



QUICK

WHAT FUTURE FOR ECOWAS AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF BURKINA FASO, MALI, AND NIGER?

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INTRODUCTION

On January 28, 2024, three Sahelian states, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This withdrawal was formally enacted on January 29, 2025, marking the most severe crisis the regional organization has ever faced.

Founded in 1975, ECOWAS initially sought to coordinate the economic and monetary policies of its member states. The organisation gradually expanded its mandate to become a key regional political actor. The withdrawal of the three countries comes amid ongoing insecurity in the Sahel and significant political upheavals.

The Sahel region faces numerous challenges: a severe humanitarian crisis with millions displaced, marked economic underdevelopment, placing it among the poorest global regions with fragile political institutions weakened by corruption, the expansion of terrorist and separatist groups, and unstable governance.

These three countries have each experienced successive coups: Mali on May 24, 2021, Burkina Faso on September 30, 2022, and Niger on July 26, 2023. Military regimes assumed power and collectively chose to leave ECOWAS in favor of an alternative alliance: the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). They justified this departure by citing ECOWAS's lack of solidarity and the harsh sanctions imposed against them.

This withdrawal has profound social, political, and economic consequences. It jeopardizes decades-long regional integration ambitions and weakening political cooperation mechanisms. The fragmentation heightens regional instability and hinders essential collaboration between Sahelian and coastal countries.

Moreover, exit procedures for the three states remain unclear. While Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger present a united front within the AES, ECOWAS has yet to clarify its strategy. Some ECOWAS members favor reopening dialogue or bilateral talks. The future of relations between AES and ECOWAS remains uncertain due to the conflictive nature of the withdrawal and ongoing political instability, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso.

What is certain is that ECOWAS must reinvent itself. The organization urgently needs to strengthen its institutions and foster more inclusive collaboration among members to deliver cohesive, sustainable collective responses to the region's multiple crises.

KEY PARTICIPANTS

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Note: QUICKs are short documents produced by WATHI's virtual round tables. They present the main findings and courses of action and are intended to fuel public debate, collective action, and decisions by political authorities.

KEY FINDINGS

- The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has plunged ECOWAS into an unprecedented crisis. It is the first simultaneous exit of several member states. The only prior exit was Mauritania in 2000 for geopolitical reasons intending closer ties with the Maghreb. However, it did not sever relations with ECOWAS and Mauritania now seeks to rejoin. Conversely, the withdrawal of the Alliance of Sahel States countries is more confrontational. Sahelian leaders criticize ECOWAS for failing to show solidarity amid internal crises and for imposing sanctions perceived as unjust and Western-influenced. Between the lines, the withdrawal also reflects a desire to shed external constraints during political transitions.
- An alternative could have been enhanced differentiated integration within ECOWAS, akin to the European Union's multi-speed alliances (eurozone, Schengen Area, etc.). It would have avoided the creation of new institutional entities while preserving regional cohesion. However, civil society in the concerned countries showed little reaction, often drawn by the military regimes' populist and sovereignty-centered narratives.
- While ECOWAS may have erred in managing transitions in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, it should not bear full responsibility for their departures. Such exits remain rare, especially from founding members. The effectiveness of a regional organization depends on members' willingness to cede some sovereignty. Without this, ECOWAS remains theoretical and unable to take concrete action.
- A major citizen complaint concerns the failure to implement free movement principles. In reality, this shortcoming is less the fault of ECOWAS than of the member states themselves, which are not implementing the commitments they have made. Similarly, ECOWAS cannot prevent constitutional reforms unless explicitly mandated. The resistance of heads of state to any strengthening of community power is also rooted in a chronic fear of coups, fuelling their distrust of a supranational framework.
- The withdrawals raise questions about legitimacy and legality, given that unelected military governments made the decisions. ECOWAS has not formally rejected the withdrawals over democratic legitimacy, but debate arises over imposing stricter exit conditions, especially amid non-democratic transitions. Paradoxically, these heads of state may enjoy a form of popular legitimacy, fuelled by a national sentiment of "taking back control" of their countries' destinies.
- Future relations between ECOWAS and AES remain unclear. The Sahelian trio coordinates negotiation positions, but ECOWAS members are divided. Some, like Togo, show closeness to AES, while others, like Ghana, support dialogue without endorsing AES. The real issue at stake in this withdrawal is not so much economic, as the three countries are not the main economies of ECOWAS, but rather institutional, political, and geographical. Indeed, despite the low direct economic impact (thanks in particular to the presence of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and the dynamism of informal trade), it is the local populations who pay the highest price: branch closures, job losses, diplomatic isolation.
- Political uncertainty in AES countries complicates rebuilding lasting ties with ECOWAS. Mali and Burkina Faso are in transition with uncertain outcomes. Niger lacks an established transition plan, exacerbating regional fragility amid armed conflicts and political tensions.
- The current crisis underscores the urgent need for deep ECOWAS reform without abandoning foundational principles. Reinforcing institutions, reaffirming democracy and shared governance, and adapting to current security realities are imperative. Peace is the basis of regional cooperation. Sahel stability is inseparable from coastal country stability. Alternative cooperation mechanisms, like the Accra Initiative launched in 2017, could provide complementary security response frameworks.
- In the short term, the effects of the Mali's, Burkina Faso's and Niger's withdrawal will gradually manifest. The main risk is ECOWAS's reduction to a mere economic zone, sidelining political and democratic ambitions. It would be dangerous for leaders to exploit sovereigntist rhetoric to circumvent community commitments, under the guise of rejecting external constraints. Sovereignty is not proclaimed; it is built through cooperation.

- Finally, building a robust regional organization depends on pooling resources and reducing dependence on external powers. Against the backdrop of growing Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence, a fragmented, weakened ECOWAS would exacerbate the region's vulnerability and threaten West African development and stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promote security cooperation frameworks outside ECOWAS. The official rejection of ECOWAS by Sahel states risks strictly national approaches at the expense of regional cooperation. However, stability in these states directly impacts coastal neighbours. Strengthening alternative initiatives like the Accra Initiative, engaging AES and ECOWAS states, is essential to maintain security cooperation continuity.
- Position ECOWAS as a tool for collective independence versus external powers. Common stances toward external partners would strengthen regional sovereignty. ECOWAS can thus become a space of collective negotiation and reduce strategic dependence on China, Russia, Turkey, or other powers.
- Explore the path of variable geometry regional integration. As in other regions of the world, differentiated integration models would make it possible to better respond to the specific needs of member states while avoiding exclusion. Such an approach would make it possible to reconcile political flexibility and regional cohesion.
- Redefine democratic evaluation criteria beyond elections. Respect for democratic principles must also include citizen participation, open public debate, freedom of expression, and consolidation of the rule of law. A more comprehensive approach to democracy would strengthen the legitimacy of regional institutions.
- Enhance ECOWAS's communication visibility. The lack of clear communication about its initiatives weakens the organization in the face of populist and sovereigntist rhetoric. A proactive, inclusive, and educational strategy could inform citizens and thus counter populist and sovereignty-driven narratives.
- Support institutional strengthening of member states. By focusing on education, research, and internal capacity building, member countries will be less vulnerable to outside influences and better able to carry out an autonomous regional project.

QUOTES OF PARTICIPANTS

"Sanctions constitute one of ECOWAS's gravest mistakes; not the sanctions themselves but their extensive economic and financial scope, legally questionable." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

"Some voices now argue ECOWAS should tighten exit conditions and prevent military coup leaders or undemocratic rulers from unilaterally deciding to leave." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

"The main reason for the withdrawal from the point of view of military leaders is the desire to free themselves from any external constraints related to the management of transition periods." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

"The three Sahelian states represent nearly 20% of ECOWAS's population but less than 10% of its GDP." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

"ECOWAS's main weakness is poor member state implementation of decisions." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

"The problem lies not only in these states' withdrawal but the conditions of their departure, as well as the animosity between the region's leaders." Gilles Yabi, Founder and Executive Director, WATHI

“Everything claimed by the AES already existed institutionally and legally in the revised ECOWAS treaty.”
— Abdoul Kane, Regional Integration Expert, former ECOWAS official

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VIDEO OF THE CONVERSATION



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