mentioning were made. It is in France's national interest to exorcise the demons of the past and to move forward in improved relations with African states; Mali would be an excellent starting point. However, in drawing this conclusion one must acknowledge the realist idea it incorporates: states do not intervene for [genuine] humanitarian purposes<sup>24</sup>.

### **Uncle Sam's unmanned drone in West Africa**

The US has been trying for so long to have a strong presence in West Africa especially in France's "chasse gardée", which more adequately means, "private hunting zone". With the rising tide of the so-called war on "terrorism", the American leadership has been urging ECOWAS to consider granting the world superpower a military base in West Africa. Upholding firmly to its motto "self-reliance and

regional resilience”, the regional organization rejected the proposal. In lieu of that, it rather opted for training and better logistics for its military wing to strengthen the regional stability and security of its region. In other words, ECOWAS was somehow still opting to maintain what is left of its “regional sovereignty”. Nevertheless, new military programs have been set up with oil rich allies such as Angola and Nigeria, who receive free arms under the Pentagon’s Excess Defense Articles Program. The increased military assistance to governments on the continent was barely noted in the US media, which tended to present American involvement in Africa as more benign and developmental<sup>25</sup>.

### **The dominance of neo-realism**

For so many years ECOWAS had rejected the establishment of American military bases in West Africa. However, suddenly out of the blue in the year 2013 as the war in northern Mali was roaring, a headline was made clear that Niger Republic has concluded an agreement with US to establish a military base for unmanned drones on its land. A detailed summary of this development was made in the following news:

The drone base will allow the U.S. to give France more intelligence on the militants its forces have been fighting in Mali, which neighbors Niger. Over time, it could extend the reach not only of American intelligence-gathering but also U.S. special operations missions to strengthen Niger's own security forces. One of the two U.S. defense officials who discussed the development confirmed that American troops would fly drones and other surveillance platforms from military airstrips in Niger, tracking militant and refugee movement inside Mali and around the border. The U.S. will share that intelligence with Niger's military, the official said<sup>26</sup>.

Silence was the reaction of the regional organization which was modeled after the EU, and which was once acclaimed as the best in conflict management and as a good model for the rest of Africa. ECOWAS self-reliance and regional resilience had withered away in the new millennium.

Yet still, the presence of US and French invincible protection did not shield Niger from a deadly attack by the Islamists in the northern towns of Agadez and Arlit, as well as on its central prison in Niamey. On May 23, Islamist militants in Niger killed 21 soldiers and injured dozens when they set off simultaneous suicide car bombs at an army outpost in the northern city of Agadez and a French-operated uranium mine in the nearby town of Arlit, near the Algerian border. Days later, two guards died and 22 inmates escaped after an attack on the main prison in Niger’s capital, Niamey<sup>27</sup>.

Little wonder, to the discredit of ECOWAS, of late, analysts have continued to express concern over growing insecurity in the West African Sub-region bringing to question the capability of the Standby Force to bring an end to the incessant violence in the region<sup>28</sup>.

### **The ECOWAS’s Declaration of Political Principles**

It is over twenty-two years since ECOWAS issued the Declaration of Political Principles in 1991 in Abuja (Nigeria). It was signed by all its members with the broad aim of ensuring a stable and secure political environment in which [their] peoples can live in freedom under the law and in true and lasting peace, free from any threat to or attempt against their security. They stressed their determination to “concert [their] efforts to promote democracy... political pluralism and respect for human rights”, as well as the peaceful settlement of disputes among members<sup>29</sup>.

Two years after the Declaration of Political Principles, Nigerian President Obasanjo came up with his “New ECOWAS” mechanism deemed necessary for the survival of the Community in the new world order... “Security First” stresses “the obvious linkage between security and development”. It is a strategy “based on a proportional and integrated approach encompassing development and security”. It refers to the obvious fact that without security in the civilian life there can be no serious and sustainable development; and conversely, without serious and sustainable development, there will be insecurity or



worse. President Obasanjo sums up the whole new dynamic with one expression: “people-centered development”<sup>30</sup>.

### **Violation of the Declaration of Political Principles**

However, all of this was nothing more than rhetoric on paper. The new millennium has witnessed serious violations of human rights whereby the state acted as the major source of insecurity threatening civilian lives. The year 2013 alone, bore witness to the brutality of the police forces against innocent civilians in several ECOWAS member countries. Nigeria stood out as the worst in this respect, followed by others such as Mali, the Ivory Coast, Niger, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea Conakry.

ECOWAS itself has made it clear that this was the reality in West Africa and that it had no means of dealing with human rights violation among its members. The Network of National Human Rights Institutions in West Africa (NNHRI-WA) says the ECOWAS Commission has little capacity to challenge human rights violation in the region, Mr. Saka Azimaz, the group's Executive Secretary noted in Abuja yesterday... He said the network discovered that the national institutions in most countries are very weak... What we have in Nigeria and Ghana maybe an exception, most countries have human rights commissions without staff, countries like Mali, Togo, Guinea Bissau and Liberia. ECOWAS needs to set up a standard as to how the commission should be structured and specific tasks shared, this is very key in the success of the fight against human right abuse in the region<sup>31</sup>.

### **Amnesty International and Nigerian national security crisis**

The wonderful yet ironic diplomatic statement of Mr. Azimaz is his exemption of “Nigeria” from the list along with Ghana. The latter, however, is one of the few exceptions and is respected in terms of its human rights record. However, international human rights groups as well as many other local observers have implicated Nigeria as one of the top violators of human rights in the African continent. In reality, the country upon which ECOWAS depends for its vitality, and in which the Declaration of Political Principles and “New ECOWAS” were advocated and ratified by other members, is the worst example of human rights abuse in the entire West African region.

According to an Amnesty International report on Nigeria this year, several people have reportedly been killed and hundreds arrested since a state of emergency was declared in the northern states of Adamawa, Borno and Yobe on 14 May. The military reportedly claim those targeted are suspected members of Boko Haram... Over the past three years, Amnesty International documented grave human rights violations committed by security forces in their response to Boko Haram, including extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, indiscriminate torching of civilian housing and arbitrary detention... In recent weeks, residents of Borno state in northern Nigeria have told Amnesty International that mass arrests in the state capital Maiduguri have increased... Detainees continue to be denied access to lawyers and families and are not being charged with any crimes or brought before a court. Many people have spent more than a year in military detention without being tried or even charged with any crimes. Others have simply disappeared... Individuals in military vehicles have been depositing bodies on an almost daily basis at mortuaries in the town. The government does not appear to carry out any investigation into these deaths, and has not released any information pertaining to those deceased and deposited at the mortuaries... Over the past two years, Amnesty International has received consistent accounts from witnesses who have seen people summarily executed outside their homes by soldiers during operations in the area, including house searches<sup>32</sup>.

Such kind of situation is not confined to Nigeria alone. Rather, the military, police, and other political establishments in most ECOWAS member countries have bad relation with the common civilians. The former want to extract civilian obedience in all cases by all means. Any actual or verbal challenge to governmental authority is considered a breach or an attempt to disrupt the state's “law and order”. It is

usually very easy for civilian demonstrators to be fired at by live bullets, or to be bitten up and detained for voicing out their grievances. The culprits within the ranks of the government's personnel could usually get away with their actions.

## Discussion and suggestions

The Declaration of Political Principles is the cornerstone for any intra-state stability, good governance, social harmony, and political stability. It is through such mechanism that relations between the civilian political elite, the common citizens, the police, and the army could be transparently promoted. Only after the national resilience of West African states is solidified, will regional resilience under ECOWAS be strong and sustainable. When it comes to the discipline of its members' internal character in a way to enhance the ideal of the Declaration, ECOWAS could consider some of the following suggestions. However, the details for these suggestions are not within the scope of this article.

1. Standardization for enlistment in the military and police institutions of ECOWAS member states. There needs to be a standardized age and educational level for every new recruit. Every West African country should have an institute in which enlisted soldiers have to go through an educational course of a particular unified code of moral ethics underlining civilian, political, and military relationships. These will be a kind of universal values derived from the major religions and cultures of West African people which the majority might not raise objection to. Educating the West African military forces is very important for social harmony and political stability. For instance in Southeast Asia, the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) "offers scholarships to the best and brightest of each annual intake to attract talents into the ranks; these scholars are given the opportunity to study overseas expense-free in return for a 6-year bond to the SAF<sup>33</sup>. ECOWAS could work through the appropriate institutions to materialize this objective.
2. One of the major sources of corruption and human rights abuse in the member countries that jeopardize political and social stability, and in turn affects the efficiency of ECOWAS is the active influence of the military in politics. Both the civilian governments and the common masses are always in a psychological fear of the military and the police. This is what practically undermines the Declaration as well as the "new ECOWAS" and "Security First" doctrines of the regional institution. Therefore, new collective security measures under the auspices of ECOWAS needed to be introduced to actively depoliticize the army and police institutions. Their authoritarian and yet unconstitutional influence on democratic governments need to be curtailed. This is because it is irrational to make national security the exclusive domain of the armed forces. If this becomes well-conceived in West Africa, there will be no justification for the military whatsoever to lay claim to political power and material resources even in the severest of circumstances<sup>34</sup>. Since these institutions and especially the military are very strong in most West African states, ECOWAS alone will not be able to reduce their influence or eliminate. Alternatively, it should introduce and push for active measures in liaison with the AU, EU, and UN. Of course, this depends on ECOWAS' leaders' willingness to take a conscious responsibility and concern for reconstructing West Africa in line with the ideals of its many principles and declarations.
3. Police stations under the heavy influence of the police are more or less the only legal arena for complaints by civilians in all West African countries (with little exception to northern Nigeria). Nevertheless, most of the time they are not the correct destination in which to sue a police officer or a soldier for an offence against a civilian, or a violation of any human rights principle. Hence, a new unique system that could be named the "Civilian Justice Restoration Department", or so, should be established. Its sole jurisdiction will be to look into complaints by civilians against perceived injustice done by the police, the army, or those who hold political power and are seen as immune to legal persecution. In the same way the army in many countries refers some civilians to "martial or military courts" in some cases, it should also be subject to justice and accountability before a court of different sort. The personnel of the suggested Department will only be civilians and act as a "council of elders"

with a direct link to the national Supreme Court of their respective countries, as well as to the ECOWAS' Court of Justice and the Council of Elders. The uniqueness of this suggested institution is that it would solely deal with cases involving injustice or aggression by those who seem above the law, or who have the ability and the connections to manipulate the law. It is to be a duplicated institution in every ECOWAS member state, with a supreme supervisory office in its headquarters.

4. On a regional level, ECOWAS needs to reinvigorate its zeal and reemphasize its sovereignty. It needs to recommit its collective will to boost the capability of its standing army to be in the position to deal with regional security threats without excessive dependency on extra-regional countries. That is why this point was stressed a few years ago.

West Africa's efforts to promote regional cooperation have at least shown that it has potential in the region and that it is quite possibly can be developed further. The future success of both ECOWAS and ECOMOG is of importance for the future of the whole region. Finding ways to deal with security challenges and economic development problems are fundamental elements in any efforts to stabilize the region and to improve the living conditions for the populations<sup>35</sup>.

## Conclusion

ECOWAS continues to claim that it is successfully progressing towards its objectives of an integrated West African economy, a stable and peaceful region, political maturity and transparency, better social welfare and more freedom for the populace. On the intra-state spectrum, these bright and cheap words are so easy to utter by any West African political leader or official in the high place in front of the TV and the paparazzi. However, the truth is in fact different from the repeated rhetoric. For after about 44 years since its foundation, ECOWAS has failed in most of its objectives for the region and within the frontiers of its member nations. Nothing noteworthy has been presented to the common masses. Rather, things have continued to degrade in most of the countries.

Most of the states in West Africa are naturally rich. Except for Cap Verde, Gambia and Guinea Bissau all of the countries of West Africa have a variety of natural resources. Gold, diamonds, oil, uranium, natural gas, copper, iron ore are some examples of what can be found in West Africa<sup>36</sup>. But most of these states have remained among the poorest countries of the world. Nigeria was at one time ranked within the world's twenty richest countries. Today it has descended into the rank of the world's twenty poorest countries. Cote d'Ivoire used to be one of the most stable, peaceful, prosperous and progressive ECOWAS member states. But today, it has fallen into the same category and situation of most of its neighbours in terms of the severe degradation in security and political stability.

From the regional perspective, the unilateral action of France no doubt appeared like a blessing for ECOWAS in that its Cote d'Ivoire and Mali problems were tackled without much sacrifice on its part. However, this indifference reduces its sovereignty, makes it more dependent, weakens its regional resilience and self-reliance, increases France's grip on its Francophone "chasse gardée" which will strengthen the old Francophone - Anglophone division and undoubtedly undermines ECOWAS' regional objectives of an integrated West African market, customs, and currency union in the new millennium.

ECOWAS needs to re-examine the direction of its objectives in line with the new developments in West Africa. It needs to look at the symptoms of weakness and search for antidotes. Failing to do so will further lead to its decay and irrelevance in addressing more serious problems in the region in the near future. This new millennium presents unforeseeable regional and international events that call for a more vigilant and cautious outlook on security. Many extra regional powers such as the US, France, China and others are well aware of this reality. Therefore, they are adopting new approaches to cope with the course of events. One of their new approaches is in entrenching themselves in the West African region, which is slipping out of ECOWAS' control. That is the new trend referred to as "the new scramble for Africa". No single West African state would be able to stand this new scramble for Africa on its own. ECOWAS is the proper channel to cater collectively for its regional states and to safeguard their collective national interests in this neo-liberal approach to absolute gain.

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