

Better Reform ECOWAS Than Embark on Military Adventures in West Africa

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The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the 15-member West Africa's main regional bloc, is seemingly losing its decades-old credibility in attempts to reinstate Niger's ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum. The overarching combined narratives of the growing crisis, mass demonstrations in support for the military and the uncoordinated plan for military intervention are explicit signs of weaknesses on the side of ECOWAS.

Several narratives further pointed to the fundamental facts that the crisis has the potential to escalate into either a conflict across West Africa, and Niger, situated in the Sahel region, occupies a pivotal position not only in terms of terrorism and violent extremism within western Africa but also within a continent that has emerged as a global focal point for terrorist activities and Islamic extremist violence.

Narratives further described ECOWAS poor knowledge and acceptance of the main objectives of and reasons for the military's appearance in political scene in the Republic of Niger, a West African States controlled by the United States and France. Ultimate failure to comprehend the neocolonial goals of foreign powers has deep created cracks in ECOWAS.

Abdulsalami Abubakar headed the regional bloc and travelled to Niamey for diplomatic talks to resolve the crisis amicably, but was unsuccessful, but only reiterated it could resort to military intervention as a last resort. Subsequently, Niger has now severed ties with Nigeria, Togo, France, its coloniser, and the United States.

Within the context of the changing political situation, the emerging new order or appropriately the taking just a glimpse of the evolutionary processes and trends, many external leaders have called of modern forms of resolving the crisis, but through military

intervention. Besides that, in the academic circles, political scenes and civil society organizations have together strongly condemns ECOWAS' belligerence in the region.

In the spectrum of Africa's population, and of course are still talking the restoring the democracy, about returning civilian head government, about constitution that stipulates the governing principles. These groups of political thoughts have simultaneously condemned the Abdourahmane Tchiani-led coup d'état in Niger that toppled the constitutionally-elected government under the leadership of President Mohamed Bazoum.

Throughout these several years ECOWAS has failed the entire West African region. It is manipulated by external powers and ordered by Washington and what is more executing instructions and directives from imperialists-minded powers who have, so far, imposed their own rules. Instead of waging and further deepening conflicts, the executive leadership of ECOWAS has to focus on its original and core mandate of economic development, regional integration and poverty eradication in West Africa. The region needs sustainable peace, social and economic development and stability.

The West African regional bloc has imposed stringent sanctions, finding a peaceful solution to the deepening crisis, yielded little with no clarity on the next steps. Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, supported by Algeria, though not a member of regional bloc, stand defiantly against any military moves to restore the previous government. France, the United States and other European nations have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into shoring up Niger's army and the coup has been seen as a major setback.

"ECOWAS and the rest of the international community want to restore President Bazoum and the junta is not on this agenda," said Seidik Abba, a Nigerien researcher and Sahel specialist and president of the International Center for Reflection for Studies On the Sahel, a think tank based in Paris, France. "The next step will be military confrontation ... What we don't know is when this confrontation will take place, how it will go, and what the consequences will be," he said.

An in-depth analysis show us that the interim leader Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani and newly appointed Prime Minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine have put forward the proposal to administer Niger for the next three years, a period within which to deal with urgent pressing issues, and possibly do some 'house-cleaning' and adequately prepared for handling over. It was, abruptly and fiercely rejected by the ECOWAS.

In a televised address to the nation, General Abdourahmane Tiani re-indicated absolute openness to dialogue, would consult on a transition back to democracy within three years, echoing lengthy timelines proposed by other coup leaders, such as Burkina Faso and Mali, in the Sahel region.

In connection with above points, experts are discussing, offering their view points. Transitions for Niger's multiple previous coups were shorter, so a three-year timeline is unprecedented said Aneliese Bernard, a former U.S. State Department official who specializes in African affairs and is now director of Strategic Stabilization Advisors, a risk advisory group. "What we're seeing in the region is the emergence of trends just to military rule," she said.

"Democracy is what we stand for and it's what we encourage," Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff, General Christopher Gwabin Musa said at the start of the two-day

meeting in Accra. “The focus of our gathering is not simply to react to events, but to proactively chart a course that results in peace and promotes stability.”

“We are ready to go any time the order is given,” Abdel-Fatau Musah, Commissioner for Political Affairs and Security at the ECOWAS Secretariat, said on August 18 after the military chiefs’ meeting in Accra, capital of the Republic of Ghana in West Africa. Abdel-Fatau Musah also said 11 of its 15 member states have agreed to commit troops to a military deployment, saying they were ‘ready to go’ whenever the order was given.

Russia and the United States have urged a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The regional bloc has already applied trade and financial sanctions while France, Germany and the United States have suspended aid programmes. The regional bloc’s troops have previously intervened in other emergencies since 1990 including in wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone. We have mentioned that Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Nigeria are expected to contribute troops, but little detail has emerged over a potential Niger operation.

Notwithstanding all that, Burkina Faso has joined voices with Mali and claimed that any intervention in Niger would be a declaration of war on Mali and Burkina Faso. In light of Russia’s increasing influence in west Africa, it is worth noting that Burkina Faso itself had a coup in January 2022 and since then has requested France to fully withdraw its troops while hailing Russia as a strategic ally, thus increasing speculations about Russian presence and influence. In the same vein, Algeria, known for its strong loyalty to Russia, announced its opposition to any intervention in Niger.

In another related development, Mali’s military leader Assimi Goita had spoken on the phone to Russian President Vladimir Putin about the situation in Niger. Putin stressed “the importance of a peaceful resolution of the situation for a more stable Sahel,” according to transcript posted to Kremlin’s website.

Foreign Affairs Ministry’s website says

“ECOWAS takes steps to restore constitutional order in Niger through a political and diplomatic dialogue with the new Nigerien authorities. That a military approach to settling the crisis in Niger risks leading to a protracted standoff in the African country and a sharp destabilization of the situation in the Sahara-Sahel region as a whole.”

Putin has called for a return to constitutional order in Niger, while Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin welcomed the coup. Prigozhin looks to strike business there as massive support for Russia has appeared to surge in Niger since July 26 coup, with junta supporters waving Russian flags at several rallies.

The Kremlin has used the Wagner Group since 2014 as a tool to expand Russia’s presence in Africa. A video in July apparently showed Prigozhin in Belarus but he was photographed on the sidelines during the second Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg. While difficult to verify the authenticity of reports, foreign media and Russian social media channels said Prigozhin was recruiting for Africa and also inviting investors from Russia to put money through its cultural affiliate Russian House.

With reference to Russia’s position as indicated above, some experts still pointed to this complexities: while the United States and Europe particularly support the restoration of the democratic government, Russia carries its anti-Western position and anti-imperialist stand

and fiercely encouraging military infiltration into politics in Africa.

With Russia's support for the emerging military power in the region, Burkina Faso and Mali showing the leeway and offer noticeable sign of encouragement for other to follow such steps aim at kicking out France. In the Russia-Africa summit joint declaration, Russia indicated, as one of its strategic objectives, unreserved and unflinching support for African States to deal drastically with growing United States and Western/European political influence and dominance across Africa.

The African Union's Peace and Security Council, so far backed sanctions but it rejects the use of force, maintain the position that there are few grounds under which ECOWAS could claim legal justification. Under the circumstances, the main challenges facing Niger and for the matter the entire West African region, and also presents useful lessons for Africa are in two specific areas: politics and economics.

Consider politics in the sense that democracy is threatened, and economics as Niger and other African States have to protect exploitation of resources. The latest flash-points in the struggle by the imperialist powers. Across the West African region, it is a battle between between the Anglophone and the Francophone. But then, there is also the controversial question concerning the construction of the Trans-Saharan pipeline from Nigeria through the region to Europe. Besides that Niger is a landlocked but well known to be a major uranium producer and has 80% impoverished population.

John P. Ruehl, an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, and a Contributing Editor to Strategic Policy, argues in his article titled "Private Military Companies Continue To Expand In Africa" that in the wake of the July 26 coup in Niger, the world's spotlight has once again turned to the expansion of private military and security companies (PMSCs) across Africa.

As the Sahel region continues to grapple with instability and conflict, the strengthening of PMSCs, both domestic and foreign, will continue to reshape Africa's security in profound and unpredictable ways. Russia has found an unconventional and effective way to assert influence in Africa's security landscape, he wrote in the article.

Nonetheless, this raises questions about sovereignty, a recurring issue in a continent where it has consistently been violated since African countries won their independence. As the Nigerien government grapples with its situation, Wagner could again act as a Kremlin surrogate, safeguarding Russia's interests by filling the security vacuum left by the ousted French military. But Prigozhin's ongoing role in Africa suggests the Kremlin is relying on smoke and mirrors to obscure its true motivations, according to John Ruehl.

Through similar microscopic glasses, M.K. Bhadrakumar, a former Indian diplomat writing in the Indian Punchline media, highlighted the deep-seated existing problems in the region and in Africa: while poor governance, rampant corruption, escalating poverty and insecurity have created conditions for the coups in Sahel region, a deeper factor is the geopolitics of resource access and control. Foreign powers are competing to explore and control the abundant mineral resources of West African nations.

Bhadrakumar wrote that the ascendant tensions in Niger and the wider subregion are no doubt exacerbated by the geopolitical and economic rivalry between the East and the West. The spectre that haunts West Africa is that the proxy war between Russia and the US can

easily creep into Africa, where Russian mercenaries and Western Special Forces are already stationed for new assignments.

Dr. Scott N. Romaniuk, an International Newton Fellow at the University of South Wales' Faculty of Life Sciences and Education and Dr. János Besenyő, Professor at the Óbuda University, Donát Bánki Faculty of Mechanical and Safety Engineering (Hungary), and Head of the Africa Research Institute, both in an opinion article explained the worsening of existing security challenges, and the emergence of new internal and regional threats.

In the framework of what we see as a coup at the crossroads of a potential regional war, a nascent proxy conflict, and the neocolonial goals of foreign powers, at least five possible consequences of the coup and its accompanying events can be postulated.

These are: firstly, there is the possibility of a decline in democratic governance in the region, which is supported by divisions among ECOWAS members and a negative attitude towards the political and economic union of West African states, especially in Niamey, where Nigeriens denounce ECOWAS' involvement.

Secondly, it is plausible that other governments within the central Sahel region may succumb to the influence of military juntas or experience state failure.

Thirdly, the socioeconomic repercussions of sanctions - a playbook from the Western strategy towards Russia in the wake of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine - are likely to have a significantly negative impact on the quality of life for those who live in Niger.

Fourthly, the present conditions may contribute to a schism between Nigeriens' desire for change and those who would prefer to maintain the current military junta, both of which may manifest through military intervention and the involvement of external actors such as Wagner mercenaries and other foreign forces.

Fifthly, Niger, under the governance of a fragile military junta, might potentially become a breeding ground for extremist activities. This may occur either due to involvement by Western powers with neo-colonialist motives or, conversely, in the absence of Western troops if their absence is perceived as an opportunity to establish operational bases within the nation.

ECOWAS sanctions will only bite ordinary impoverished millions. The African Union supports all that sharply divides the continent, moving forth and back without any suitable solutions. Both are watching their traditional external forces. Burkina Faso has also agreed to restore civilian rule next year, while Guinea shortened its transition timeline to 24 months. With a flurry of sanctions since the coup, it only goes piling economic pressure on one of the world's poorest countries.

Niger shares distinctive borders with Burkina Faso and Mali, as well as Chad and Algeria in Sahel region. These States have pledged their support to Niger, as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) continually looks for mechanisms to resolve the crisis. The regional bloc has come under criticisms, it slackens on its primary responsibilities and some have called for staff changes attributing to inefficiency. The bloc's reputation has been at stake, and most probably, needs new dynamic faces at the Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria.

The military has been in power since July 26. Mohamed Bazoum's election in 2021 was a landmark in Niger's history, ushering in its first peaceful transfer of power since

independence from France in 1960. Niger is a landlocked nation located in West Africa and well known to be a major uranium producer but has 80% impoverished population. Niger remains one of the poorest countries in the world, regularly ranking at the bottom of the UN's Human Development Index.

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