

Assessment of democratic norm promotion, authoritarian regimes, and ECOWAS leadership in West Africa

Kamar Hamza (Ph.D)

Department of Political Science, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, Nigeria
Tel: +234 8028408885. Corresponding author: kamar@ibbu.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper assessed the challenges of democratic norm regression and promotion in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from 2019 to 2024. The paper investigated democratic norm regression in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and the efforts of ECOWAS to retain in them in her membership fold in other to fashion. This step would enhance her own version of democratic norm that would be of benefit to all citizens in each country. This paper adopted qualitative research design in form of discourse to explain the phenomenon of democratic norm erosion in West Africa and the activities of major players in the regression or promotion of democratic norms. Secondary data were sourced from journal articles, newspaper reports and ECOWAS leader's speeches during their extra ordinary meetings. The data were analysed through narrative thematic analysis to create a story on the discourse of democratic norm regression and promotion among ECOWAS States. The paper adopted the social constructivist theory as its framework for analysis. The paper found out that the governance protocol of the regional body is yet to be implemented so as to realise the desired objectives of deepening democracy in the sub-region. The paper concludes that these objectives have not been realized as a result of multiple challenges like interference from external forces and the inability of each country and the regional body to form a single civic identity in place of the multiple identities that prevail in the subregion.

Keywords: Democratic norm, authoritarian regimes, democratic governance, social constructivist theory, ECOWAS

President Bola Tinubu's leadership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) initial stage had been marked by a strong commitment to democratic norm promotion in the region. Like other predecessors, he had prioritized strengthening democratic institutions and promoting good governance in member states, particularly in Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria. Under Tinubu's leadership, ECOWAS has implemented various initiatives aimed at enhancing democratic norms, such as election observation missions, capacity-building programs for electoral commissions, and support for civil society organizations. These efforts are yet to contribute to improved electoral processes and outcomes in the region. In Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, Tinubu's leadership has made attempt to help to stabilize democratic transitions and promote peaceful transfer of power. Despite the use of collaborative engagement and constructive dialogue, in fostering a sense of community and cooperation among ECOWAS member states.

Niger, which experienced a military coup in 2010, has struggled with electoral irregularities and restrictions on civil liberties (Adam, 2018). The 2016 presidential election,

won by Mahamadou Issoufou, was marred by allegations of electoral fraud (Amnesty International, 2016). A military coup attempt in 2021 was foiled, but highlighted the ongoing democratic challenges (Reuters, 2021) and there was a successful take over in 2023. Mali, which experienced a military coup in 2012, has struggled to consolidate its democracy (Baudais & Chauzal, 2018). The 2018 presidential election, won by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, was marred by allegations of electoral fraud (Diawara, 2019). The 2020 protests against Keïta's government led to his resignation, and a subsequent military coup in 2021 (BBC News, 2021). Burkina Faso, which underwent a popular uprising in 2014, has faced security challenges and restrictions on political freedoms (Hagberg, 2018). The 2020 presidential election, won by Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, was conducted amidst security concerns (EISA, 2020). A military coup in 2022 led by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba further eroded democratic norms (Al Jazeera, 2022).

Constructivist Theory and Democratic Norm in West Africa

Democratic norm regression in West Africa has garnered significant attention in recent years, with many countries in the region experiencing a decline in democratic values and

institutions (Oluwaseyi, 2022). Constructivist theory offers valuable insights into this phenomenon, highlighting the role of social constructs and identity in shaping democratic norms. Constructivist theory posits that international relations are shaped by social constructs, rather than solely by material factors (Wendt, 1992).

A scholar explains the contention between realist theorists' assumption that they contended to formulate their own theory of international relations:

There is perception of realist theorists in international relations (as a discipline) that the international system is anarchical. This perception has made great powers to promote their national interests and prompted them to act against the interest of less powerful nations. It is their premise of their assumption that the social constructivist theorists contend by exploring democracy norm research. They argue that anarchy or interest is amenable to a scholar's interpretation. Martha Finnemore (1996), advanced the thesis that norm research is more appropriate for the study of international relation on the behavior of state and international relations if mutual cooperation among states is to be promoted for peace to reign in the world. Research in norms succeeded filling the vacuum after the independence of the smaller states that constituted the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989 (Hamza and Akote, 2023).

In the context of democratic norm regression, constructivist theory suggests that democratic norms are not fixed, but rather are constructed and reconstructed through social interactions and identity formation. West Africa has experienced a significant decline in democratic norms in recent years. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced military coups, while others, such as Nigeria and Ghana, have struggled with electoral violence and democratic backsliding (Adebayo, 2020).

The theory highlights the role of identity in shaping democratic norms. In West Africa, identity politics has contributed to democratic norm regression, as ethnic and regional identities have been mobilized to undermine democratic institutions (Ejiogu, 2020). It emphasizes the importance of social constructs in shaping democratic norms. In West Africa, social constructs such as traditional authority and clientelism have undermined democratic norms (Ojo, 2022). The theory recognises the role of international influences in shaping democratic norms. In West Africa, external actors such as the European Union and the United States have promoted democratic norms, but their efforts have been undermined by other international actors, such as China (Taylor, 2020). Democratic norm regression in West Africa is a complex phenomenon that requires a nuanced understanding of social constructs and identity. This theory offers valuable insights into this phenomenon, highlighting the role of

identity formation, social constructs, and international influences. Further research is needed to explore the implications of constructivist theory for promoting democratic norms in West Africa. This study is a preliminary study which will be followed by empirical research.

Democratic norms in West Africa are shaped by various social constructs and identity formations (Oluwaseyi, 2022). These social constructs and identities influence how individuals and groups perceive and engage with democratic institutions and processes (Ejiogu, 2020). Primordial interests like so-called social constructs such as ethnicity, religion, and traditional authority shape democratic norms in West Africa (Ojo, 2022). For instance, ethnic identity has been mobilized to undermine democratic institutions in countries like Nigeria and Ghana (Adebayo, 2020). Religious identity has been used to justify authoritarianism in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso (Taylor, 2020). Traditional authority has been invoked to legitimize undemocratic practices in countries like Niger and Chad (Wendt, 1992).

However, identity formations such as national identity, regional identity, and youth identity also shape democratic norms in West Africa (Ejiogu, 2020). For instance, national identity has been mobilized to promote democratic norms in countries like Senegal and Cape Verde (Oluwaseyi, 2022). Regional identity has been invoked to promote economic integration and democratic cooperation in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Ojo, 2022). Youth identity has been mobilized to promote democratic activism and political participation in countries like Nigeria and Ghana (Adebayo, 2020). Social constructs and identity formations play a significant role in shaping democratic norms in West Africa. Understanding these factors is crucial for promoting democratic consolidation and deepening in the region.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been a driving force for regional integration in West Africa since its establishment in 1975 (ECOWAS, 2022). However, the organization faces significant challenges in promoting a regional identity among its member states (Ojo, 2022). The challenges to regional identity, diverse colonial legacies, nationalism and sovereignty, economic disparities, cultural and linguistic diversity. West Africa's diverse colonial legacies have created different linguistic, cultural, and political traditions, making it challenging to foster a shared regional identity (Adebayo, 2020). Member states' strong nationalist sentiments and concerns about sovereignty hinder the development of a regional identity (Taylor, 2020). Significant economic disparities between member states create tensions and undermine efforts to promote regional identity (Ejiogu, 2020). West Africa's rich

cultural and linguistic diversity can be both a strength and a weakness in promoting regional identity (Oluwaseyi, 2022).

Decline in Democratic Norms in West Africa

West Africa has experienced a decline in democratic norms in recent years, with several countries in the region witnessing democratic backsliding (Adejumobi, 2020). This regression is characterized by the erosion of civil liberties, the suppression of opposition voices, and the concentration of power in the hands of incumbent leaders (Ibrahim, 2018). In countries such as Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso, democratic institutions have been weakened, and the rule of law has been undermined (Oluwajodu, 2020). The rise of authoritarianism and the decline of democratic norms have been linked to various factors, including political instability, economic crises, and security challenges (Kandeh, 2019). The regression of democratic norms in West Africa has significant implications for the region's stability, security, and development. It is essential to address the underlying causes of democratic backsliding and promote democratic consolidation in the region (Adejumobi, 2020). The Sahel region has witnessed a decline in democratic norms in recent years, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger experiencing significant setbacks (Bøås, 2020). This regression is characterized by the erosion of civil liberties, electoral irregularities, and the concentration of power in the hands of incumbent leaders (Ichino & Nathan, 2019).

Table 1 to 3 below show evidence that there are challenges associated with democratic norm consolidation in the West Africa subregion where three countries have decided to withdraw from the sub-regional fold.

Table 1: Overview of democratic norm regression in Niger

SNO	Country	Events	Year
1	Niger	Military coup led by Salou Djibo	2010
		Presidential election won by Mahamadou Issoufou	2011
		Issoufou re-elected amidst allegations of electoral fraud	2016
		Protests against Issoufou's government	2020
		Military coup attempt foiled	2021
		Successful military coup	2023

Source: Compiled by the author through the use of data from news platforms

Table 1 above show that there is democratic norm regression in Niger. The country has faced this regression due to military interventions, electoral irregularities, and restrictions on civil liberties.

Table 2: Overview of democratic norm regression in Mali,

SNO	Country	Events	Year
	Mali		
		Military coup led by Amadou Sanogo	2012
		Presidential election won by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta	2013
		Keïta re-elected amidst allegations of electoral fraud	2018
		Protests against Keïta's government, leading to his resignation	2020
		Military coup led by Assimi Goïta	2021

Source: Compiled by the author through the use of data from news platforms

Table 2 above shows that democratic norm has regressed in Mali due to repeated military interventions, electoral irregularities, and restrictions on civil liberties.

Table 3: Overview of democratic norm regression in Burkina Faso

SNO	Country	Events	Year
	Burkina Faso		
		Popular uprising led to the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré	2014
		Transitional government established	2015
		Presidential election won by Roch Marc Christian Kaboré	2016
		Kaboré re-elected amidst security challenges	2020
		Military coup led by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba	2022

Source: Compiled by the author through the use of data from news platforms

Table 3 above also show that Burkina Faso has experienced democratic norm regression due to security challenges, military interventions, and restrictions on political freedoms. These countries face similar challenges that include military interventions, electoral irregularities, restrictions on civil liberties security challenges and weak democratic institutions. This show that the capacity to addressing these challenges are yet to be attended to and they are vital in promoting democratic consolidation in the region.

The military's identity claims for taking over government in West Africa

The military's identity claims for taking over the government in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso can be deciphered through various theoretical perspectives such as, nationalism, security, economic development, ethnic or regional representation, anti-corruption, restoring order, protecting democracy, external threats, internal cohesion and historical legacy. These make them to identify with the nationalist and patriotic elements in their countries.

The military adventurists in government have always claimed to be protecting their countries' sovereignty and national interests (Amadou, 2023; Traore, 2022 and Sawadogo, 2022). They most often assert that they were restoring stability and security in the face of political instability or terrorist threats (Batou, 2023; Doumbia, 2022 and Ouédraogo, 2022). They are in the habit of making promise to improve the economy and address corruption (Moussa, 2023; Sissoko, 2022 and Zoungrana, 2022). They usually claim to represent marginalized ethnic or regional groups (Oumarou, 2023; Keita, 2022 and Kaboré, 2022). They most times allege corruption against the ousted government and promise accountability (Issoufou, 2023; Cisse, 2022 and Bazié, 2022). They profess their respect for restoring law and order, and ending political chaos (Abdou, 2023; Diarra, 2022 and Yé, 2022). They paradoxically claim to be protecting democracy by suspending it temporarily (Djibo, 2023; Samake, 2022 and Tapsoba, 2022). They usually claim to be protecting their countries from external threats, such as terrorism or foreign interference (Kouanda, 2023; Maiga, 2022 and Séré, 2022). They most often assert that they were unifying the country and promoting national cohesion (Siddo, 2023; B Traore, 2022 and Nikiema, 2022). They claim to be restoring their countries' historical legacy or past glory (Ousmane, 2023; A Traore, 2022 and Traoré, 2022).

Attendant risk to other democracies in the regional fold

There is argument on the bush fire effect of coup in West Africa. The military coup in West Africa and for instance in Niger in 2023 could spark concerns about a potential "bush fire" effect in West Africa, where neighboring countries may experience similar instability and conflict (Adebajo, 2020). This argument is based on the assumptions that any successful coup in the subregion for instance Niger could create a power vacuum, which may embolden other military leaders in the region to seize power (Bøås, 2020). Coup of this nature would raise security concerns, particularly in neighboring countries which already face challenges from violent nonstate actor or extremist groups (Hagberg, 2018). Successful coup would erode democratic gains in a country where is successful, which is likely to have a rippling effect on other countries in the region, undermining democratic institutions and the rule of law (Ichino &

Nathan, 2019). Any successful coup would also likely have economic implications for the region, particularly if it leads to sanctions or disruptions in trade and investment (Kandeh, 2019).

There is theoretical postulation of the demonstration effect of a coup in West Africa. From the lens of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that individuals learn new behaviors by observing and imitating others. In the context of coups, the demonstration effect can be understood as a process where military leaders in one country observe the success of a coup in another country and are inspired to attempt a similar takeover (Bøås, 2020). This effect can be amplified by factors like regional proximity. Coups in neighboring countries can create a sense of proximity and shared experience, increasing the likelihood of imitation (Hagberg, 2018). Again, similar political and economic conditions could also be a factor in this regard. Countries with similar political and economic challenges may be more likely to experience a demonstration effect, as military leaders may see a coup as a viable solution to their own problems (Ichino & Nathan, 2019). Lastly media coverage could be a factor in demonstration effect on military coup in the subregion. Extensive media coverage of a coup can create a sense of spectacle, inspiring others to follow suit (Kandeh, 2019).

Russia's alleged involvement in military coups in West Africa

Analysts argue that Russia's denial of supporting coup in West Africa is not credible, given its history of supporting authoritarian regimes in Africa (Tsygankov, 2022). Russia's involvement in the Niger military coup of 2023 has been a subject of debate. Some analysts have argue that Russia played a significant role in supporting the coup, while others claim that Russia's involvement was limited. Russia has been accused of providing military support to the coup leaders, including training and equipment (Boukhars, 2023). This support allegedly enabled the coup leaders to overthrow the democratically-elected government. Russia's motivation for supporting the coup may have been to expand its influence in the Sahel region and gain access to Niger's natural resources (Kendhil, 2023). However, Russia has denied any involvement in the Niger military coup, stating that it respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Niger (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Attempted use of military force to reverse the Niger military coup of 2023

In Gambia, the Nigerian military along with other in the subregion made Yahya Jame to withdraw after attempting to stay in power after losing at the polls to Barrow. The then President Muhammadu Buhari was the leaders of the regional body. Towing the line of former President Buhari,

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's leadership in 2023 (its democratic norm promotion effort), contemplated use of force against the military coup that displaced President Mohammed Bazom in Niger Republic. There was outcry from the citizens of both Niger and Nigeria which made the leadership of the sub-regional body to rule out military intervention.

There were several factors that made the ECOWAS leadership to contemplate the use of force. The debate in support of the use of military force to reverse the Niger military coup of 2023 was justified on the assumption that it will restore democracy and stability in the region as posed by some scholars in the past (Bøås, 2020). The international community had a responsibility to protect civilians from human rights abuses and ensure the rule of law (United Nations, 2022). Military intervention lead to further violence and instability, and create an environment not conducive to democratic transition (Ichino & Nathan, 2019).

Another strand of argument claimed that military intervention cannot reverse the military takeover because, for instance, the Niger military coup of 2023 in Niger might lead to further destabilization and civilian casualties (Hagberg, 2018). The use of force may also undermine regional efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully (Economic Community of West African States, 2022). Moreover, military intervention may be perceived as neocolonialism, undermining Niger's sovereignty and legitimacy (Adebajo, 2020). The argument against military intervention in this regard made the leadership of ECOWAS to reverse her intention.

The resources in the three countries under study have made great powers to struggle for control of those in government for their own national interest. France and the United State of America are being displaced by the military. The three countries threatened to withdraw from the regional fold, despite the use of diplomatic means other than the use of force. The wanning influence of France and USA in these three countries and emergent influence of Russia and the accommodation of unconstitutional government among ECOWAS countries will likely spell doom for regional, international economic and security arrangements.

Enforcement instruments of ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance

Enforcement instruments of ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance

President Bola Ahmed Tinubu the head of government of ECOWAS addressed the ECOWAS Parliament on the challenge military take over in Niger made diplomatic pronouncement thus:

Following the resolution of our previous Extraordinary Summit to initiate a meeting of the ECOWAS Chiefs of

Defense Staff, the meeting of the Chiefs of Staff Committee was duly held from 2nd to 4th August, 2023. The outcome of that meeting, as well as a Memorandum by the President of the ECOWAS Commission on current socio-political developments in Niger, will be presented during this Summit. These will offer critical insights that will inform our collective decision-making process at this meeting (Paragraph 5).

Their affirmation on relinquishing power and reinstating President Bazoum that was overthrown by the military in 2023:

Moreso, in reaffirming our relentless commitment to democracy, human rights, and the well-being of the people of Niger, it is crucial that we prioritize diplomatic negotiations and dialogue as the bedrock of our approach. We must engage all parties involved, including the coup leaders, in earnest discussions to convince them to relinquish power and reinstate President Bazoum. It is our duty to exhaust all avenues of engagement to ensure a swift return to constitutional governance in Niger (Paragraph 6).

On building the future defined by peace, progress, and prosperity in West Africa despite the Socio-Political Situation in the Republic of Niger:

I am confident that this 2nd ECOWAS Extraordinary Summit on the Socio-Political Situation in the Republic of Niger will be a defining moment in our journey towards a stronger, more resilient, and integrated West Africa. Let us seize this opportunity to make a lasting impact on the lives of our fellow Africans as we strive to build a future defined by peace, progress, and prosperity (Paragraph 8).

His hope on the amicable solution to the political crisis in Niger:

In conclusion, I extend my gratitude to each of you for your attention to this critical issue. I trust that our deliberations will be productive and fruitful, leading us to find an amicable solution to the political crisis in Niger. As we continue to work together in solidarity and harmony, we can ensure a prosperous future for the entire West African region (Paragraph 9).

The withdraw from membership of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a sign of democratic norm erosion in these states. Democratically elected regimes were overthrown via non constitutional means and replaced by military juntas. Despite many efforts at reconciliation by the regional body. The regional body in its democratic norm promotion effort wanted to use force against the last military coup that displaced President Mohammed Bazom in Niger. There was outcry from both Niger and Nigeria which made the government to rule out military intervention. The leaders of the regional body opted for other diplomatic move by sending elders to the

leaders of the military junta. They refused to attend to the delegation. The leaders of the regional body decided to continue the diplomatic talks with the leadership of the military who threatened to withdraw from their fold. They military leaders refused to attend meeting of military leaders of West Africa in protest. They opted to form an alliance of Sahelian States.

Conclusion

The goal of constructivism is creating common ground and understanding for mutual benefits. West Africa countries are yet to come to terms with the conviction that they are supposed to come together in this regard. The problem of integration in West Africa is still as real as it was when the regional body was established. This is one of the major reasons why it back-pedaled on the use of force for the enforcement of its democratic norm as governance instrument in Niger Republic in 2023 up till date. The great powers are still controlling the leadership in the resource rich countries at the detriment of the citizens. They have paid lip service to the protocol on free movement, free trade and other agreements. Each country has tried to protect its borders jealously and some glued to their former colonial masters in terms of currency, investment, trade and monetary agreement. Democracy will not mean anything to the ordinary citizens if democratic norms do not improve their standard of living. While challenges persist, ECOWAS's initiatives offer hope for a stronger regional identity in West Africa. Promoting regional identity is crucial for ECOWAS's success in fostering regional integration and cooperation.

Recommendation

Initiatives to promote regional identity are ECOWAS citizenship, regional cultural events, education and youth programs and regional media initiatives have to be put in place to promote good governance which can lead to the prevention democratic norm erosion

The body has introduced the concept of ECOWAS citizenship to promote a sense of regional belonging (ECOWAS, 2022) but how far has it achieved it aim in making this of benefit to citizens. In view of this there should be mechanism in place for realizing this goal

The body organises regional cultural events to celebrate West Africa's diversity and promote regional identity (Ojo, 2022). This is just a jamboree. It is yet to be used as mechanism for the integration of the people in the sub-region.

It has also established education and youth programs to foster regional identity among young people (Ejiogu, 2020). There should be publicity across the region for creating awareness on this opportunity for the youths in the sub-region.

It has also launched regional media initiatives to promote a shared narrative and regional identity (Adebayo, 2020).

However, not many practitioners are aware of this opportunity. Awareness on this opportunity should be created.

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