

Reforming ECOWAS



A Case for Institutional Resilience in a Changing Era

Policy Brief by Djiby Sow (ISS) and Melissa Li (GPPi)

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Summary

Confronted with political fragmentation, epitomized by the 2025 withdrawal of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) stands at a crossroads: preserve the status quo, confine itself to economic integration (its original mandate), or pursue deeper political integration. This brief argues for the latter, urging ECOWAS to seize today's window of opportunity for ambitious reforms. In light of the structural weaknesses of ECOWAS member states at a time of global geopolitical upheaval, only a more integrated ECOWAS can effectively restore legitimacy, reinforce resilience and serve as an indispensable facilitator of stability.

Key Findings

- ECOWAS faces a profound crisis in the aftermath of the simultaneous exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in January 2025. The region is now divided into two distinct diplomatic and military organizations (AES and ECOWAS), undermining the founding vision of a united West Africa, built on a shared integration project.
- The AES exit highlighted underlying flaws in ECOWAS's approach to unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs). Inconsistencies in wielding its zero-tolerance principle regarding UCGs opened the organization up for allegations of double standards and undemocratic behavior. Reinforced by youth disillusionment and shifting geopolitics that undercut the leverage of its diplomatic and economic sanctions, this widespread perception has eroded ECOWAS's political and normative authority since 2020.
- The multidimensional crisis confronting ECOWAS fundamentally reflects a structural tension between its supranational ambitions and member states' sovereignty claims. The overwhelming dominance of the ECOWAS Authority in ECOWAS decision-making processes limits the autonomy and enforcement capacity of other Community institutions and specialized agencies, sometimes hampering the coherence of regional policy.
- ECOWAS stands at a juncture. To restore its legitimacy and secure lasting stability, it must commit to deeper political integration; holding stiffly onto the status quo, will hasten its decline, while reverting to a purely economic role will sever its link with West African citizens, who value ECOWAS's advocacy for democratic governance.

Recommendations

To ECOWAS member states:

- Reform is imperative, especially amid profound demographic changes. Fragile post-colonial states – with a young and growing population – cannot meet the vast social demands and systemic turbulence they will increasingly face, compounded by global shocks from crises like COVID-19, Ukraine and Iran. A more politically integrated ECOWAS will contribute to stability.

- The current context offers a strategic window of opportunity for ambitious and gradual reform. In its initial phase of reform, ECOWAS must deliver quick political wins to restore its legitimacy and moral authority by fast-tracking its ECOSOC to reconnect with civil society and adopting the revised 2001 Supplementary Protocol to dispel perceptions of double standards.
- ECOWAS must also overhaul its sanctions regime to ensure civilian protection, curb political interference and restore credibility by creating a dedicated committee, setting clear and transparent criteria and drafting explicit exemptions for essential goods. To strengthen transparency and accountability, the Authority should replace consensus-based decision-making with formal voting on matters of democracy and governance, and ensure that reservations are made public.
- The second phase of reforms must begin to rebalance the internal power dynamics by making ECOWAS Court rulings on democracy and governance automatically binding and by strengthening the Commission's institutional autonomy by requiring parliamentary approval for the appointment of the Commission's leadership.
- The third phase must consolidate ECOWAS's shift to a supranational model by deepening parliamentary reform (direct elections, budgetary autonomy, stronger oversight, and expanded competencies to defense, peace and security) and by elevating the Court of Justice to ensure the primacy of Community law over national law.
- Since unanimous agreement on reforms is unlikely, ECOWAS should rely on a core group of willing "champions" to drive reforms – Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and potentially Côte d'Ivoire.

To Germany and the EU:

- ECOWAS reforms demand resources beyond member states' means, making European support essential. The strategic incentive is clear: investing in ECOWAS strengthens democracy, curbs migration, crime and insecurity, protects economic interests and preserves geopolitical influence against rising Russian and Chinese models.

Introduction

In 2025, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) marked its fiftieth anniversary. Despite its longstanding reputation as the most effective Regional Economic Community on the African continent, the organization now faces a profound crisis following the unprecedented and simultaneous withdrawals of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (as of January 29, 2025). The three countries – all led by juntas – had previously established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) as a defense pact in response to ECOWAS’s threat to use military force against Niger in the aftermath of the July 26, 2023, coup.

For over a decade prior to this departure, ECOWAS had struggled to effectively address the multidimensional crisis that has destabilized the Sahel region since 2012. The withdrawal of the AES states can therefore be seen both as a cause of ECOWAS’s current crisis and as a reflection of deeper challenges within the organization. As a justification for their decision to leave ECOWAS, the three countries asserted that the organization had failed to support them in their fight against terrorism, while imposing “illegal, illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible sanctions.”¹

Although the juntas’ deeper political motive may have been to circumvent their legal obligation under ECOWAS’s rules to restore constitutional order as soon as possible, the episode has revealed underlying weaknesses in the regional body’s approach to managing unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs). Over the previous two decades, ECOWAS had quite effectively overseen successful transitions in the three AES states – Niger (2009–2011), Mali (2012), Burkina Faso (2014–2015) – as well as in Guinea (2008) and The Gambia (2016–2017). Since 2020, however, ECOWAS has struggled to halt the resurgence of military takeovers across the region. The AES states have now embarked on a minimum of five-year transition timelines, in place of the short transitions prescribed by ECOWAS rules.²

ECOWAS’s capacity to embody and deliver on its development and integration promises to the peoples of West Africa is increasingly in question.

The region is increasingly divided into two distinct diplomatic and military organizations (ECOWAS and AES), undermining the founding vision of a united West Africa built on a shared integration project, precisely at a moment when the widening security threats demand collective and sustained action. At the same time, ECOWAS’s ability to uphold its own democratic principles is under mounting strain. The political crises of 2025 in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, and Côte d’Ivoire

have emerged as major stress tests for an already embattled organization. Confronted with the sovereigntist rhetoric of the juntas – which enjoy considerable popular support in the Sahel and beyond³ – ECOWAS’s capacity to embody and deliver on its development and integration promises to the peoples of West Africa is increasingly in question.

Recognizing that ECOWAS stands at a critical juncture, the 65th ordinary Session of Heads of State and Government decided to convene a Special Summit on the Future of Regional Integration by the end of 2025 to reflect on “the state of governance, peace and security, and the regional integration project.”⁴ A pact, consolidating recommendations from civil

1 “Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso announce withdrawal from ECOWAS,” *Aljazeera*, 28 January 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/28/niger-mali-burkina-faso-announce-withdrawal-from-ecowas>.

2 In 2025, the three AES countries each decided on renewable five-year transitions following national conferences. This harmonization effort comes at a time when Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger had already been under military transition since 2020, 2021 and 2023, respectively.

3 The rhetoric of the Senegalese authorities (and their party, PASTEF), democratically elected in March 2024, is also firmly anchored in sovereigntism.

4 ECOWAS, 65th ordinary session of the ECOWAS Heads of States and Government, Final communiqué, 7 July 2024, <http://>

society consultations, will be submitted to Heads of State and Government for endorsement. Designed as a citizen-led exercise,⁵ the consultations will focus on five thematic pillars: (1) Economic and Regional Integration, (2) Democracy, Good Governance, and Constitutional Processes, (3) Peace and Security, (4) Information Technology, and (5) Youth and Women.

This policy brief aims to contribute to the thematic pillar of Democracy, Good Governance, and Constitutional Processes, as well as to the broader literature on ECOWAS. It does not seek to address all of the challenges confronting the organization, including otherwise critical issues such as its response to insecurity in the region. While the assumption is that the reform agenda proposed herein would contribute to a stronger and more efficient ECOWAS in all areas, the organization's performance regarding regional security should be assessed separately (under the Peace and Security pillar of the citizen consultations). Likewise, this brief does not engage with the issues surrounding ECOWAS's financial autonomy or questions around building a durable system of self-financing, despite acknowledging the centrality of finances when implementing a reform agenda.

Rather, this policy brief focuses on possible political, institutional and framework reforms to strengthen ECOWAS's ability to respond to contemporary West African challenges in the areas of good governance and democracy. A central priority is enhancing ECOWAS's capacity to anticipate and respond effectively to political crises, notably UCGs. The brief first provides an overview of the factors contributing to ECOWAS's challenges in facing UCGs (from 2020 onwards), before discussing the three major pathways that lie before the regional body at this critical juncture. It further sets out possible reform avenues to address ECOWAS's foremost internal issue, namely the power imbalance embedded in its institutional design. Finally, the brief explores pragmatic strategies to navigate member states' reluctance to cede sovereignty as the main challenge to meaningful democratic reform.

This policy brief draws on interviews with stakeholders and experts in Abuja (Nigeria), Berlin (Germany) and Dakar (Senegal) between January and August 2025, as well as a literature review. The research benefited from the close engagement with a practitioner working group, comprising West African and European civil society representatives, practitioners, officials, and experts; their insights and critical feedback were invaluable throughout the process.

ECOWAS's Democratic Legacy Under Strain

Established in 1975 with an initial mandate promoting economic integration, ECOWAS progressively broadened its mandate to encompass peace, security, and democratic governance. This transformation gained momentum in the 1990s with the adoption of landmark political instruments that empowered ECOWAS to respond to UCGs.⁶

ecowas.int/sixty-fifth-65th-ordinary-session-of-the-authority-of-heads-of-state-and-government/.

- 5 The process involves «former leaders of ECOWAS, community, traditional and faith leaders, civil society and community organizations, industry leaders and the broader private sector, youth and women organizations, research institutions and academia». Keynote address of ECOWAS Peace and Security Commissioner Amb. Abdel-Fatau Musa to ECOSOC Chamber, UNHQ, 25 July 2025.
- 6 The African Union defines UCGs as any putsch or coup d'Etat against a democratically elected government; any intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government; any replacement of a democratically elected government by armed dissidents or rebels; any refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party or candidate after free, fair and regular elections; any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government. See for more information: African Union, "African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance," accessed on 29 August 2025, <https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36384-treaty-african-charter-on-democracy-and-governance.pdf>.

These include the following documents: the 1991 Declaration of Political Principles, the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Over the past two decades, ECOWAS has wielded a mix of tools to safeguard democracy in its member states, ranging from diplomatic engagement, legal frameworks, economic and diplomatic sanctions, and – when necessary – military intervention. Its actions in Guinea-Bissau (1998 and 2012), Niger (2009–2011), Guinea (2008–2010), Mali (2012), Burkina Faso (2014–2015), and The Gambia (2016–2017) underscore ECOWAS’s past capacity to successfully steer political transitions and restore constitutional order in the wake of democratic crises.

Figure 1: ECOWAS’s Success Stories – Historical Interventions Demonstrating Institutional Capacity and Regional Leadership





Mali

2012

In March 2012, President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, following a series of military defeats in the north of Mali. Sanogo's coup was firmly condemned by ECOWAS, which imposed an economic embargo and suspended the country from its institutions. Rapid mediation efforts led to the formation of a transitional government headed by National Assembly President Dioncounda Traoré. The transition paved the way for credible elections in 2013, supported by a joint mobilization of ECOWAS, the AU, the UN, as well as technical and financial partners.



Burkina Faso

2014 - 2015

In 2014, President Blaise Compaoré attempted to amend the constitution to pursue another term, sparking a popular uprising. ECOWAS supported the civilian-led transition spearheaded by national actors. In September 2015, a coup attempt by the Presidential Security Regiment was swiftly neutralized within a week, following coordinated pressure from ECOWAS, the AU, the broader international community, and Burkinabé civil society. The transitional process was preserved and presidential elections could be held as scheduled.



The Gambia

2016 - 2017

After originally accepting his political defeat to Adama Barrow in the 2016 presidential elections, outgoing President Yahya Jammeh reversed his position and refused to step down. ECOWAS engaged in diplomatic efforts, which proved unsuccessful. The organization then launched a regional military operation, backed by strong declarations of support from the AU, the UN, and the European Union. Under this multidimensional pressure, Jammeh eventually stepped down, demonstrating ECOWAS' ability to combine diplomacy, deterrence and regional legitimacy in the defense of democratic norms.

Since 2020 however, ECOWAS has seen its normative and political authority on democratic governance steadily decline. Coups d'état in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) all led to entrenched military regimes. The joint withdrawal of the three AES countries from ECOWAS in January 2025, following sharp disagreements over the handling of the Niger coup, marked an unprecedented rupture in the region.

ECOWAS's Legitimacy Crisis

This political fragmentation of West Africa stems from a confluence of factors, widely analyzed in the literature.⁷ First and foremost is ECOWAS's deepening legitimacy crisis, with the

⁷ Aïssatou Kanté, Fahiraman Rodrigue Koné, Hassane Koné, Issaka K. Souaré, Djiby Sow, Lori-Anne Thérooux-Bénoni and Paulin Maurice Toupane, "Rethinking Responses to Unconstitutional Changes of Government in West Africa," *Institute for Security Studies*, West Africa Report, June 2024, <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1738672290719-Eng-WAR-50-updated.pdf>.

organization facing sustained criticism for applying double standards in the implementation of its zero-tolerance policy towards UCGs. According to this opinion, ECOWAS responds much more directly and decisively to power shifts enacted through military force than those executed via legal manipulation, where leaders aim to extend their tenure in so-called constitutional coups.⁸

Notable instances include constitutional revisions in Guinea (2020) and Togo (2019 and 2024), as well as the 2020 political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire and the 2024 contested electoral delay in Senegal. By contrast, ECOWAS's response to military coups has been swift and decisive. Following the 2023 coup in Niger, for instance, the organization immediately threatened military intervention⁹ and imposed far reaching sanctions, including an embargo on essential goods such as food, medicine and electricity¹⁰ – measures that disproportionately affected the civilian population.

While the asymmetry in ECOWAS's response has sparked public skepticism and eroded its moral authority, it is worth noting that ECOWAS's lack of an effective response to constitutional coups cannot be attributed exclusively to a lack of political will. The organization's current legal frameworks do not provide it with the required tools to act. The constitutional changes in Côte d'Ivoire (2016) and Guinea (2020) were timed to take effect outside the six months

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preceding the elections, when member states can still amend electoral laws without the consent of a majority of political actors.¹¹ As a matter of fact, when looking at the political situation of Niger in 2009, ECOWAS has also been consistent in applying this provision. The Authority of Heads of State and Government (“the Authority”) no longer considered Mamadou Tandja as the country's lawful president at the end of his mandate in December 2008 because his constitutional move to remain in power occurred within the prohibited six-month window.

Although political considerations are factors in each situation, ECOWAS's alleged holding of “double standards” is primarily rooted in a lack of a normative framework. As will be discussed further, the ECOWAS Commission has already twice attempted – ultimately unsuccessfully – to revise the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to address this lack.

Waning Support for Democratic Governance

Beyond the relevance of its legal frameworks, ECOWAS also appears increasingly out of touch with the expectations of the populations it is meant to serve, despite its aspirational plans (laid out in its “Vision 2020” and “Vision 2050” frameworks) to transform itself from an “ECOWAS of States” to an “ECOWAS of the Peoples.”¹² While ECOWAS remains focused on democracy and rule of law, young citizens are increasingly supportive of non-democratic

8 Stakeholder interview, Berlin, April 2025.

9 Djiby Sow, “ECOWAS must look beyond the use of force in Niger”, *ISS Today*, 9 August 2023. <https://issafrika.org/iss-today/ecowas-must-look-beyond-the-use-of-force-in-niger>.

10 ECOWAS, 51st Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Niger, Final Communiqué, 30 July 2023.

11 Article 2(1) of ECOWAS' Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance provides that no substantial modification shall be made to the electoral laws in the last six (6) months before the elections, except with the consent of a majority of Political actors.”

12 Emmanuel Ami-Okhane, “ECOWAS of the People: A Transition We Need,” 11 July 2025 <https://gppi.net/2025/07/11/ask-the-experts-ecowas-at-50>.

modes of governance, as the high levels of popular support for recent military coups in the Sahel and Guinea show; many feel disillusioned with electoral democracy and the failure of democratic institutions to address persistent governance, social justice and security crises.

According to Afrobarometer data, popular support for democracy has declined sharply in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea (even if it remains the preferred model in theory).¹³ Even more strikingly, over 50 percent of Africans are open to military intervention in cases of political elites abusing power – a trend that is particularly pronounced among younger populations. This shift is driven primarily by deep dissatisfaction with “local government, poor-quality elections, and a lack of presidential accountability,” rather than economic factors.¹⁴

This growing disillusionment poses a direct challenge to national authorities and, ultimately, to ECOWAS. When large segments of the population no longer perceive democracy as delivering tangible benefits, the regional body's defense of democratic norms risks being dismissed as elitist or externally imposed, as has happened in the AES states. As popular support for elected governments erodes, so too does the political and moral leverage that ECOWAS can exert to advocate for democratic restoration.

Shifting Geopolitical Environment

A third factor underlying ECOWAS's declining effectiveness in addressing UCGs is the rapidly evolving international geopolitical landscape.¹⁵ The organization's earlier successes in promoting peace, security and democratic governance, particularly those during the 1990s and early 2000s, were significantly facilitated by the post-Cold War order. During this period, liberal democracy emerged as a dominant global norm, and ECOWAS could rely on strong political, diplomatic and financial support from Western powers and international institutions. This external support underpinned the organization's capacity to mediate political crises, implement sanctions, and – when necessary – deploy peacekeeping missions to protect civilians and restore peace in affected member states.

ECOWAS's earlier successes in promoting peace, security and democratic governance, were significantly facilitated by the post-Cold War order.

This post-Cold War global order is now changing and fragmenting. The rise of alternative global powers, particularly China and Russia, has created new geopolitical opportunities for authoritarian or military-led regimes in West Africa to circumvent what would have otherwise been a regional and international diplomatic isolation. These powers offer West African regimes alternative political recognition, security cooperation and financial support without attaching conditions related to democratic governance or human rights. This new geopolitical status quo has significantly weakened ECOWAS's leverage over non-compliant regimes. Military juntas in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger now operate in a multipolar environment that enables them to defy regional norms with comparatively limited repercussions by relying on alternative global players.

¹³ This finding is also confirmed in a UNDP report that finds that 55% of surveyed respondents in countries affected by UCGs prefer democracy as the governance model: <https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/soldiers-and-citizens>.

¹⁴ Afrobarometer, “African Insights 2024: Democracy at Risk - the people's perspective,” 2024, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Afrobarometer_FlagshipReport2024_English.pdf.

¹⁵ Stakeholder interview, Abuja, April 2025.

An Institutional Architecture Dominated by the Executive

Finally, ECOWAS's institutional design is marked by notable democratic deficits stemming from the prevailing dominance of the executive. Through the Mediation and Security Council (MSC) at the ambassadorial and ministerial levels, and especially the Authority, member states retain the bulk of the organization's effective political power. This concentration of authority constrains the autonomy and enforcement capacity of ECOWAS institutions and specialized agencies.

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Crucially, this governance structure generates an inherent conflict of interest with respect to the issue of UCGs: the actors responsible for responding to democratic backsliding (in their role as ECOWAS members) are the very same actors who undermine constitutional safeguards or extend presidential term limits (as heads of state). This conflict of interest is starkly illustrated by the opposition of certain member states to reforming the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which they perceive as an obstacle to their head of state's ability to remain in office beyond two terms. Such structural imbalances can weaken the Authority's ability to respond decisively to UCGs.

Reimagining ECOWAS: A Pivotal Juncture

Confronted with these challenges and the withdrawal of the AES states, ECOWAS stands at a critical juncture. The decision to hold a Special Summit on the Future of Regional Integration by the end of 2025 reflects the member states' awareness of the need for stocktaking and decisive action. Three broad pathways lie ahead for ECOWAS.

Option 1: The Status Quo – A Path to Institutional Erosion

Maintaining the current trajectory would further erode ECOWAS's authority. Such a scenario would prolong the current legitimacy crisis, worsen citizen disengagement, and pave the way for the rise of alternative, competing or fragmented formats, such as the AES. As citizens and regional stakeholders continue to lose confidence in ECOWAS's ability to enforce its normative frameworks on democracy and good governance, the organization risks becoming a symbolic institution, devoid of meaningful leverage over the political trajectories of its member states.

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Signs of such an ECOWAS, constrained in its actions, are already visible. In March 2025, President Embaló expelled an ECOWAS electoral mission from Guinea-Bissau. In Côte d'Ivoire, President Ouattara is heading toward a fourth term, with leading opposition candidates disqualified from elections in October 2025. And in Guinea, President Mamadi Doumbouya is likely to run for office, countering ECOWAS rules¹⁶ – and potentially win.

16 Doumbouya's candidacy would violate Article 12 of ECOWAS Supplementary Act on Sanctions, which prohibits perpetrators of coup d'états from standing for presidential office in their respective countries. Supplementary Act A/SP.13/02/12 on Sanctions against Member States that fail to honor their obligations to ECOWAS.

Option 2: Economic Integration Without Democratic Governance

Alternatively, member states may be tempted to forgo ECOWAS's political ambitions and pressure the organization to revert to its original economic mandate: facilitating the free movement of goods and people, harmonizing economic policies and building a common market. Such a recalibration could restore minimal consensus among member states by sidestepping politically sensitive issues related to democratic governance. By easing tensions and enabling essential cooperation on security, this pathway could help retain all current members – and possibly reintegrate the three AES countries.

However, this scenario would signify ECOWAS's abdication of its role as regional guarantor of democracy, leaving a structural void in the architecture. This power vacuum might open the door to domestic power struggles or external actors filling the gap. Most importantly, in doing so, the organization risks severing its connection to the people of the region, who – despite supporting recent UCGs – continue to value the dividends of democracy.

Option 3: Resilience Through Further Political Integration

The third scenario, which is the pathway this policy brief endorses, would be ECOWAS heeding the calls from citizens and a number of Heads of State and undertaking reforms capable of meeting the challenges of contemporary West Africa. The brief envisions a gradual but resolute path toward a more politically integrated ECOWAS, capable of systematically enforcing democratic governance norms. Achieving this would require member states to cede a significant degree of sovereignty as well as to institutionalize binding common rules where necessary: adherence to constitutions and term limits, integrity of electoral processes, enforcement of community judicial decisions, and enhanced powers for the ECOWAS Commission to monitor and support democratic governance at the national level.

Amid mounting socio-economic challenges and political tensions across the region, this scenario represents the most viable path to lasting stability. It would accelerate progress toward the Vision 2050 aspiration of an “ECOWAS of the Peoples.” However, it is likely to encounter strong resistance from some member states reluctant to cede more of their sovereignty – and could even provoke further withdrawals. ECOWAS will have to make the difficult choice between upholding its principles and preserving its current membership.

Adjusting the Balance of Power Within the ECOWAS Architecture

Deepening ECOWAS's political integration first requires tackling the organization's most persistent weakness after fifty years of existence: the imbalance of power within its institutional framework. A starting point would be to complete reforms already initiated by the Commission before the resurgence of UCGs in 2020 – not only to restore ECOWAS's legitimacy and political authority, but also to lay the groundwork for a more balanced governance system. This includes (1) revising the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and (2) reforming the sanctions regime, two instruments whose limitations are well known and whose adjustment would bring greater clarity and consistency to the Authority's role in political governance. Other priorities include (3) establishing a more predictable and fair decision-making process within the Authority, (4) insulating the Commission from political interference, (5) ensuring the binding force of ECOWAS Court rulings, and (6) giving citizens a stronger voice in regional affairs. Together, these steps would help rebalance the Authority's influence within a more democratic institutional order.

Revisiting the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance

As mentioned above, ECOWAS’s inability to respond effectively to constitutional coups is in large part due to its lack of an institutional framework. To restore normative coherence and address recurring accusations of double standards, the ECOWAS Commission has already twice attempted to revise the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, the normative foundation of ECOWAS’s political governance framework – first in 2015, then again in 2021.¹⁷ These reforms were blocked by opposition from certain member states, most notably Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, The Gambia, and Togo.¹⁸

The draft version of the amended Protocol aims to adapt ECOWAS’s tools to emerging political threats, particularly constitutional amendments by incumbent governments trying to extend their hold on power. It seeks to introduce a strict two-term limit for presidential mandates as an explicit principle within the community’s framework for constitutional convergence, defined as “any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments aimed at extending term limits or remaining in power beyond two terms.”¹⁹

Now is the time to revisit these draft amendments to the Protocol. The current context, characterized by calls for greater regional transparency, offers a strategic window of opportunity to finally advance this long-awaited reform. Togo appears to have become the last open holdout, though some legal analysts argue that its transition to a parliamentary regime could facilitate accommodation of the amendment.²⁰

Reforming the Sanctions Mechanism to Ensure Transparency and Predictability

Similarly, the ECOWAS sanctions regime had already been identified as a reform priority by the Commission; a revision of the Supplementary Act on Sanctions was underway prior to the recent wave of UCGs.²¹ The reform envisaged the creation of a dedicated committee, made up of ECOWAS Commission and Parliament members, tasked with proposing sanctions on a case-by-case basis, monitoring their implementation and assessing their impact.

The absence of a clear and consistent implementation framework has exposed the organization to accusations of bias, strengthening popular support for military juntas and deepening public disillusionment with ECOWAS.

When reviewing the sanctions regime, ECOWAS should take the sanctions imposed on Niger in 2023 as a case study of what doesn’t work: these sanctions had major adverse effects on civilian populations and highlighted the sanction regime’s selectivity and lack of transparency.²² The absence of a clear and consistent implementation framework has exposed the organization to accusations of bias, ultimately strengthening popular support for military juntas and deepening public disillusionment with ECOWAS.

¹⁷ Stakeholder interview, Abuja, April 2025.

¹⁸ Stakeholder interview, Dakar, March 2025.

¹⁹ In reference to Article 23(5) of the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

²⁰ Under this interpretation, subsequent to the 2024 constitutional reform introducing a parliamentary system in Togo, the Community’s two-term presidential limit would be understood as applying to the President of the Republic (now essentially a ceremonial role), rather than to the President of the Council of Ministers, where executive authority is effectively exercised and which is currently held by Faure Gnassingbé. Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

²¹ Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

²² Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

To restore both legitimacy and effectiveness, ECOWAS must define objective, transparent and publicly accessible criteria governing the activation, intensity, duration, and suspension of sanctions. These criteria should be based on measurable breaches of constitutional order, violations of fundamental rights or obstruction of credible electoral processes. The revised sanctions regime should also minimize harm to civilian populations by explicitly excluding

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measures affecting access to essential goods and services such as food, energy, medicine, and education. In line with the African Union's (AU's) response framework to UCGs, ECOWAS could enshrine in its legal texts a prohibition on punitive collective sanctions impacting civilians.²³

Such adjustments would help reduce political interference in both the decision-making and implementation, making the sanctions regime more predictable, fair and transparent.

Strengthening Accountability in the Authority's Decision-Making

As noted above, the Authority – as ECOWAS's highest organ – wields the bulk of ECOWAS's executive power. Its decisions are made behind closed doors and governed by the rule of consensus, contributing to a lack of transparency and weakening democratic accountability. Although the 2006 reform formally transformed the Executive Secretariat into a commission with a strengthened mandate,²⁴ in practice, the Commission remains largely confined to executing decisions taken by Heads of State,²⁵ particularly in matters of governance, peace and security.

This concentration of authority can hamper the coherence of regional policies, as illustrated by the way it contributed to the breakdown in relations between ECOWAS and the AES countries. In mid-2022, the Authority, after imposing sanctions on Mali and Burkina Faso, lifted the sanctions and set out transition timetables toward restoring constitutional order (all according to applicable procedures). Yet in 2023, during a meeting on the sidelines of the 36th AU summit in Addis Ababa, the Authority unilaterally imposed new, targeted sanctions on transitional leaders²⁶ – abandoning their previously adopted gradual engagement strategy. Similarly, in Niger, the Authority bypassed established dialogue procedures altogether, instead immediately imposing economic sanctions and threatening the use of force. These actions hardened positions among transitional authorities and deepened the political rupture, ultimately contributing to the exit of AES states.

More recently, the rotation of the Authority's presidency sparked tensions when, contrary to expectations, Sierra Leone was chosen to chair the Authority instead of Senegal. The established unwritten rule of linguistic rotation (anglophone/francophone) was not respected, setting a dangerous precedent²⁷ in an organization where political appointments result from ad hoc arrangements and informal lobbying.

23 "Careful attention should be exercised to ensure that the ordinary citizens of the concerned country do not suffer disproportionately on account of the enforcement of sanctions". Organization of African Unity (OAU), Declaration on the Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government, 12th July 2000 (AHG/Decl.5 (XXXVI)).

24 Donal Dennis Arebamen, "Democratization within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)", 2025, p. 8, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/392897231_Democratization_within_the_Economic_Community_of_West_African_States_ECOWAS.

25 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

26 ECOWAS, Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States and Government, *Final communiqué*, Addis Ababa, 18 February 2023, https://www.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ENG_Final-Communique-Addis-Ext_Ord_-Summit-English7123.pdf.

27 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

ECOWAS must urgently strive toward establishing a more predictable, equitable and institutionalized decision-making system.

All these examples show that ECOWAS must urgently strive toward establishing a more predictable, equitable and institutionalized decision-making system.²⁸ Certain decisions – particularly those related to democracy and governance – should require a formal vote, rather than informal consensus.²⁹ Such a shift would make the positions of individual member states public, which would both enhance institutional transparency as well as individual and collective accountability.

Safeguarding the Commission’s Institutional Autonomy

Any credible reform agenda must further extend to the relationship between the Authority and the ECOWAS Commission. Currently, the positions of President, Vice-President and Commissioners are allocated through intergovernmental negotiations, reflecting regional geopolitical and linguistic balances among Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone member states. However, this system of allocation, driven more by political considerations than by merit or experience, undermines both the technical quality and accountability of those appointed to these strategic roles. It may foster patterns of national loyalty at the expense of regional interest,³⁰ creating vulnerabilities where the Commission becomes paralyzed in the event of a conflict of interest.

The 2014 popular uprising in Burkina Faso and the 2020 political crisis in Côte d’Ivoire illustrate this dynamic: the nationality of the President of the Commission (Burkinabé in 2014 and Ivorian in 2020, respectively) generated a conflict of interest, which weighed on ECOWAS’s ability to effectively manage both crises.³¹

Bolstering the Commission’s autonomy vis-à-vis member states is therefore essential. Tensions frequently arise between the Commission and member state-level representatives across ECOWAS’s institutional layers, including from the MSC (both at ambassadorial and ministerial levels) as well as from the Authority. These frictions are often fueled by lingering mistrust toward the Commission, perceived as overly independent or politically intrusive.

Reform efforts should aim to reinforce the Commission’s institutional authority and its democratic legitimacy.

Bissau-Guinean President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, for instance, expelled an ECOWAS pre-electoral mission in March 2025, labelling the Commission as “activists”³² – a stark indication of the structural strain in relations between the regional executive branch and (some) national governments.

Reform efforts should aim to reinforce the Commission’s institutional authority and its democratic legitimacy. One potential mechanism to do so could be a parliamentary confirmation process for the highest levels of Commission staff, as is done in the case of the European Union (EU). The President of the Commission would continue to be nominated by the Authority, but would require formal approval from

28 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

29 ECOWAS, *Rules of Procedure of the Authority of Heads of State*, 2010, “Rule 20 - Decision-Making Procedure: The Authority shall preferably take its decisions unanimously or by consensus. Where it is impossible to achieve unanimity or consensus, the Authority shall take its decision by two-thirds majority of the Member States present and eligible to vote.”

30 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

31 HE Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo and HE Jean-Claude Kassi Brou chaired the Commission during the respective crises. Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

32 “It is not some petty officials who will come here to dictate what we must do. No, never! With me, that is simply not possible! [...] This [ECOWAS] is an organisation that must be calibrated. We, the Heads of State, will calibrate it. We cannot have activists within the ECOWAS Commission. No, that is unacceptable!” *Russia Today*, “La Grande Interview: Umaro Sissoco Embaló,” 11 March 2025, <https://francais.rt.com/magazines/la-grande-interview/117862-grande-interview-umaro-sissoco-embalo>.

the ECOWAS Parliament. Commissioners, for their part, would undergo individual hearings before relevant parliamentary committees, which would hold the power to reject nominees deemed unfit for office.³³

Such a mechanism would create a healthier institutional balance between the Authority, the Commission and other ECOWAS institutions, while enhancing both the credibility and expertise of the regional executive body.

Securing Democratic Governance Through a Stronger Court of Justice

Another central element institutional reform must focus on is the enhancement of the authority and legal reach of the ECOWAS Court of Justice (“the Court”). Despite its pivotal role within the community’s legal architecture, the Court’s practical impact remains limited. According to its own data, only 22 percent of its rulings have been enforced by member states since its establishment in 2001.³⁴ Compliance in cases specifically relating to democracy, elections, governance, or human rights is even lower.

This enforcement gap undermines not only the Court’s normative authority, but ECOWAS’s authority overall. Senegal offers a telling example. In 2018, several Senegalese opposition parties – most notably the Union Sociale Libérale – brought a case before the Court, challenging the constitutionality of a Senegalese law introducing citizen sponsorship requirements, mandating that all national presidential candidates secure at least 53,457 signatures (0.8 percent of registered voters), distributed across no fewer than seven regions, before being allowed to run for the presidency.³⁵ While the Senegalese government framed the law as a “rationalization” of the electoral process, it was widely perceived as a tool for political exclusion, due to the substantial resources required to collect the necessary signatures. In April 2021, the ECOWAS Court ruled that the sponsorship system infringed on the right to free and fair electoral participation and ordered its repeal within six months.³⁶ Senegal, however, failed to comply, and the provision remained in force, exacerbating political tensions ahead of the 2024 presidential election.

Only 22 percent of rulings by the ECOWAS Court of Justice have been enforced by member states since its establishment in 2001.

This case underscores the importance of effective enforcement mechanisms to ensure that the Court’s rulings actually sway member states’ political trajectories. Legally, the Court’s decisions are binding under Article 15(4) of the 1993 Revised Treaty – in theory, member states can be sanctioned for non-compliance under Article 77. In practice, however, a lack of political will hinders the systematic enforcement of the Court’s rulings.

At the ECOWAS level, this deficiency is reflected in the absence of an institutional follow-up mechanism for the Commission or the political leadership, including the Authority.³⁷ At the national level, resistance to Court rulings manifests in two primary forms: first, the failure

33 Stakeholder Interview, Dakar, June 2025.

34 The figure was disclosed by the President of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice at the Inaugural meeting of Competent National Authorities (CNAs) in Lagos, Nigeria in June 2025.

35 Accord, “Political Reforms and Implications for Democracy and Instability in West Africa: The Way Forward for ECOWAS and Member States”, 2022, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/political-reforms-and-implications-for-democracy-and-instability-in-west-africa-the-way-forward-for-ecowas-and-member-states/>.

36 CEDEAO, “Cour de justice de la Communauté des États de l’Afrique de l’Ouest,” 28 April 2021, ECW/CCI/JUD/10/21, <https://juricaf.org/arret/CEDEAO-COURDEJUSTICEDELACOMMUNAUTEDESETATSDELAFRIQUEDE-LOUEST-20210428-ECWCCIJUD1021>.

37 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

to incorporate ECOWAS legal instruments and Court Protocols into domestic legislation, creating legal gaps that impede the integration of ECOWAS Community law,³⁸ and second, the absence of formal enforcement procedures for Court rulings, despite the designation of national authorities tasked with their execution.³⁹

To address these gaps, ECOWAS should embed stronger and more comprehensive enforcement provisions in the relevant protocols. In particular, ECOWAS could revise the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance to include provisions that would reinforce the enforceability of judgments concerning political and electoral matters, and clearly define sanctions for non-compliance.⁴⁰ Such an enforcement framework should be supported by a dedicated monitoring mechanism within the Commission, tasked exclusively with overseeing the implementation of the ECOWAS Court's decisions.⁴¹

In the longer term, structural reform of the ECOWAS 1993 Revised Treaty should aim to transform the Court into a fully empowered institutional body overseeing intergovernmental authorities. The Court should have the authority to annul Community acts (regulations, decisions, directives) that go against foundational legal texts, the ability to take action on its own when needed, and review or overturn national court rulings.⁴² These reforms will prove essential to guarantee the primacy of Community law over national law and the enforceability of the democratic principles that ECOWAS seeks to uphold.

Amplifying Citizens' Voices in Regional Governance

Any strategy to rebalance ECOWAS institutions must be accompanied by initiatives aimed at enhancing the organization's societal legitimacy. ECOWAS faces a significant deficit in social accountability and is frequently perceived as opaque, lacking social accountability, and disconnected from citizens' expectations.⁴³ This perceived distance undermines public ownership and weakens the organization's capacity to represent a shared West African vision.

1. Operationalizing ECOSOC

In this context, the Commission is advancing the full operationalization of the ECOWAS Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), as provided for in the 1993 Revised Treaty. This initiative is aligned with the aspirations outlined in Visions 2020 and 2050, which seek to establish a "ECOWAS of the Peoples." ECOSOC is envisioned as an autonomous platform, independent of national governments, designed to enhance the participation of regional civil society actors in ECOWAS decision-making processes, ranging from NGOs to women, youth, and professional associations.⁴⁴

38 Tony Anene Maidoh, "Enforcement of Judgements of the ECOWAS Court of Justice", *National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS)*, 2018, p. 67, <https://ir.nilds.gov.ng/bitstream/handle/123456789/387/ENFORCEMENT%20OF%20JUDGMENTS%20OF%20THE%20ECOWAS%20COURT%20OF%20JUSTICE.pdf?sequence=1%26isAllowed=y>.

39 Tony Anene Maidoh (2018), "Enforcement of Judgements of the ECOWAS Court of Justice", *National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS)*, p. 66.

40 One option would be to clarify that the non-enforcement of decisions falls within the scope of the *Supplementary Act on the Imposition of Sanctions against Member States that do not Honour their Obligations towards ECOWAS*. Tarisai Mutangi, "Status of the implementation of the human rights related decisions of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice", 2021, *De Jure Law Journal* 512-532, p. 531, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2225-7160/2021/v54a30>.

41 Tony Anene Maidoh (2018), "Enforcement of Judgements of the ECOWAS Court of Justice", *National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS)*, p. 66.

42 Djifa Agbélénko Agbezoukin, "Renforcement de l'Etat de droit et de la justice en Afrique de l'Ouest : quel apport de la Cour de justice de la CEDEAO?" *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 25(8), 2020, pp. 22-27. <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.25-Issue8/Series-11/D2508112227.pdf>.

43 Stakeholder interview, Addis Ababa, April 2025.

44 EU-Africa Chamber of Commerce, "Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission holds technical

The body would be composed of one or more representatives per ECOWAS member state. These delegates would participate in ECOSOC's General Assembly, convening ahead of ECOWAS statutory meetings. Through the preparation of thematic reports, ECOSOC would provide advisory opinions on regional issues, particularly in the domains of economy, human rights, governance, and social cohesion, thereby creating greater civilian participation in ECOWAS politics.⁴⁵

The way delegates would be appointed to the ECOSOC is of critical importance. If ECOSOC is to reflect the aspirations of regional populations, delegate selection would have to be guided by objective standards and must remain independent of member states' political considerations. In particular, delegates should not be drawn from the existing economic, environmental and social councils within member states, as these bodies are closely linked to governmental structures and shaped by prevailing political dynamics.⁴⁶

Another challenge in establishing an effective link between civil society and the highest levels of ECOWAS lies in ensuring that ECOSOC's reports reach the Authority without dilution. Sensitive recommendations risk being filtered or neutralized due to the excessive politicization of decision-making processes throughout ECOWAS levels of governance.⁴⁷ To mitigate this, the ECOSOC Secretary-General should be a respected and credible figure, empowered to personally attend statutory summits and present the Council's findings directly.⁴⁸

Operationalizing ECOSOC and providing it with the appropriate resources would mark a significant step forward.

Operationalizing ECOSOC under these conditions and providing it with the appropriate resources would mark a significant step forward. It would contribute to a rebalancing by embedding a structured societal voice within the Community decision-making apparatus. In addition, its effectiveness would be further enhanced by the complementary reforms discussed above: strengthening the Commission's institutional authority and enhancing the transparency of deliberations of the Authority.

2. Establishing a Genuinely Representative ECOWAS Parliament

ECOSOC should, however, not be a substitute for ECOWAS's democratic legitimacy; rather, it should function as a complement to ECOWAS's popular grounding. In the longer term, ECOWAS must undertake a comprehensive reform of its Parliament, transforming it from a primarily advisory body into a genuinely representative institution of West African citizens, endowed with meaningful legislative authority and robust executive oversight powers.

The Supplementary Act of 17 December 2016⁴⁹ represents the most recent milestone in efforts to strengthen the ECOWAS Parliament's jurisdiction. Emerging from a study commissioned by the Parliament (A Case for the Enhancement of Power of the ECOWAS Parliament⁵⁰), the Supplementary Act was intended to be a pivotal step toward realizing the

meeting for the establishment of economic and social council in west Africa", 29 June 2025, <https://eu-africa-chamber.org/economic-community-of-west-african-states-ecowas-commission-holds-technical-meeting-for-the-establishment-of-economic-and-social-council-in-west-africa/>.

45 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

46 Stakeholder interview, Dakar, August 2025.

47 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

48 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

49 ECOWAS, *Supplementary Act A/SA. 1/12/16 relating to the Enhancement of the Power of the ECOWAS Parliament*.

50 African Center for Parliamentary Affairs (ACPA) "Research on the Dynamics of Processes of the Enhancement of Powers of the ECOWAS Parliament".

Vision 2020 goal of an “ECOWAS of the Peoples” by enhancing parliamentary involvement in decision-making.⁵¹ Yet, its ambitions remain constrained by the broader democratic deficit that has long characterized ECOWAS.

First, the current method of electing ECOWAS parliamentary members (through appointment by national legislatures) remains indirect and undermines aspirations for direct popular legitimacy through universal suffrage.⁵² Moreover, although the ECOWAS parliamentarians must suspend their national mandate (article 19 of the Supplementary Act), they remain largely accountable to their national political parties and domestic political dynamics. Article 18.1.b. stipulates that “the representation of each Member State shall reflect as much as possible the political configuration in the State,” which constrains Parliament’s oversight functions and legislative initiatives, particularly when these run counter to the immediate national interests of specific member states.⁵³

Second, there are clear limitations to the Parliament’s jurisdiction: matters relating to defense, peace and security, as well as the admission of member states to ECOWAS or their sanctioning, fall entirely outside the Parliament’s remit.⁵⁴ These core areas of sovereignty remain under the exclusive purview of the Authority, reinforcing state-driven decision-making in the organization’s governance.

Finally, while the 2016 Supplementary Act grants the Parliament co-decision powers over the Community budget (article 17), the chamber still lacks financial autonomy. For instance, while Parliament exercised its enhanced powers to approve the 2025 Community budget – set at 418 million Units of Account (UA) – its own allocation for the same fiscal year was cut by 19.5 percent, reducing it to 18,696,897 UA.⁵⁵ With inadequate financial resources and limited administrative support already recognized as systemic impediments to the effective fulfilment of its mandate,⁵⁶ this reduction further undermines Parliament’s operational capacity, including its ability to effectively exercise budgetary oversight over ECOWAS institutions. It also further entrenches a structural dependency that leaves Parliament vulnerable to executive influence and pressure, ultimately constraining it in shaping regional policy and governance.

Ensuring genuine democratic anchoring for ECOWAS will require addressing these significant gaps through far-reaching reform. Ultimately, in addition to the previously proposed establishment of a parliamentary confirmation process for the leadership of the Commission (President, Vice-President and Commissioners), ECOWAS must aim to implement the direct election of Community Members of Parliament through universal suffrage, broaden parliamentary competencies to encompass all areas of ECOWAS’s mandate-including governance, peace and security, and ensure full financial autonomy in both the formulation and execution of its budget.

51 *Supplementary Act A/SA. 1/12/16*, Preamble.

52 The Supplementary Act establishes the principle of electing community representatives by direct universal suffrage (article 18.1.a). However, pending its implementation, it provides for election by the national parliament (article 18.1.g).

53 Stakeholder interview, Abuja, July 2025.

54 Samuel Prisso Essawe, “The (third) new Act on the ECOWAS Parliament: A Greater Involvement of the People”, *Regional Integration Observer*, Vol. 3 No. 1, March 2015, p. 9, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280640140-The_third_new_Act_on_the_ECOWAS_Parliament_A_Greater_Involvement_of_the_People.

55 “ECOWAS parliament approves 418 million units of account for 2025 budget”, *Businessday*, December 13, 2024, <https://businessday.ng/news/article/ecowas-parliament-approves-418-million-units-of-account-for-2025-budget/>

56 Mohamed Kabeer Garba, “Examining the role of the Economic Community of West African States Parliament in Promoting Representational Democracy at the Regional Level”, *I. Int. J. L. Pol. Sci. Admin*, Vol 9 No. 03, May-June, 2025, p. 70.

Conclusion: Navigating Sovereignty Realities

The crisis confronting ECOWAS fundamentally reflects a structural tension between the organization's supranational ambition and the sovereignty imperative pursued by its member states. The internal challenges, mentioned above (the inconsistent application of norms regarding good governance and democracy, the weak enforcement of rulings by the Court, and the lack of autonomy and independence of both the Commission and the Parliament) are all by-products of an intergovernmental orientation embedded in the organization's DNA – ultimately safeguarded by the dominance of the Authority. At its core, this dynamic reflects member states' reluctance to delegate substantive powers in areas they perceive as central to their sovereignty.

This structural reality translates into a limited political will for far-reaching reform. The solutions proposed in this policy brief are no exception: they ultimately require a redefinition of the West African integration project, toward a more politically integrated ECOWAS, underpinned by strong democratic checks and balances and binding, impartial and predictable mechanisms.

The success of a reform agenda will depend less on the technical quality of the proposals and more on the creation of the political conditions necessary for their implementation.

The success of such a reform agenda will therefore depend less on the technical quality of the proposals and more on the creation of the political conditions necessary for their implementation. Ensuring three of these conditions will prove fundamental: (1) sequencing reforms strategically over time to avoid a “take-it-or-leave-it” reform package, (2) building a sufficiently powerful coalition of actors to carry forward the redefinition of the integration project, and (3) identifying incentives for change that can form the basis of targeted advocacy with member states.

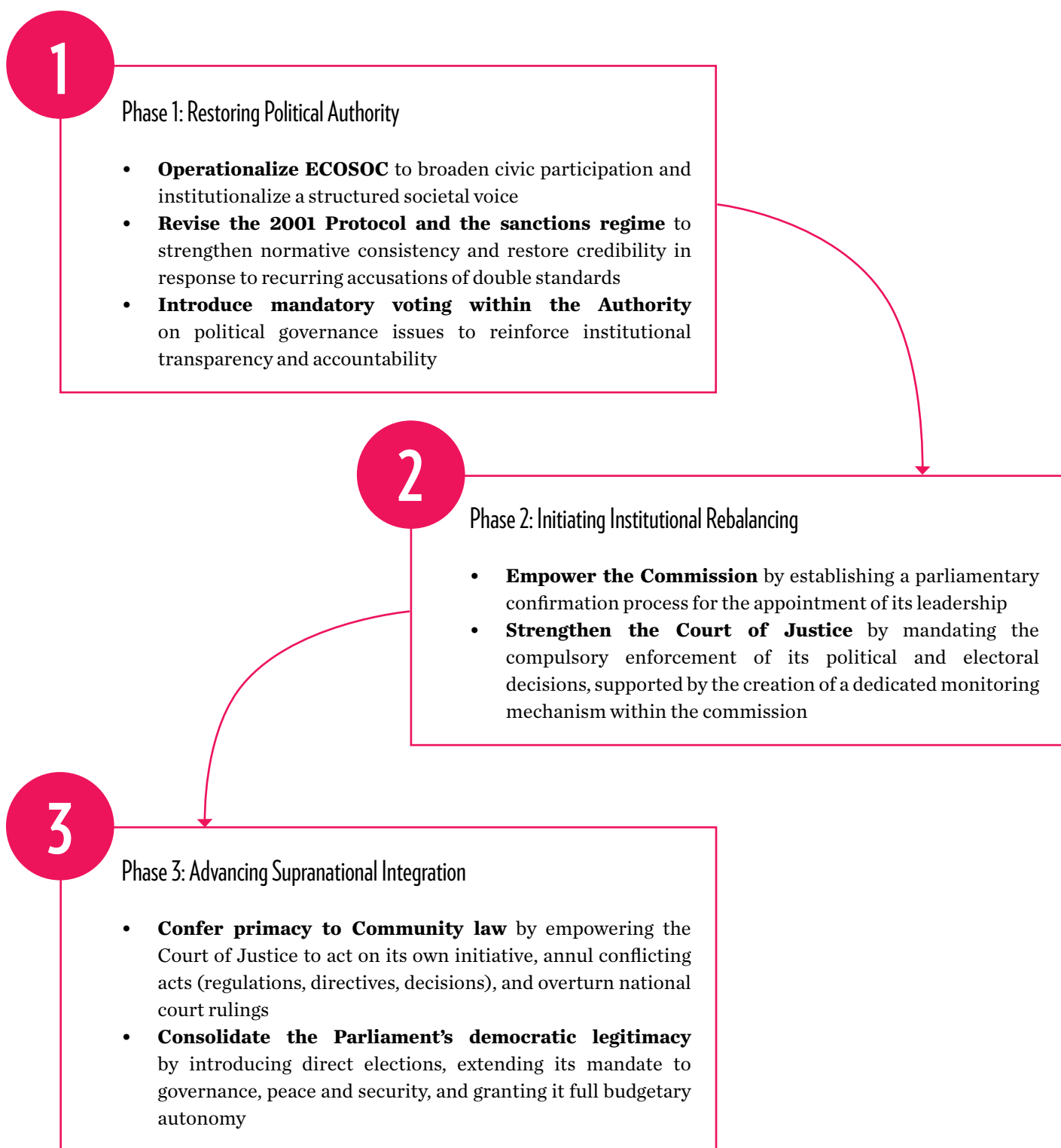
Easy Political Wins as Building Blocks

To navigate state sensitivities, the strategic sequencing of reforms will be essential. The first phase should prioritize securing easy political wins with the immediate objective of restoring ECOWAS's moral authority while laying the groundwork for deeper reforms. The crisis triggered by the AES states' withdrawal presents a unique opportunity to fast-track ongoing initiatives.

Accelerating the implementation of ECOSOC is an example of low-hanging fruit: it would send a clear signal to West African civil society. Revising the sanctions regime and adopting the revised Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance could also quickly reshape public perceptions of the organization, particularly regarding allegations of double standards. Another early measure could be the introduction of mandatory voting in the Authority for deliberations under the scope of the revised Supplementary Protocol, with any member states reservations made public.

A second, intermediate phase would focus on initiating institutional rebalancing through targeted measures. This could include introducing two critical checks and balances: (1) ECOWAS Court rulings on electoral, democratic and governance matters should be made to be automatically binding, and (2) the Commission's leadership should be held accountable to the Parliament, essentially through their appointment process.

Figure 2: Strategic Sequencing of ECOWAS Reforms – Navigating State Sensitivities Through Phased Implementation



A third and final phase would consolidate ECOWAS's transition toward a more supranational model. This would involve, on the one hand, deepening parliamentary reform - introducing the direct election of Community MPs by universal suffrage, granting budgetary autonomy, strengthening oversight powers, and expanding competencies to cover all areas of ECOWAS' mandate - and, on the other, elevating the Community Court to guarantee the primacy of Community law over national law.

Reform Champions: Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana... and Côte d'Ivoire?

Given that unanimous agreement among all member states on the full agenda is unlikely, reform should be approached pragmatically: a core group of political actors (willing “champions”), capable of driving reform forward, needs to be identified. Furthermore, the use of pilot states – beyond the “champions” – to roll out reforms could prove necessary to

overcome resistance, even if this would entail temporarily accepting a variable-geometry ECOWAS. The goal would be to demonstrate, by example, the benefits of reform and gradually encourage broader participation.

Sierra Leone's President Bio will be instrumental to the success of the planned Summit for the Future and any reform agenda that will be agreed upon.

As Chairperson of the ECOWAS Authority, Sierra Leone's President Bio will be instrumental to the success of the planned Summit for the Future and any reform agenda that will be agreed upon. Looking toward the legacy of his tenure, Bio's pledge to advance ECOWAS reform, as outlined

in his Acceptance Speech at the June Summit, offers an important opportunity. Bio not only acknowledged that ECOWAS must reform itself and become more transparent, efficient and responsive to its peoples' needs but also noted that ECOWAS's mandate must be redefined to be more proactive and people-centered.

Nigeria's role, also, will be pivotal from the outset, not only due to its longstanding support for ECOWAS's regional integration and peacekeeping mandate, but also because of its status as both a democratic anchor and an economic powerhouse in the region. Its capacity to rally smaller anglophone states is similarly important. For Abuja, the incentive to support ECOWAS's reform would be twofold: preserving the organization as a vehicle for projecting its influence and doing so as a way to maintain its regional leadership.

Senegal is another natural champion. The resilience of its institutions, which facilitated a peaceful and democratic resolution to the 2024 political crisis, exemplifies leadership. While the new authorities are still consolidating their power, their youth as well as their call for an ECOWAS attuned to contemporary challenges constitute strong assets. Ghana, which achieved yet another peaceful democratic alternation in 2024, could further strengthen this coalition.

Côte d'Ivoire's support for the reform agenda will prove decisive. The country is not only the economic and diplomatic engine of francophone West Africa. It will face a crucial test come the presidential election in October 2025, with President Ouattara seeking a fourth term and the exclusion of the two main opposition candidates. The election, however, carries opportunities for the reform agenda. While the vote risks precipitating a political crisis, such a crisis would increase pressure on the Authority, because it would uncover and exemplify the very governance failings the reform agenda seeks to address. If, on the other hand, the 83-year-old Ouattara gets re-elected in a stable context, he would enter the twilight of his final term, most likely intent on restoring his image and consolidating his regional legacy, which would make him a powerful ally for the region's reformist ambitions.

Crucially, such a reform agenda will require financial resources that go beyond the capacities of ECOWAS member states alone. Reform champions will therefore need to rely on external support as well. For Germany – and for the EU more broadly – backing the democratic and institutional strengthening of ECOWAS represents a strategic investment in their own stability and prosperity. An unstable West Africa has direct implications for Europe, ranging from great migratory pressures to the fueling of transnational criminal networks and insecurity.

The strategic incentive is clear; Germany and the EU should secure a credible regional partner capable of addressing political crises upstream, rather than managing their consequences downstream. In doing so, Europe would also safeguard its economic interests in a region of 465 million consumers, while limiting the political and financial costs associated with emergency military interventions and the management of humanitarian crises. The alternative is likely to prove more costly in the long run, both in terms of security and in the erosion of Europe’s geopolitical influence, with Russian and Chinese influence steadily gaining ground.

Weathering the Turbulence: Collective Reform, Shared Resilience

ECOWAS and its member states must, however, be in the driving seat. For them, a clear-eyed understanding of the profound shifts and ruptures underway in the region constitutes the most compelling incentive for reform. With a median age of 18 years, West Africa is not only the youngest region in the world but also the fastest growing: its population of 466 million in 2025 is projected to grow by over 60 percent to reach 734 million by 2050.⁵⁷ Under the current circumstances, the region’s post-colonial states – even those that are performing well economically – simply cannot meet the immense social demands this population growth will pose, and are confronted with systemic turbulence and disruptions.

The divergent trajectories of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea on the one hand, and Senegal on the other, offer valuable lessons.

Viewed through this lens, the divergent trajectories of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea on the one hand, and Senegal on the other, offer valuable lessons. They illustrate two manifestations of the same root cause: a decades-long governance crisis where leaders – whether they be democratically elected or from the military – failed to deliver credible responses to citizens’ exponentially growing needs. The political shift in these two sets of examples took different shapes, reflecting their respective political cultures. In Senegal, a democratic turning point came at the ballot box in March 2024, with PASTEF, a decade-old nationalist and sovereigntist political party, overturning the political class that had ruled the country since its independence. In the former set of cases (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Guinea, which collectively account for 21 coups since independence), the army seized power, in keeping with their long-standing tradition of military involvement in politics.

The lesson for all ECOWAS member states is unambiguous: in countries with a history of coups, any acute political crisis carries a high risk of triggering yet another, with unpredictable consequences. While Senegal has reaffirmed its exceptional status – it is one of the two West African countries that have never experienced a coup (Cape Verde is the other) – it must be underscored that the 2021-2024 political tensions pushed the country to the brink. Overall, the erosion of ECOWAS’s authority only heightens this collective vulnerability.

57 Worldometer, Western Africa Population, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/western-africa-population>.

Against the internal structural challenges of West African States and the upheavals of a shifting global order (COVID-19, Ukraine, Iran), which translate into heightened exposure to external shocks, adherence to democratic principles will not entirely insulate the region from political crises and instability. However, respect for constitutions and the rule of law, political alternation, and free and fair elections remain the most effective ways to weather internal political strife and move toward regional stability.

A more politically integrated ECOWAS, organized around these principles, responsive to its societies and more accountable to its citizens, would not only be a more resilient organization but also an indispensable stabilizing force in West Africa in an uncertain era.

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Cover Photo: GHANA-ECOWAS-DIPLOMACY-ANNIVERSARY – A general view of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) at the launch of the 50th Anniversary celebrations of ECOWAS in Accra on April 22, 2025. Photo by NIPAH DENNIS/AFP via Getty Images.

Reinhardtstr. 7, 10117 Berlin, Germany
Phone +49 30 275 959 75-0
gppi@gppi.net

gppi.net