

Assessment of ECOWAS Interventions in Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso and the Gambia

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The increase in violent hostilities on the African continent since the 1990s can be attributed to the withdrawal of super power strategic interest in Africa following the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War dramatically changed the global strategic landscape. Although threat of big power and regional conflicts diminished, the security landscape became characterized by political fragmentation. In the Third World particularly West Africa has experienced many conflicts arising from a multiplicity of causes such as bad governance among others. The intensity and carnage that attended these conflicts, coupled with the inactions of the “big powers”, reinforced the need for an “African solution” to what was largely perceived as an “African problem”. Regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) began to intervene in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ivory Coast through its intervention force-ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

Since, the first ECOWAS intervention in Liberia in the 1990s the body has developed an elaborate conflict management framework for dealing with the challenges confronting its area of influence. Though this is a bold attempt by an African institution to address problematic situations in the region, the ECOWAS conflict management framework and its application has been marred by several challenges. For example, ECOWAS interventions have been characterised by a host of controversies including lack of United Nations Security Council authorization to enforce peace, weakness in decision making, accusations of hegemony by Nigeria, and so on. In addition, because of the dynamic nature of conflicts in the region, there is a need for a reassessment of established framework to be able to meet up with new and emerging challenges.

This paper assesses ECOWAS present intervention and involvement in Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso and the Gambia. It begins by looking at the ECOWAS Peace and Security Architecture; thereafter it discusses ECOWAS interventions in Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso and the Gambia. It will then examine pending issues from the interventions. Subsequently it will proffer a way forward.

ECOWAS MECHANISM FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT, RESOLUTION, PEACEKEEPING AND SECURITY

The ECOWAS conflict management framework provides for regional intervention in political crisis in members states. ECOMOG has been adopted as the regional intervention force. Intervention became popular in the 1990s when ECOWAS deployed ECOMOG forces into Liberia to prevent the overthrow of the unpopular government of President Samuel Doe by the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) led by Charles Taylor. ECOMOG intervention can take the form of peacekeeping or peace enforcement. It can monitor ceasefire agreements; and when the factions who signed the ceasefire do not do so in good faith, violations are taken into consideration and it could compel ECOMOG to use force to get the recalcitrant parties to adhere to the provisions of the ceasefire agreement.¹In other words, ECOMOG missions could change from peacekeeping to peace enforcement depending on the conditions on ground and it can again rapidly transform itself from a fighting force to a peacekeeping force. Such was the case in Liberia and Sierra Leone where ECOMOG intervened as a peacekeeping force to protect government properties and civilian populations. The violence shown by the NPFL and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in both countries meant that intervention passed from peacekeeping to peace enforcement operation. ECOWAS intervention in the brutal civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s made significant inroads and accomplished quite a lot in the sphere of conflict interventions

Despite its significant achievements, there are inadequacies in the previously existing Protocols to deal with emerging security challenges in the region especially the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts.² The spillover effects of the conflicts had earlier led to the establishment of a Standing Mediation Committee (SMC) on May 9, 1990 which produced the ECOMOG with a mandate to stabilize situations in both countries. Apart from the legality of ECOMOG intervention in Liberia being challenged, it encountered several challenges in its operations in what became a learning experiment for ECOWAS in sub-regional conflict management. Similar developments in Guinea-Bissau between 1990 and 1999 convinced ECOWAS that developing

a conflict management mechanism that would address the shortcomings of the earlier protocols was important if sub-regional stability and development were to be realized.³

The ECOWAS mechanism on conflict prevention elaborated more clearly the objectives of ECOWAS intervention in conflicts in West Africa. The conditions that could trigger intervention in any member state include: cases of external aggression, conflict between two or more member states, internal conflict that may lead to serious humanitarian disaster or serious violation of human rights and the rule of law: and the removal or attempts to remove a democratically elected government (Protocol Relating to the Mechanism, Article 25).

There are three key organs in the ECOWAS Mechanism: the Mediation and Security Council, Defence and Security Commission and the Council of Elders. The mediation and Security Council decides all matters relating to peace and security on behalf of the Authority of Heads of State and Government. It is composed of nine member states elected for a two year period on a rotational basis with no permanent seat.⁴ The Council is fashioned after the UN Security Council but it functions at a regional level and no member has a veto power. Decisions in the council are taken based on a two third majority of votes. The Council implements the provisions of the Mechanism through the Defence and Security Commission, the Council of Elders and "ECOMOG", now ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF). In addition, Article 22 provides for 8 major roles of ESF as below:

- Observation and Monitoring;
- Peace-keeping and restoration of peace
- Humanitarian intervention in support of humanitarian disaster;
- Enforcement of sanctions, including embargo;
- Preventive deployment;
- Peace-building, disarmament and demobilization;
- Policing activities, including the control of fraud and organized crime;
- Any other operations as may be mandated by the Mediation and Security Council.

In June 2004, ECOMOG was renamed ECOWAS Standby Force (ESF).⁵ To ensure adequate preparedness for action, it was integrated into the Mechanism as a useful tool for maintaining peace in the region. Troops of the ESF consist of contingents from national armed forces of member countries. The ESF is designed to have the capability for rapid deployment within 14 days to halt sub-regional crisis. The tasks of the ECOWAS Standby Force include military and observation mission where ECOMOG will supervise and monitor ceasefires, disarmament, demobilization, elections, respect for human rights and humanitarian activities among other tasks.⁶

With a view to strengthening the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution,

Peacekeeping and Security, which has become the ECOWAS' foundational regional security framework, ECOWAS leaders in 2001 signed *the Protocol A/sp/1/12/01/ on Democracy and Good Governance supplementary to the protocol establishing the mechanism for conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security*. The Supplementary Protocol is considered as a tool which takes into account the deep-seated political causes of conflict, instability and insecurity whereas the Mechanism deals more specifically with addressing conflicts and other types of causes.⁷

The ECOWAS conflict mechanism also makes provision for an Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), as part of its conflict prevention strategy. The Observation and Monitoring Centre (OMC) is the hub of ECOWAS early warning system. ECOWAS has four observations and monitoring zones within the sub-region. Zone 1 comprises: Cape Verde, Gambia, Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. Zone 2: Burkina Faso, Cote d' Ivoire, Mali and Nigeria. 3: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ghana, and Zone 4: Benin, Togo and Nigeria. These four zones have their capitals in Banjul (Gambia), Monrovia (Liberia) Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and Cotonou (Benin).⁸ The function of ECOWARN is to collect data on potential causes of disputes or conflict triggers and report to the central ECOWAS Observatory at the headquarters in Abuja, Nigeria.

No doubt, in the past, and also in recent times, as the preceding paragraphs have shown, conflicts within the West Africa sub-region have resulted into intractable violent upheavals, assuming frightening proportions. Lives have been lost and resources destroyed on a large scale. Thousands of people have been displaced and became refugees outside their countries. These have exerted strains on the ECOWAS conflict mechanisms.

These ECOWAS experiences, as it were, brought to light the fact that, even while the West African regions is the most advanced in designing and nurturing of structures and institutions to fight insecurity in Africa, ironically, it is still very vulnerable to diverse security threats. The illegal proliferation of small arms and light weapons, bad governance, mis-management of extractive industries, trans-border criminal networks capitalising on free movement of people in the region and activities of external interests, among other factors, continues to make the region unstable. ECOWAS is not unaware of these security problems and has over the years tried to emplace in those conflict mechanisms some structures for good governance and conflict prevention, so as to not only prevent conflicts but also safeguard the security of member states from all forms of hostilities. However, these initiatives have proved insufficient in putting an end to security threats in the region. All these underscore the complexities of multilateral arrangements at ensuring sub-regional security. It is therefore imperative to interrogate, at least, in recent times, some of these attempts at conflict intervention by ECOWAS in the region.

ECOWAS CONFLICT PREVENTION FRAMEWORK (ECPF)

Problems relating to implementation of the preventive aspect of the 1999 Mechanism especially late response to crisis informed the establishment of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008.⁹ The goal of the ECPF is to ensure the creative transformation of conflict, diffusion of tensions and prevent the outbreak, escalation, spread or recurrence of violence. In other word, it involves institutionalizing measures to ensure that conflicts do not arise in the first place or if they do, that they do not reoccur.¹⁰ The emphasis according to the framework is not to prevent conflict per se (since conflict is a natural phenomenon), but to ensure that it does not escalate into violence. This involves identifying conflict triggers during sudden events or accelerators that could spark a crisis which could in turn lead to violent conflict.

It can be argued that the ECPF is a proactive alternative to ECOMOG. Rather than wait for conflict to occur, escalate and become violent before intervention, the position should be to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of violent conflicts.¹¹ This means that, military intervention should only constitute a measure of last resort. This would be done by initiating measures such as sustainable development and strengthening a culture of democracy and developmental reforms aimed at checking the deterioration of social and economic conditions and building the peace in post-conflict countries over a period of time to prevent a relapse into violent conflict.

The ECPF has components such as Early Warning, Preventive Diplomacy, Democracy and Political Governance, Human Rights and the Rule of Law, Media, Natural Resources and Governance, Women, Peace and Security, Peace Education etc. Critical to the ECPF is the early warning component which is designed to help ECOWAS member states predict the emerging conflicts and facilitate interventions to avert, diffuse or creatively transform such potential or latent conflict situations.¹² To achieve the early warning objectives, the ECOWAS Early Warning and Response Network (ECOWARN), was reinvigorated.

ECOWAS INTERVENTION AND INVOLVEMENT IN GUINEA-BISSAU, BURKINA FASO, AND THE GAMBIA

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau has witnessed succession of political and security challenges since the 1998-1999 conflict that led President Nino Vieira to accuse his Chief of Army Staff Ansumane Mane of supplying arms to Casamance separatists.¹³ ECOWAS intervened but the mission ended in failure which led to a quick withdrawal from the country. In 2004 following a mutiny by the military, the organization had to intervene to defuse the political tension before it escalated into a violent conflict.¹⁴ Between 2005-2009 ECOWAS played an important role in the mediation process, which was

crucial in containing the risks of a widespread violence.¹⁵ Furthermore, in 2010 another coup took place and ECOWAS tried to re-launch the mediation process, in partnership with the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). However, misunderstanding and rivalries between the partners who were supposed to work to find solutions on issues such as reforms and instability in government hampered the organization's efforts towards contributing to reforms in the security sector.¹⁶

Following another military coup in 2012, ECOWAS was quick to deploy a military mission, the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea Bissau (ECOMIB) and restored constitutional order. In this regard, the organization deployed a team of military experts to assist the authorities in the security sector reform process.¹² However, challenges still remain in Guinea Bissau and ECOWAS has not yet succeeded in bringing about the key reforms necessary to bring about stability in the country.

Burkina-Faso

Following the political and institutional crisis in Burkina Faso from 2014-2015 that led to the resignation of President Blaise Compaore in October 2014, ECOWAS intervention during the crisis, led a joint mission with the African Union and United Nations to Ouagadougou. The former President of Ghana who was also the then Chairman of ECOWAS led a delegation of Senegalese President MackySall and the former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, to Burkina Faso and they urged all stakeholders to assign by consensus a suitable eminent civilian to lead the transition, form a transitional government for a period of 1 year, organize presidential and legislative elections by November 2015.¹⁷

In addition, a contact group was created chaired by the Senegalese president who also appointed a special envoy for Burkina Faso. However, following the 16 September 2015 Coup by the Presidential Guard (RSP) ECOWAS mediation efforts came under huge criticism and was largely considered to be a failure. The organization was accused of being biased due to longer term relationship with President Blaise Compaore, eventually the Burkinabe Army defeated the RSP and re-established the transitional institution.¹⁸

Gambia

After Gambia's presidential election in December 2016 President Yahaya Jammeh changed his mind after initially accepting a surprise defeat and subsequently annulled the election results and deployed troops to seize the headquarters of the electoral commission. Fearing widespread violence, an estimated 45,000 Gambians fled across the border to Senegal. ECOWAS leaders acted in a timely and decisive manner understanding that if left to fester, the Gambian crisis would create an ongoing humanitarian, economic, and security strain for the entire region.¹⁹

On January 18, regional leaders announced their intent to deploy forces to Gambia, under the banner of the Economic Community of West African States Military Intervention in Gambia (ECOMIG), to enforce the election results. The UN Security Council promptly authorized Senegal's request on behalf of ECOWAS to intervene.²⁰ The decision invoked ECOWAS's supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance, which allows zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means. It also invoked Article 25 of the ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, which authorizes military intervention in the event that "democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or where there is massive violation of human rights in a member state."²¹

ECOMIG was mandated to facilitate the exit of Yahya Jammeh, restore the popular will of the Gambian people as expressed in the December 9 elections and create conditions for normalizing the political and humanitarian situation in Gambia.²² The force fell under the ECOWAS command structure, with a Senegalese commander at the helm, and consisted of 7,000 troops from Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, and Togo along with air and naval assets. On the evening of January 22, 2017, Yahya Jammeh boarded a plane and after 22 years in power, departed Banjul for the final time as Gambia's leader. His departure was not voluntary, but rather the result of active diplomatic and ultimately military pressure from the ECOWAS.

PENDING ISSUES FROM ECOWAS INTERVENTION IN GUINEA-BISSAU, BURKINA FASO AND THE GAMBIA

Guinea Bissau

In the case, after adopting frameworks provided for in the Protocol on the Conflict Prevention Mechanism (December 1999) and the supplementary protocol (December 2000), ECOWAS became active again in Guinea Bissau starting from 2004 and particularly after the 6 October 2004 mutiny. ECOWAS provided a grant of US\$ 500,000 to cover part of arrears in salary payment to soldiers and decided to establish a permanent presence in Guinea Bissau by nominating a Special Representative of the Executive Secretary to collaborate with national authorities and the international community in order to promote peace.²³ Together with the UN, AU and the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries. ECOWAS helped in easing tensions around the presidential elections held in June and July 2005. ECOWAS and AU got directly involved in preventive diplomacy activities by sending a joint high level mission to the country.

The main criticism about ECOWAS made by the actors and observers in Guinea Bissau borders on the limited capacity of the organization to translate its political will of helping to ensure sustainable stability of the country into concrete action or, at least push the bilateral and multilateral partners with much greater financial and technical resources. It must be said however, that the adoption by the United

Nations Security Council on February 18, 2015, resolution S / RES / 2203 (2015) acknowledging the important role played by ECOMIB in the stabilization of Guinea-Bissau and encouraging the international community to provide support, ECOMIB remained exclusively funded by ECOWAS. The Commission and the member states continued to work towards successful conclusion of the mission in Guinea-Bissau, despite the very difficult situation. The troop contributing countries of ECOMIB were Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire, Togo, Senegal, and Burkina Faso.

Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso ECOWAS intervention effort was considered to be a failure largely due to lack of experience in the mediation team led by President of Senegal Macky Sall being their first mediation mission under difficult circumstances. The organization tried to move quickly and to put forward a comprehensive solution to a deep-rooted crisis that could not be resolved within a short period of time. The mediators proposed an agreement without having sufficiently consulted the parties in the crisis. Another issue was that the Burkinabe actors distrusted ECOWAS because they felt that President Compaore had strong ties within the organization and head of states in the region. These played an important role in the inability of ECOWAS to act more firmly against the coup plotter.

The Gambia

While the ECOWAS experience in Gambia can be described as one of the greatest successes of entrenching democracy by ECOWAS in West Africa. We must not lose sight of the sometimes political shenanigans and intricacies, particularly by the political class of the various member states in the region. These shenanigans and intricacies have constantly been a stumbling block for ECOWAS to fully implement its Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy in the region.

For instance, the Gambia had been a member of ECOWAS ever since the organization was created in 1975. Beginning in the 1990s, ECOWAS assumed a more political role following the wave of political reforms and the growing number of protracted domestic violent conflicts in the region. The revised ECOWAS treaty (1993) and especially the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention (1999) and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2000) formally enshrined the commitment of the organization to promote democracy and good governance and to adopt what was later to be called the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Electoral observation had been part of the ECOWAS mandate since the revised 1993 treaty. But responsibilities were further clarified with the 2001 protocol. The ECOWAS Commission created the Electoral Assistance Unit in 2005. And this is roughly the moment when ECOWAS began to systematically observe all national elections in member countries. Electoral observation requires an invitation from national authorities, and in a quite unusual step, the then President of Gambia,

Yahaya Jammeh, refused to allow the ECOWAS Observation Team to Monitor the December 2016 presidential elections.

The determined intervention on the part of ECOWAS should thus be praised but also assessed realistically. A failure to enforce the departure of Jammeh would have delegitimized the whole democratisation agenda. While restoring Barrow as elected president might not have made the Gambia a functioning democracy, it nevertheless still created the preconditions for a restoration of democracy.²⁴ For ECOWAS, as for all other regional organizations. Actively promoting the strengthening of democratic institutions and the rule of law in member states is a much more difficult task than sanctioning blatant anti-democratic behavior, as it requires much more capacity and a stronger interaction between the ECOWAS Commission and member states' governments. Moving forward this should probe the minds of the political class in the various ECOWAS member states.

Way Forward

From the experiences of ECOWAS, and its subsequent experiences in Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso and Gambia, ECOWAS has realized that to achieve the objective of sub-regional conflict prevention and in the long run engendering peace and security. Its focus would have to be geared towards a transformation of governance structures in its member states with a longer term goal to entrench democratic principles and practices, tackle the economic and social consequences of violent conflict, restore and in some cases engender the necessary environment for development. This has been characterized by the development of certain key normative frameworks, namely; the Declaration on ECOWAS Political Principles 1991; the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace Keeping and Security (known as the Mechanism) 1999; the full adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001- which underlines the sub-regions departure from authoritarian and dictatorships of the Cold War years.

ECOWAS should device a comprehensive framework on ECPF, for instance in Gambia the general view that President Barrow has been left with a political burden with no assistance coming from ECOWAS. This is largely due to the absence of civilian actors in the mission, which deprived the mission important elements such a political leadership to promote dialogue and reconciliation towards the establishment of legitimate and effective institutions of governance, civilian mission administration and humanitarian and peace-building interventions.²⁵

Specifically, also, ECOWAS would have to strengthen key areas in its institutional frameworks for conflict management. This must include demanding total commitment from all its member countries, issues of funding and logistics must also be addressed. In addition the appointment of ECOWAS mediators and facilitators should be guided by the criteria of integrity and suitability to the specific conflict situation. And the Commission should be responsible

for facilitating and backstopping the work of mediators and facilitators. Above all, ECOWAS can no longer act in isolation in conflict management. The organization should work towards effective partnership with the AU and UN, the two bodies with more effective organizational systems that can provide the necessary financial, logistical and institutional support to ECOWAS.

NOTES

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