

SANCTIONS, SOVEREIGNTY AND REGIONAL BACKLASH: ASSESSING ECOWAS'S COERCIVE DIPLOMACY TOWARDS MILITARY REGIMES IN WEST AFRICA, 2020–2026

ANYALEBECHI, Shammah Mahakwe, PhD

Shammah.anyalebechi@ust.edu.ng

Department of Political Science, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 11th July 2026 Accepted: 10th August 2026	This study evaluated the effectiveness and political implications of the Economic Community of West African States' coercive diplomacy against military rule in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger from August 2020 to September 2026. It questioned the impact of suspension, targeted restrictions, comprehensive economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and threatened force on transition behaviour and when they exacerbated sovereignty-based resistance and regional fragmentation. It was a qualitative comparative narrative research. ECOWAS instruments, demand, transmission mechanism, concession, constitutional outcome and regional consequences are coded. The theory of coercive diplomacy and the Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory were used as analytical frameworks. The results indicated two propositions. One, ECOWAS incurred visible costs and, in some instances, won concessions that were sometimes short-term, but rarely obtained its ultimate goal: a swift return of the displaced constitutional powers. Results were greatest when demands were modest, a credible exit was available and linked to the demands, and when military rulers had no way to pass on the costs to civilians or deadlines were not too long. Second, there were also wide and obvious punitive actions that reinforced anti-interference narratives, fostered solidarity among the Sahelian regimes and helped to institutionalize a counter-alignment through the Alliance of Sahel States. Partial formal compliance demonstrated by Guinea's eventual elections, but the former junta leader's triumph also shows that there are differences between electoral completion and democratic restoration. The study proposed that the ECOWAS anti-coup norm must be upheld while collective punishment is replaced by graduated and targeted sanctions, which should be reviewed, inclusive mediation and humanitarian safeguards are put in place, and preventive measures are taken against military coups and civilian constitutional manipulation.
Keywords: ECOWAS, sanctions, sovereignty, coercive diplomacy, military regimes, Alliance of Sahel States	

1. INTRODUCTION

From 2020 to 2023, the political landscape in West Africa changed as a result of successive military takeovers in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger. The military in Mali has staged two coup de main, in August 2020 and May 2021; in Guinea, the military deposed President Alpha Condé in September 2021; and in Burkina Faso, the military has carried out two coup de main in 2022, while in Niger, the military seized the presidency in July 2023 from President Mohamed Bazoum. Such incidents threatened the regional anti-coup norm in the central Sahel, where public discontent over elected governments and waning faith in outside security alliances, and violent insurgencies, were already transforming the region. ECOWAS' response included condemnation, mediation and institutional suspension, travel bans, asset freezes, border closures, financial restrictions and in Niger, an explicit threat to use force. That response is well grounded in law. The Revised ECOWAS Treaty allows sanctions for non-observance of ECOWAS obligations and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) dictates zero tolerance of power acquired or retained through unconstitutional means (Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS], 1993, 2001).

However, the authority to respond does not address the strategic issue of the effectiveness of coercion. Sanctions can be a sign of solidarity, raise the price of military dictatorship and uphold a regional constitutional rule. They can also be a negative effect on trade, public revenue, energy supply and access to basic commodities, without posing a direct threat to the personal survival of the military elites. Externally imposed pressure can provide the regime with a focusing political narrative: where domestic grievances are expressed in sovereignty and anti-colonialism, external pressure can provide the regime with a unifying political narrative. This tension has been most evident in the aftermath of the Niger

coup. ECOWAS put in place the most comprehensive package recently and initially called for the return of Bazoum in one week.

However, the junta maintained its control, broad sanctions were lifted in February 2024, on humanitarian grounds, Niger has joined Mali and Burkina Faso in strengthening the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and the three withdrawals from ECOWAS have come into effect on 29 January 2025. In March 2025, Niger was in the midst of a five-year transition under the leadership of Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani. The transition period had already been extended in Burkina Faso to July 2029 and in Mali, Assimi Goïta had been given a five-year presidential term that can be renewed. In Guinea, an election in December 2025 saw the end of military transition, but the process was tightly controlled and former junta head Mamadi Doumbouya was elected (Al Jazeera, 2025; Associated Press, 2026; Reuters, 2024a).

Thus, the main research question is: when did ECOWAS coercive diplomacy impact the behaviour of military regimes and when did it generate regional backlash based on sovereignty? The inquiry is structured into three subsidiary questions: What were the goals and means that were applied in the four cases; how were costs passed from rulers to citizens; and how did target governments translate pressure into domestic or interstate support? The study is of empirical and institutional importance. It de-couples costs from policy success, it detaches a negotiated timetable from constitutional restoration and it views regional cohesion as an effect and not a precondition. It will expire in September 2026, allowing for evaluation beyond the immediate crisis response.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sanctions

Sanctions are intentional limitations that are intended to change behavior, to limit ability, to stigmatize the target or to reinforce a norm. They vary by scope. Targeted measures are taken to focus pressure on decision makers such as travel bans, individual asset freezes, and restrictions on named institutions. Comprehensive measures impede broader trade, transport, finance or public-sector access. Many people can't tell if they're successful just by looking at how they are hurting economically. Signalling and deterrence can be accomplished without policy change by a sender, and procedural surrender without political surrender by a target. While economic deprivation rarely forces governments to give up fundamental goals, as Pape (1997) cautions, sanctions sometimes do when the demands are modest and the bargaining situation is favourable, as Drezner (2011) emphasizes. Therefore, the dependent variable will not be "damage" but actual steps towards the political demand.

Sanctions have distributional impacts as well. Authoritarian incumbents might shield military and patronage networks and households might absorb inflation, shortages and unemployment. Economic sanctions may exacerbate human-rights conditions, at least in part by boosting state repression and constricting access to resources for the society, as shown in Peksen (2009). Galtung's classic account (1967) throws in the 'rally' problem: social disadvantage does not necessarily lead to pressure on rulers, but can even strengthen solidarity against the sender. In ECOWAS, these risks are exacerbated by the fact of landlocked economies, the existence of informal cross-border trade and common monetary institutions. Costs can rapidly be passed on to traders, patients and border communities as a result of the same interdependence that can be the source of leverage for the organisation.

2.2 Sovereignty

Sovereignty is a legal, institutional and political entity. From a legal point of view, the ECOWAS members have taken on obligations regarding the rule of law in their constitutions by their own will – thus, the enforcement is not a form of external interference. Politically, however, military regimes cast sovereignty as the popular control over military alliances, natural resources and foreign policy. This claim rings true where former colonial power France is linked to failed counter-insurgency and to economic dependence, or protection of elites. So it's not whether sovereignty arguments are legally conclusive, but rather what their impact is on compliance. A coercive action that is seen as arbitrary, imposed on the people from outside, and insensitive to their welfare can turn an anti-coup issue into a struggle for national dignity. ECOWAS conflict management is therefore set in the context of competing decolonial narratives as noted by Stoica (2022), and the Niger response as noted by Aboagye (2024) was noted to have been poorly sequenced, to have experienced collateral harm and to have been plagued by doubts about the credibility of threatened force.

2.3 Regional Backlash

Regional backlash is an organised reaction which changes the pressure institutional environment. It can involve public protests, diplomatic non-cooperation, reciprocal border measures, new security measures, or withdrawal from the sending organisation. Backlash is more than just disliking of sanctions—it lessens the sender's leverage in the future. This is shown in the AES. In September 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a defence charter, a confederation treaty, which led to their de facto disassociation from ECOWAS in January 2025. Their combined stance was related to the survival of the regime, security autonomy, and resistance to external influence (Associated Press, 2024b; Reuters, 2024b). This disintegrative effect is a key long-run effect of the ECOWAS sanctions as noted by Andreeva and Novikov (2024). Ekpenyong and Garba (2025) also discover that, despite the fact that sanction politics led to interim commitments for transitional justice, it also undermined cohesion.

2.4 Coercive Diplomacy

Coercive diplomacy aims to convince an opponent to cease or reverse an activity through the use of threats and some pressure, but not war. Schelling (1966) distinguishes compellence from brute force – target must be left with a choice and know what compliance will get them. George (1991) lists a number of components that are necessary: clarity of demand, urgency, credible consequences and a balance of pressure and inducement. Suspension and sanctions are tools of bargaining, only if linked to a viable political solution, applied to ECOWAS. Maximal demands can go down if

the member states are not prepared to take the threatened next step. However, small concessions, like a reduced transition, can be secured where the risk is great and where the target can be seen as sovereign and not embarrassing.

2.5 The ECOWAS, Regional Integration and Military Rule

ECOWAS has evolved from an economic community to become a regional security and governance actor. Constitutional convergence became a Community interest and not just a domestic issue through its conflict-prevention mechanism in 1999 and its democracy protocol in 2001. The organisation's previous operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone and The Gambia established its reputation for effective regional response; however, the Sahel cases are different in structure. Military authorities dominate state institutions, derive their legitimacy from security failures and function in an environment of competition for access from outside partners. Member state consensus is also weaker as intervention and sanctions have differential costs on neighbours.

In the context of regional integration, the conflict between supranational commitments and weak domestic implementation is highlighted. According to Eyina et al. (2023), political mistrust, the weakness of institutions, border issues and unequal state capacities are hindering the development of ECOWAS. Those constraints directly apply to sanctions: sanctions require national customs services, central banks, energy connections and political cooperation. Eyina and Kabari (2021) also demonstrate that porous borders and weak arms-control mechanisms are a link between governance failures and regional insecurity. A policy that sanctions military governments while reducing the day-to-day cooperation, might then undermine the security networks that help to maintain military legitimacy.

2.6 Empirical Review

The empirical evidence is ambiguous. ECOWAS used a combination of suspension, closure of borders and financial restrictions, and mediation, after Mali's coup in August 2020. The measures were removed once a civilian-led transitional process was put in place, though the fragility of the transition was revealed when it was overrun by the army in May 2021 by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The authorities later suggested elections several years after the agreed time frame and in January 2022, ECOWAS and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) imposed a much wider package. Normal economic and business activities were curtailed by the pressure, and fiscal strains grew. Sanctions were lifted in July 2022, following Mali's acceptance of a 24 month timeline. This was a concession to bargaining, not democratic restoration, however, as the election deadline for March 2024 came and went, political parties were dissolved in May 2025 and Goïta won a five-year renewable term of office (Al Jazeera, 2025; Reuters, 2024c, 2025b). Mali is thus an example of tactical influence rather than strategic compliance.

Guinea has been suspended, and the primary target of sanctions is the country since the September 2021 coup. ECOWAS initially pushed back an initial 36-month transition period and negotiated a 24-month transition, starting from January 2023. The formal transition was postponed and a constitutional referendum was held in September 2025, ahead of a presidential election on 28 December. With 86.7 per cent of the votes, the Supreme Court affirmed Doumbouya's win, and he was inaugurated in January 2026 (Associated Press, 2026). This is the most successful formal electoral outcome of the four cases and not a simple success. Former junta leader, who had pledged not to challenge, was allowed to stand and major opponents were either weakened or excluded and the constitution was in place. Mills (2022) points out that ECOWAS' earlier condoning of Condé's attempt to do a third term has cast doubt on its preventive legitimacy. The contrast shows the need for a separate evaluation of holding elections after a coup and democratic consolidation.

The two coups in Burkina Faso in January and September 2022 resulted in suspension, mediation and targeted pressure, but not in a blockade like Mali in 2022 and Niger in 2023. There was limited appetite for more comprehensive action due to humanitarian and security conditions. ECOWAS initially agreed to a 2 year period of transition to elections by July 2024. In May 2024, the national consultations then prolonged the military rule by sixty months, until July 2029, and gave Captain Ibrahim Traoré the option to challenge a future election (Reuters, 2024a). The case demonstrates that restraint not only can limit civilian collateral damage but is not in itself sufficient to ensure compliance. It is also an example of the shortcomings of transition calendars with no intermediate benchmarks or independent monitoring and consequences for delay.

The most transparently coercive test was from Niger. ECOWAS on 30 July 2023 imposed the following measures: closure of land and air borders, suspension of commercial and financial transactions, freezing of state assets and individual restrictions. It had been given a restoration deadline of one week, and it had been made clear that “all measures” – which included the use of force – would be taken. Most electricity supply was also cut off in Nigeria. The sanctions and the suspension of external financing had an adverse impact on markets, trade and households' welfare in an already fragile and landlocked economy, according to a joint WFP–World Bank assessment (World Food Programme & World Bank, 2023). As of February 2024, Niger has defaulted on over US\$500 million in debt payments, and public expenditures have significantly decreased, but the junta had not restored Bazoum (Reuters, 2024d). ECOWAS then raised general measures for humanitarian reasons as it remained in its constitutional stance.

The Niger evidence is a direct split between economic impact and political effectiveness. The World Bank (2024) projected sluggish growth in 2023, after the coup, sanctions and financing restrictions, but a recovery in the following year as sanctions were lifted and oil exports increased. Meanwhile, health and relief systems were also hampered by power and logistics issues – UNICEF reported that continued outages put vaccine cold chains at risk (Associated Press, 2023). These costs were a factor in the urgency of relief but without elite displacement. Rather, the junta took the measures as proof that ECOWAS was punishing Nigeriens. In March 2025, Tchiani was sworn in for a five-year “flexible” transition and political parties were dissolved (Associated Press, 2025). The results of the outcome measure indicate that the most comprehensive package resulted in the highest initial costs and one of the poorest constitutional reversals. The same applies to a cross-case research. Based on this, Andreeva and Novikov (2024) conclude that sanctions had an impact on development and induced compromise timetables but not on the regimes ECOWAS aimed for. Aboagye (2024) emphasizes the legal, humanitarian and strategic issues in the Niger ultimatum. Mills (2022) emphasizes prevention more than that, because the ECOWAS is more consistent in responding to military coup than to the manipulation of the constitution by elected leaders. There are however two omissions in the literature. First, some of the studies stop at the time of the AES withdrawal, prior to the effective date of the military rule or to subsequent extensions of military rule. Second, the four elements of economic impact, behavioural concession, constitutional outcome and regional backlash are combined into one measure of success. This current analysis breaks them down until September 2026.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

The study will use the approaches of coercive diplomacy theory and Regional Security Complex theory. Coercive diplomacy (Schelling, 1966; operationally developed by George, 1991) is a theory that explains how a sender makes demands, sets deadlines, threatens and provides limited punishment to induce behavioural change. The four key variables are demand clarity, enforcement credibility, target vulnerability, and proportionality and the availability of a face-saving exit. It suggests that ECOWAS pressure is most likely to be successful where a viable demand is agreed upon by the member countries, where implementation is ensured, and where relief is provided upon observation of compliance. It anticipates failure when the target is more threatening to the sender than the costs of failure; when the sender doubts escalation; or when the sender can redistribute the pain.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that security threats and political responses tend to be geographically concentrated in a region because the security of one state cannot be divorced from the security of its neighbours, which is known as Regional Security Complex Theory. Nestled in complex webs of trade, monetary union, migration, insurgency and military cooperation, it offers an explanation for why sanctions work. Coercion can thus not only affect the calculation of a target, but also the regional structure itself. Coordinated action by the pressured regimes leads to a loss of leverage for the sender and makes common security management more difficult. The two tests are intertwined, with the ECOWAS possibly increasing the price of military rule and at the same time decreasing the institutional channels available for negotiating compliance and regional security.

3.1. RESEARCH GAP AND PROPOSITIONS:

3.1 Research Gap

While there is existing analysis that demonstrates that the ECOWAS sanctions create material hardship and uneven political outcomes, there are three analytical problems. First, “effectiveness” is often represented by sanctions imposed, or a transition plan announced, and not necessarily as a process from pressure to lasting constitutional achievement. Second, sovereignty rhetoric is frequently referred to as propaganda or public sentiment, and not as a mechanism which are able to shift alliances and enforcement capability. Third, previous studies were unable to witness the effective withdrawal of the three AES states, Mali's consolidation in 2025 and Guinea's electoral deadline in 2025-2026, among other factors. A systemic story is required to tie together instruments, cost transmission, bargains, regime and institutional consequences over time.

3.2 Propositions

Proposition 1: ECOWAS sanctions impose significant economic and diplomatic costs, but they advance constitutional restoration only when demands are limited and credible, target vulnerability is matched by sender unity, and compliance is paired with a clear, attainable exit route.

Proposition 2: Broad coercive measures that transmit costs to civilians and are perceived as selective or externally influenced strengthen sovereignty narratives, encourage counter-alignment through the Alliance of Sahel States and reduce ECOWAS's subsequent regional leverage.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Approach: The study uses a qualitative comparative systemic narrative design. The use of a narrative analysis is used to reconstruct the chronological relationship between a coup, the ECOWAS demand, the coercive instrument, target response, modification of pressure and eventual political outcome. The systemic part views sanctions as measures in an interdependent regional context instead of as unilateral measures between two nations. Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger are a structured comparison, as all of these countries experienced military rule during the period, with varying degrees of coercion, economic dependency and subsequent alignment.

4.2 Sources of Data: These come from the Revised ECOWAS Treaty, the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, official summit communiqués, World Bank assessments, World Food Programme assessments, peer-reviewed research, and policy studies and Reuters and Associated Press reporting. The time window is from August 2020 to 12 September 2026. Decisions and stated objectives are determined through official instruments, the transmission effects through economic and humanitarian assessments, causal interpretations through academic literature, and news reports primarily for dated political developments not yet addressed in academic literature.

4.3 Analytical Procedure: The documents were coded according to the following seven categories: trigger, stated demand, instrument, implementation breadth, civilian transmission, target concession and final constitutional/regional outcome. Using within-case process tracing, the study determined if the concession was a result of pressure and if it survived after the easing of sanctions. The propositions were then compared and contrasted using the cross case technique and four levels of outcomes: economic impact, bargaining movement, restoration of constitutional rule and preservation of regional cohesion. An election date alone was not considered to be restoration. What was needed was coordination or institutional withdrawal, and this had to be visible, rather than just verbal.

4.4 Trustworthiness and Ethics: Triangulation of sources, date-specific statements and separation of ECOWAS decisions from the actions of the individual members or WAEMU was done to enhance trustworthiness. Uncontentious claims of legitimacy are made, rather than posited as facts. The analysis does not assume that demonstrations are necessarily an expression of popular opinion, nor that military governments' claims to sovereignty are evidence of popular consent. Formal research-participant consent was not required since no human participants or personal data were used.

4.5 Limitations: Private bargaining, sanctions evasion, and household level attitudes can only be measured in part by documentary evidence. There are also other factors that distort the economic effects, such as insecurity, aid suspensions and global price changes due to climate shocks. The four cases are not statistically representative and developments in the areas near the September 2026 cut-off may be revised later. The study can thus make only mechanism-based, not universal, causal claims.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Comparative record of ECOWAS coercive diplomacy, 2020–2026

Case	ECOWAS response	Interim movement	Outcome by September 2026
Mali	Suspension and sanctions in 2020; comprehensive trade and financial restrictions in January 2022.	Civilian-led transition in 2020; 24-month election timetable accepted in 2022.	Election deadline missed; parties dissolved; Goïta received a renewable five-year mandate; ECOWAS exit effective in 2025.
Guinea	Suspension, targeted travel and financial sanctions; diplomatic pressure against a 36-month plan.	Transition shortened in negotiation; referendum and presidential election held in 2025.	Doumbouya inaugurated in 2026 after winning 86.7%; formal transition completed but democratic competitiveness disputed.
Burkina Faso	Suspension and mediation after two 2022 coups; targeted rather than comprehensive economic pressure.	Two-year timetable initially accepted.	Transition extended for five years from July 2024; AES/ECOWAS split entrenched.
Niger	Broad trade, finance, border and air restrictions; asset freezes; one-week ultimatum and threat of force.	Dialogue occurred; broad sanctions lifted in February 2024 for humanitarian reasons.	Bazoum not restored; five-year transition adopted in 2025; ECOWAS exit effective in 2025.

Note. "Outcome" distinguishes an announced transition step from restoration of competitive constitutional rule.

Source: Authors' synthesis of ECOWAS communiqués and the sources cited in Sections 2.6 and 5.

5.1 Proposition 1: Costs, Concessions and the Limits of Compellence

The available scholarly evidence support the Proposition 1: ECOWAS did a better job imposing costs and securing timetable commitments than restoring constitutional authorities in place. In all four instances, suspension conveyed normative disaffirmation and took away the military leadership's routine access to regional institutions. Economic and trade measures introduced material pressure for those economies that were heavily reliant on regional corridors and

the WAEMU system. The 2022 Mali package has been negotiated as part of the framework of a shorter electoral calendar, and Guinea has shifted from a proposed 36-month electoral calendar to one that is 24 months. These are non-trivial effects. They demonstrate how regional pressure can influence the conditions for military rulers' acceptance.

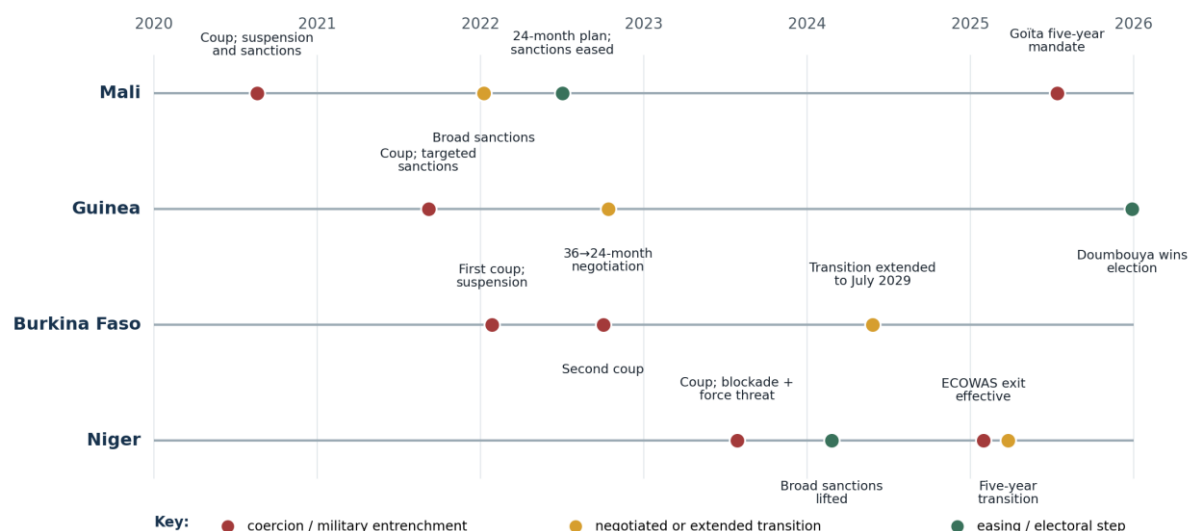
However, the causal sequence did not go so far as to achieve durable constitutional restoration. The 24 month plan for Mali was basis for sanctions relief but was then missed. The accepted timetable of Burkina Faso was extended to 2029. Niger didn't reinstate Bazoum and its subsequent five years transition was less close to ECOWAS's one-week ultimatum than the junta's initial three-year offer. Eventually, Guinea did have an election but the winner was the officer who led the coup and ruled during the opposition ban. ECOWAS looks more effective if the only measure for success is a transition document or ballot; if the only measure for success is alternation, civilian control and compliance with prior commitments, then ECOWAS is less effective.

Variation is along the lines of coercive diplomacy theory. The Mali 2022 demand was tight to negotiate, as it was about the timeline and benchmarks of transition, and sanction relief was contingent upon an adapted timeline. Niger's initial demands were maximum, such as the immediate reinstatement of the deposed president, and the time limit was very short and the threat of force called for political and operational unity, which was lacking. After the deadline passed without action, the threat became "discredited. Diplomatic messages then began to move to a negotiated transition and humanitarian relief. The target knew that taking the money up front would alter the sender's stance.

Being vulnerable was not the same as being a leader. Broad measures affected state finances, trade routes and electricity, but military rulers were in charge of coercive institutions and were able to ration scarce resources. The costs faced by households and firms were greater than the costs of insiders to the regime. To the extent that sanctions relied upon civilian suffering to create political pressure, the impact of sanctions was based upon an unverifiable assumption that citizens could force armed rulers. This transmission can also be understood as a mechanism that reinforces repression or a nationalist unity, as Galtung (1967) and Peksen (2009) have argued in the context of human rights. ECOWAS was thus confronted with a compellence paradox: the more economic the compellence, the less discrimination between leaders and society.

Credibility was further determined by sender unity. It would have been very expensive in terms of operational, legal and domestic political costs for the military to intervene in Niger and Mali and Burkina Faso said they would consider an attack to be a declaration of war. Escalation was subject to questioning among neighbouring legislatures and publics. This led to a clearly discernible disconnect between authorisations and actual policy. Schelling (1966) stresses that threats can only be effective when the adversary thinks the threatener would rather carry out the threat than back down. The Niger ultimatum did not pass this test. By contrast, targeted travel and asset restrictions are less difficult to maintain, but they would need intelligence and financial enforcement and co-ordinated monitoring to get to the decision makers.

Thus, Proposition 1 receives "intermediate" and "partial" constitutional support. Sanctions can provide bargaining leverage for movement, raise the "reputational costs" of a coup, and maintain a "formal anti-coup norm. They don't necessarily remove military regimes that are good at staying alive, have coercive organizations and can turn to other partners. Effectiveness is enhanced when ECOWAS sets minimum and maximum targets and ties each measure to a quantifiable indicator, ensures humanitarian pathways are safeguarded and provides for relief after compliance. Otherwise, sanctions are faced with the danger of turning into punishment without a credible diplomatic avenue.

Figure 1. Coercive measures and political outcomes in the four cases, 2020–2026.

Source: Authors' synthesis of ECOWAS (2022, 2023, 2024), Al Jazeera (2025), Associated Press (2025, 2026) and Reuters (2024a, 2024c).

Pressure and political compliance did not proceed in a linear fashion as seen in Figure 1. The 2022 Mali sanctions came before the agreed 24-month period, with the electoral deadline being pushed back. Guinea has only recently completed a transition to an election, and the former junta leader is still in office. Burkina Faso had a first timetable, but it was extended after the military coup. The most comprehensive package and the shortest ultimatum was given to Niger, where sanctions were lifted without Bazoum's restoration, and a five-year transition ensued. The figure thus highlights the difference between bargaining movement and constitutional restoration, and corroborates the assertion that it is limited and credible demands with an explicit off-ramp that work best, not maximal threats that the sender cannot maintain.

5.2 Proposition 2: Sovereignty Narratives and Regional Backlash

There is strong support for Proposition 2, but sanctions were not the only reason for the backlash. Insecurity, hostility towards French influence and common interest in resisting outside demands already linked the AES regimes. Their coordination was expedited and rationalized by ECOWAS pressure which gave them a shared frame of reference as adversaries. Leaders termed sanctions "unlawful, inhumane and subservient to foreign interests. This framing made the issue of unconstitutional seizure of power into a broader issue of denying Sahelian peoples the right to elect security and development partners. The narrative proved very convenient in terms of linking regime survival to national sovereignty.

The claim was made plausible to affected populations through the use of civilian transmission. Normal trade was interrupted by border closures and financial restrictions; electricity supplies were interrupted in Niger, impacting businesses and health facilities; financing was suspended, reducing fiscal space; and rerouted trade led to higher transport costs. While the WFP–World Bank assessment did not necessarily point fingers at ECOWAS, it did show how the political crisis was exacerbated by sanctions and disruptions in external financing, and vice versa (World Food Programme & World Bank, 2023). The regional body subsequently claimed to have lifted Niger's blanket measures on humanitarian grounds, which implied that the pressure imposed had unacceptable social consequences. This reinforced the junta's claim that it was a matter of endurance, not compliance, that necessitated policy changes.

This was exacerbated by perceived selectivity. While citizens noted third-term projects and electoral manipulation and weak civilian governance elsewhere, ECOWAS has a clear rule against coup. According to Mills (2022), the organisation was also unable to avert the crisis in Guinea due to its soft response to Condé's constitutional amendment and forceful response after he was ousted by the army. There is a legal difference between a military coup and a civilian constitutional manipulation, but politically, both are corrosive if they have the effect of inhibiting alternation. This is a malleability that military leaders use to "save" the people from a failure of democracy. Sanctions then seem to be in the service of office-holders, not of constitutionalism.

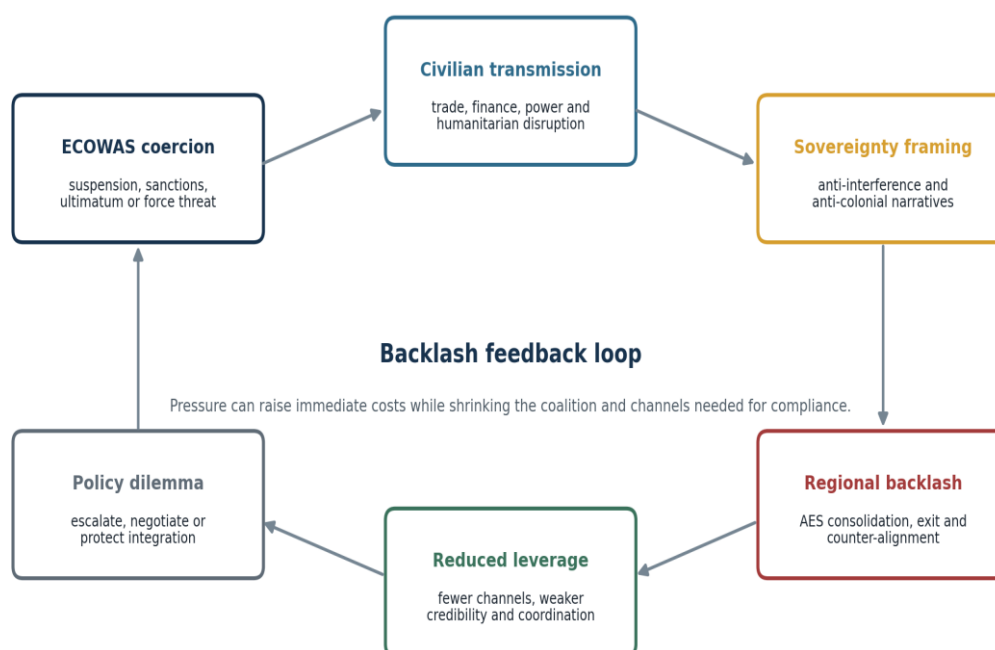
The AES took the conversation to institutional change. Coercion costs for any single regime were increased by the September 2023 mutual defence charter. The confederation treaty of July 2024 enlarged the scope of coordination while the withdrawal of January 2025 made ECOWAS to twelve member states. Practical uncertainty was also created over free movement and trade preferences and security coordination with the exit. ECOWAS continued to recognize passports and maintain trade arrangements, with a window of dialogue open, demonstrating that the costs of full suspension did not only fall on the targets, but also on the sender (Associated Press, 2024a; Reuters, 2025a). Backlash thus did not only reflect an expression of displeasure but also a change in the bargaining structure.

Regional Security Complex Theory explains why this is important. The insurgencies that spread across the borders of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Benin and Nigeria go hand in hand with the movement of arms, fighters, displaced people and illicit finance. Eyina and Kabari (2021) report on porous borders and lacking control mechanisms that highlight the importance of collective implementation of security. Institutional fragmentation generates a lack of information, overlapping border regulations and competing security alliances. It can also be a factor in limiting ECOWAS' access to early warning and mediation, where military rule and insurgency are most prevalent. This is a political cost of exit to those who stay in.

This does not imply that the regimes are accepting the ECOWAS' assertion that the division was the sole fault of the ECOWAS. The juntas opted for a continuation of their rule, limited internal politics and sought new external ties. Anti-French feeling and opposition to counter-terrorism policy pre-dates sanctions. ECOWAS was also justified in having a collective interest in curbing the contagion of coup. The causal claim is more limited - that the "material grievances" and a "coordination frame" were provided by the "broad pressure". Sanctions were not the cause but an accelerant to preexisting conditions.

The policy implication: legitimacy is a component of leverage. The enforcement of a regional organisation will be undermined if the measures taken by it undermine the coalition, information networks and public acceptance that are required for enforcement. Specific restrictions coupled with clear legal arguments and equal treatment of violations of the civilian constitution would reduce the sovereignty gap. Civil society, legislatures and border communities should also be engaged in structured dialogue to ensure that the popular will is not hijacked by the junta-ECOWAS bargaining process. The anti-coup norm is more defensible when it is part of a larger norm that is consistently applied against unconstitutional retention and unconstitutional acquisition of power.

Figure 2. Systemic feedback loop from coercion to regional backlash.



Source: Authors' conceptual synthesis based on Galtung (1967), Buzan and Wæver (2003), Mills (2022), Aboagye (2024), and Andreeva and Novikov (2024).

Figure 2. illustrated the mechanism behind a coercive instrument undermining its future effectiveness. The first point of entry of ECOWAS pressure is through borders, banking, energy and aid in an interdependent economy. If civilians are bearing the brunt of it, military rulers can make an anti-coup claim seem an interference in national sovereignty. Such framing encourages solidarity and counter-alignment, such as AES institutions and ECOWAS withdrawal. Exit then diminishes the diplomatic access, policy coordination and enforcement capacity, and makes the regional body more difficult to choose between escalation and accommodation. The loop is not automatic, targeted measures, humanitarian exemptions, a consistent constitution and credible mediation can interrupt the loop before social harm becomes political legitimacy for the target regime.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

ECOWAS' attitude to military rule in 2020-2026 maintained a vital principle that unconstitutional takeover of power can't be normalised without regional implication. There were real costs attached to suspension, sanctions and mediation, and sometimes, a change in transition bargaining. But there is a uniform pressure-constitutional gap in the cases.

Military rule in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were extended beyond initial pledges for a transition; the deposed President of Niger was never restored; and the military leader of the coup in Guinea was restored as elected President under disputed competitive elections. ECOWAS was thus more effective in its signalling, stigmatising and negotiating timetables than in its obligations of durable civilian control.

The second is that there was a regional system change caused by coercion. Broad measures were particularly costly for citizens, and aided military rulers in mobilizing sovereignty and anti-interference discourses in particular in Niger. This was coupled with security complaints and the already existing anti-French sentiments which led to AES consolidation and withdrawal from ECOWAS. The backlash led to a lack of cohesion within institutions and made regional security cooperation more difficult. The bottom line is do not give up sanctions. It's to refashion them in a way that's credible enough for diplomacy, conditionally effective enough to incentivize steps, legally and transparently legitimate enough to not be invalidated, and preventively able to be effective against constitutional manipulation without a barracks intervention.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the major findings, the following recommendations were stated:

- 1). There is need to implement an escalating sanctions system. ECOWAS should release a permanent set of procedures from suspension and mediation to targeted financial restrictions, procurement controls and only in exceptional cases to be extended to a wider scale of measures. At each stage, the behaviours that lead to escalation and the behaviour that is known to lead to feeling better should be identified.
- 2). There is need to implement civilians first – design for protection policy. It is important to protect, from the start, humanitarian goods, electricity for hospitals and water systems, remittances, food corridors and legitimate small-scale border trade. Distributional impacts should be reported on every 30 to 60 days, and should be automatic if the impacts are greater than the politics of the measure.
- 3). There also need to establish an attack networks that ensure the survival of the regime. Financial intelligence units, central banks and external partners should target the leaders of the coup, companies owned by the military, intermediaries for procurements and sanctions evasion networks. Legality and an appeal mechanism should be maintained in order to prevent arbitrary listing through the use of evidentiary standards.
- 4) Finally, there is need to implement ECOWAS - AES security compact. ECOWAS should negotiate functional modalities on intelligence, counter-terrorism, humanitarian access and pastoral mobility and cross-border crime, without accepting any form of indefinite military rule. Security cooperation does not have to be tied up to the negotiation of membership and political discussion can continue.

6.3 Recommendations for future studies

In future research, the household survey, elite interviews and trade microdata should be combined in order to separate the effects of sanctions from insecurity and withdrawal of aid. Comparative analysis should also be made on the ability of Guinea's electoral outcome to yield civilian institutional control, and the feasibility of functional ECOWAS-AES collaboration in the face of political disconnection. A set of data would be available to code each sanction by target, exemption date, and enforcement/review date, which would allow for more robust causal testing.

REFERENCES

1. Aboagye, F. (2024). From the Mano River to the Sahel: A critical appraisal of the ECOWAS approach to the post-coup crisis in Niger (2023). *African Journal of Defence, Security and Strategy*, 4, 14–44. <https://ajodss.gafscmil.edu.gh/index.php/ajodss/article/download/13/7>
2. Al Jazeera. (2025, July 4). Mali military chief granted renewable five-year presidential term. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/4/mali-military-chief-granted-renewable-five-year-presidential-term>
3. Andreeva, T. A., & Novikov, A. D. (2024). Sanctions as a coercive leverage within ECOWAS. *Asia and Africa Today*, 9, 71–80. <https://doi.org/10.31857/S0321507524090097>
4. Associated Press. (2023, August 23). Power cuts in Niger threaten to spoil millions of vaccines as sanctions take their toll, UN says. <https://apnews.com/article/5e7d6610635b0aa2ffe6570cc417930e>
5. Associated Press. (2024a, December 15). West Africa regional bloc approves exit timeline for 3 coup-hit member states. <https://apnews.com/article/d0aa7e956734406dd6d4be7dcfc255f8>
6. Associated Press. (2024b, January 29). What is ECOWAS and why have 3 coup-hit nations quit the West Africa bloc? <https://apnews.com/article/d2e8b1e5448d9a7823e6b9d3d8ec774b>
7. Associated Press. (2025, March 26). Niger's junta leader cements his grip on power as he is sworn in as president. <https://apnews.com/article/e7763dca5a85e790eeaca43f39237c04>
8. Associated Press. (2026, January 5). Guinea's junta leader is confirmed president-elect after first vote since a 2021 coup. <https://apnews.com/article/b3cf4eb1e045a525542f59347b08fe1a>
9. Buzan, B., & Wæver, O. (2003). *Regions and powers: The structure of international security*. Cambridge University Press.
10. Drezner, D. W. (2011). Sanctions sometimes succeed: The case for economic statecraft. *International Security*, 36(1), 96–108. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00050
11. Economic Community of West African States. (1993). *Revised Treaty of the Economic Community of West African States*. <https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Revised-treaty-1.pdf>
12. Economic Community of West African States. (2001). *Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on democracy and good governance supplementary to the Protocol relating to the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution,*

- peacekeeping and security. <https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Protocol-on-Democracy-and-Good-Governance.pdf>
13. Economic Community of West African States. (2022, January 9). Final communiqué: Fourth extraordinary summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on the political situation in Mali. ECOWAS Commission.
14. Economic Community of West African States. (2023, July 30). Final communiqué: Extraordinary summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on the political situation in Niger. ECOWAS Commission.
15. Economic Community of West African States. (2024, February 24). Final communiqué: Extraordinary summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government on the political, peace and security situation in the region. <https://reliefweb.int/report/niger/extraordinary-summit-ecowas-authority-heads-state-and-government-political-peace-and-security-situation-region>
16. Ekpenyong, E., & Garba, D. (2025). Coups and ECOWAS sanctions: Implications for cohesion and integration in West Africa. *Journal of African Union Studies*, 14(2), 177–198. <https://doi.org/10.31920/2050-4306/2025/14n2a9>
17. Eyina, N. N., Elijah, L. O., Hart, A. O., & Anyalebechi, S. M. (2023). Regional integration and economic development: A study of Economic Community of West African States, 2015–2020. *Modern Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 17, 86–107.
18. Eyina, N. N., & Kabari, J. B. (2021). An assessment of arms proliferation and control mechanisms in Nigeria, 2010–2020. *International Journal on Integrated Education*, 4(11), 93–102. <https://media.neliti.com/media/publications/352377-an-assessment-of-arms-proliferation-and-2b621495.pdf>
19. Galtung, J. (1967). On the effects of international economic sanctions: With examples from the case of Rhodesia. *World Politics*, 19(3), 378–416. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009785>
20. George, A. L. (1991). *Forceful persuasion: Coercive diplomacy as an alternative to war*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
21. Mills, L. (2022). The effectiveness of ECOWAS in mitigating coups in West Africa. International Peace Institute. <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Leonie-Mills-Effectiveness-of-ECOWAS.pdf>
22. Morgan, T. C., Bapat, N., & Kobayashi, Y. (2014). Threat and imposition of economic sanctions 1945–2005: Updating the TIES dataset. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 31(5), 541–558. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894213520379>
23. Pape, R. A. (1997). Why economic sanctions do not work. *International Security*, 22(2), 90–136. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539368>
24. Peksen, D. (2009). Better or worse? The effect of economic sanctions on human rights. *Journal of Peace Research*, 46(1), 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343308098404>
25. Portela, C., & Mora-Sanguinetti, J. S. (2023). Sanctions effectiveness, development and regime type: Are aid suspensions and economic sanctions alike? *World Development*, 172, 106370. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106370>
26. Reuters. (2024a, May 25). Burkina Faso extends junta rule by five years. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-extends-junta-rule-by-five-years-2024-05-25/>
27. Reuters. (2024b, July 6). Junta-led Sahel states rule out return to West African economic bloc. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/junta-led-sahel-states-rule-out-return-west-african-economic-bloc-2024-07-06/>
28. Reuters. (2024c, April 1). Mali political parties request elections after junta shuns transition promise. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-political-parties-request-elections-after-junta-shuns-transition-promise-2024-04-01/>
29. Reuters. (2024d, February 24). West African ECOWAS bloc mulls new strategy towards junta states. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/west-african-ecowas-bloc-mulls-new-strategy-towards-junta-states-2024-02-24/>
30. Reuters. (2025a, January 29). Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formally leave ECOWAS regional bloc. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-mali-niger-formally-leave-ecowas-regional-bloc-2025-01-29/>
31. Reuters. (2025b, May 13). Mali's military rulers formally dissolve political parties. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-military-rulers-formally-dissolve-political-parties-2025-05-13/>
32. Schelling, T. C. (1966). *Arms and influence*. Yale University Press.
33. Stoica, D. S. (2022). Decoloniality in danger or being boosted? An exploration of ECOWAS positions and conflict management in the Western African region. *Hungarian Journal of African Studies*, 16(3), 79–93.
34. World Bank. (2024). Niger economic update 2024: Investing in human capital for resilience and prosperity. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/f60ac0cb-fd0f-4a12-9581-422b4025e919>
35. World Food Programme, & World Bank. (2023). Socio-economic impacts of the political crisis, ECOWAS and WAEMU sanctions and disruptions in external financing in Niger. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/socio-economic-impacts-political-crisis-ecowas-and-waemu-sanctions-and-disruptions>