



**WEST AFRICA NETWORK
FOR PEACEBUILDING**
BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FOR PEACE

PRESS STATEMENT

EXIT OF THE THREE CENTRAL SAHEL STATES FROM ECOWAS AND POLITICAL STALEMATE IN SENEGAL: A CALL ON ECOWAS TO STRENGTHEN ENGAGEMENT WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS TO MITIGATE POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR STABILITY OF THE REGION

Background

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), on behalf of its 750 member organisations across the 15 Member States of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), expresses concern over recent occurrences in the political landscape of the region which portrays a visible signpost of democratic governance aberrations that threaten the modest democratic gains achieved over the years. A notable factor within the recent dynamics is the communiqué issued by the military leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger on 28th January 2024 announcing their withdrawal of membership from ECOWAS. Prior to this, the three States had formed a bloc known as the Alliance of Sahel States as a strategy to tackle the rising insurgencies and armed groups attacks in their respective countries. The Alliance has also exited from various regional multilateral security cooperations including G5 Sahel and there have been concerns around their active participation in other arrangements such as the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) and Accra Initiative (AI). This has implications for counterterrorism cooperation and responses to peace and security challenges in the region. In addition, Mali has officially terminated diplomatic and defence cooperation with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) as of 31st December 2023. These actions undermine collaborative efforts by ECOWAS, African Union (AU), United Nations (UN) and other key international partners to restore democracy, good governance and security stability in the Sahel and the West Africa region.

As a key Regional Economic Community, the long-standing strategic role of ECOWAS in responding to diverse threats to democracy, peace and security in Member States is undoubtable especially when weighed against its past achievements in restoring peace and democracy in the Mano River Union, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso and The Gambia. It is equally noteworthy that the current complex multidimensional transnational crimes and violent extremism, and political instabilities that impact over 70 per cent of Member States require a multilateral or cooperative approach and therefore further justifies the relevance of ECOWAS at this time. In this wise, the current political impasse with Alliance of Sahel States countries has not only fractured relations between ECOWAS and the three States, but has also undermined multilateral and bilateral security cooperation to effectively respond to the threats and its contagion effects on regional peace and security.

Equally concerning is the current political development in Senegal. The decision by President Macky Sall to postpone the general election scheduled to take place on 25 February 2024, on grounds of disputes over the candidate list is a threat to the political stability of a country that has been prided as a beacon of democratic stability in the region. Irrespective of the assurances by the President and the call for national dialogue, the decision has further provoked tensions in a region already struggling with a plethora of political uncertainties and further threats of military coups as exemplified by the recently recorded failed coups in Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and The Gambia.

The evolving situation in Senegal is marked by violent demonstrations, arrests of protesters and political opponents as well as accusations of exclusion of key opposition political parties and their candidates from the electoral process. This has cast a shadow of doubt on the confidence and credibility of the public in the electoral process. It has also fractured the civic space, social cohesion and state-citizens relations. Thus, rising tensions and violence coupled with the indefinite postponement of the scheduled elections could further jeopardise the possibility of mitigative responses that forestall political stability in Senegal.

The reputation of ECOWAS as a relevant regional bloc is also hinged on how it effectively deals with the current impasses in the region. Nonetheless, the regional bloc's responses to glaring attempts by leaders to amend constitutions to elongate their tenure in office, the string of coups in the region and the withdrawal of membership of the three central Sahel States, have been criticised for not doing enough to deter unconstitutionality, decline in electoral integrity as well as weak domestication and implementation of its Protocols and decisions in Member States. This is evident in the none condemnation of the unprecedented election postponement in Senegal and the failure of the Extra-Ordinary Ministerial Session of the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council to deliberate on it to agree on a resolution for action in its meeting held in Abuja, Nigeria on 8th February 2024. These recurrent political contestations in the region have the potential to taint ECOWAS' credibility and wane public confidence and trust in terms of its capacity to uphold democratic norms and consolidate the gains it has already made, and its ability to make further progress in democratic governance, integration and security in the region.

WANEP's Concerns

The prevailing political and security crises in the region are exacerbated by the continued political impasse and strained diplomatic relations between ECOWAS and its Member States in the Sahel, as well as the current tensions in Senegal. This poses significant challenges not only to democratic stability in the affected countries, but further tarnishes the credibility of ECOWAS in view of its non-commitant response to Member State contravention of its Protocols. For these reasons, WANEP specifically expresses the following concerns:

1. The diplomatic dilemma relating to ECOWAS response to the Unconstitutional Change of Government (UCG) countries under sanctions which has attracted criticisms as the reasons for the withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger as members of the regional community. This is further aggravated by ECOWAS posture to the emerging political crisis in Senegal and an indictment on its ability to abide by its protocol. It erodes the ethos of credibility as a regional interlocutor as well as the reputation it has built which has been widely respected for over three decades.

2. The threat to the attainment of the ECOWAS Agenda 2050 aimed at promoting a “people-centred” community that ensures regional economic integration and development, good governance and security.
3. The potential for more unconstitutional change of governments in other Member States by the military emboldened by the weak regional responses to actions of the Sahel countries and ongoing ‘constitutional coups’ in other Member States.
4. The threat to democracy and inclusive governance through the weakening of democratic principles and practices in Member States. This will exacerbate conflicts across Member States and brand the region as a zone of instability.
5. The risks to multilateralism in an era that requires a collective political response to mutual threats of transnational crimes and conflicts in West Africa. This has the potential to undermine stability and the well-being of citizens.

WANEP therefore urgently calls for the following:

- ECOWAS Heads of State and Authority to reconsider its commitment to the multistakeholder review and recommendations that strengthen the 2001 Protocol on Good Governance and Democracy as a panacea to stem the tide of democratic retrogression and multiple conflicts in the region;
- The need for ECOWAS to intensify multiple channels of diplomatic engagements with the central Sahel states to resolve strained relations with the UCG countries. These engagements will require multilateral negotiations that involves the African Union, key political influencers through the Panel of the Wise as well as back door diplomatic shuttling with Sahel states;
- The need for ECOWAS to work with partner CSOs and international stakeholders to initiate sustained, constructive and inclusive multistakeholder dialogues with political actors in Senegal that minimise distrust in the democratic process while mobilising confidence and commitment to the conduct of elections and democracy in the country;
- Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to intensify constructive advocacy campaigns that further- subnational stakeholder engagement with local political actors and community- based organisations to push for collective action for election security and support for strong democratic institutions in the region.

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For Further inquiries on this statement, please contact wanep@wanep.org