

REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN WEST AFRICA IN THE CONTEXT OF JIHADIST INSURGENCIES AND MILITARY RULE IN THE SAHEL, 2011-2023

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Abstract

This study investigates the interplay among jihadist insurgencies, military rule, and regional integration in West Africa between 2011 and 2023, with particular emphasis on the Sahel region. The study is situated within the context of the deteriorating security environment characterised by the proliferation of violent extremist groups and the resurgence of military coups, both of which have posed significant challenges to the regional integration agenda of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other regional institutions. The study aims to examine how these twin phenomena—jihadist insurgency and authoritarian resurgence—have influenced the political and institutional environment for regional integration. It adopts a qualitative research approach, employing content analysis of policy documents, official communiqués, and relevant scholarly literature. Thematic analysis is used to identify the major patterns and issues emerging from the data. The findings reveal that the persistence of jihadist violence and recurrent military coups has undermined state legitimacy, fragmented political authority, weakened democratic governance, and diminished regional solidarity. The study further finds that ECOWAS's capacity to respond effectively has been constrained by institutional weaknesses, political divisions among member states, and inconsistent enforcement of regional protocols. In addition, the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States has intensified regional fragmentation and exposed growing disagreements over security cooperation, governance, and the future direction of regional integration. The study concludes that meaningful regional integration in West Africa remains achievable but depends on comprehensive institutional reforms, stronger political commitment among member states, enhanced regional cooperation, and inclusive governance practices that simultaneously promote security, democratic governance, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Regional Integration, Jihadist Insurgency, Military Rule, ECOWAS, Sahel

Introduction

The concept of regional integration in West Africa has historically been shaped by aspirations for collective security, economic cooperation, and political stability. Since the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, the region has made considerable strides in fostering multilateral cooperation. Integration efforts have ranged from economic liberalization, infrastructural development, cross-border trade enhancement, to regional peacekeeping interventions. However, in recent years, the West African region, especially the Sahel, has been destabilized by a surge in jihadist insurgencies and a concurrent rise in military rule, particularly from 2011 to 2023. These developments have posed significant challenges to integration efforts. Not only do these issues threaten national sovereignty and territorial integrity, but they also complicate the institutional frameworks that underpin regional cooperation. The post-2011 period, marked by the collapse of the Libyan regime, witnessed a dramatic proliferation of armed groups and weapons across the Sahel, particularly affecting countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Jihadist groups, initially marginal, have grown into formidable non-state actors challenging the authority of states and the legitimacy of regional integration projects. This has been accompanied by repeated coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), each citing state failure as justification. While regional integration was initially envisaged as a pathway to peace and development, the resurgence of authoritarianism and transnational insurgencies suggests a retreat from democratic norms and collaborative governance.¹ These events raise critical questions about the resilience and adaptability of West Africa's regional institutions in times of crisis. What began as efforts to deepen cooperation now risks fragmentation, as military juntas seek autonomy from regional sanctions and jihadist groups exploit governance vacuums.

The escalation of jihadist violence in the Sahel has dramatically altered the region's security architecture. Militant groups such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and Ansar Dine have capitalized on porous borders, ethnic tensions, and state fragility to expand their influence. These groups operate across national boundaries, making it difficult for individual states to contain the threat. As a result, traditional notions of sovereignty are increasingly undermined by a transnational insurgency that does not recognize borders. The regional nature of the jihadist threat makes coordinated action imperative, yet regional integration mechanisms have struggled to respond effectively. ECOWAS, despite its political clout, has largely deferred counterterrorism efforts to national armies or foreign powers like France and the United States. The failure of Operation Barkhane and the subsequent withdrawal of French troops from Mali underscore the limitations of external military interventions. Meanwhile, the G5 Sahel joint force, designed to enhance regional security cooperation, has suffered from inadequate funding, poor coordination, and political divisions.²

Jihadist insurgencies also exacerbate humanitarian crises, displacing millions and disrupting socio-economic activities. In such a context, the promise of regional integration as a tool for development and peace is severely compromised. Rather than drawing closer together, affected states are turning inward, prioritizing national survival over regional collaboration. Furthermore, jihadist narratives often frame regional institutions as Western-backed entities, undermining their legitimacy among local populations. This de-legitimization has political implications, especially when military regimes claim to better reflect national interests than ECOWAS or the African Union. In this atmosphere of distrust, integration efforts are seen not as pathways to stability, but as impositions from above. The situation is further complicated by rivalries among member states, competition for international aid, and divergent threat perceptions. The net effect is a paralysis of regional policy and fragmentation of integration ideals.

The resurgence of military coups in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel, represents another major impediment to regional integration. Beginning with the Malian coup in 2012 and accelerating post-2020, West Africa has witnessed a rollback of democratic gains that were painstakingly achieved over decades. Military takeovers in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have shifted the political landscape, introducing new regimes that are often hostile or indifferent to ECOWAS protocols.³ The justification for these coups typically hinges on state failure in the face of jihadist threats, corruption, or constitutional manipulation. However, military rule inherently contradicts the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which prohibits the ascension to power through unconstitutional means. As such, ECOWAS has responded with sanctions, suspension of membership, and diplomatic isolation of coup-led governments. Yet, these responses have been met with defiance rather than compliance. The juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have formed new alliances—such as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)—and declared intentions to exit ECOWAS.⁴ This signals a dangerous precedent: rather than restoring democracy, sanctions may be accelerating regional disintegration.

Moreover, the withdrawal or suspension of these states from ECOWAS undermines the very foundation of regional integration, which depends on shared norms and mutual trust. Military rulers often espouse nationalist rhetoric and reject external influence, framing regional integration as an infringement on sovereignty. The resulting diplomatic standoff complicates coordination on security, trade, and development. Additionally, these regimes have engaged in new partnerships with non-traditional actors like Russia, bypassing regional structures altogether.⁵ This geopolitical realignment challenges ECOWAS's centrality and weakens its influence. The rise of authoritarianism also discourages civil society participation and regional democratic solidarity, further eroding integration from within. The broader implication is that integration cannot be sustained in a political environment that rejects the very principles on which it was founded.

Given the dual crises of jihadist insurgency and military rule, there is an urgent need to rethink the trajectory of regional integration in West Africa. Rather than continuing with a top-down model that emphasizes formal treaties and elite-driven protocols, a more inclusive and adaptive framework may be required. Integration must be resilient enough to survive political shocks and flexible enough to accommodate national differences. This may involve reimagining ECOWAS not just as a political body but as a platform for multi-level governance involving civil society, local authorities, and traditional leaders. The failure of integration should not be seen merely as institutional weakness, but as a reflection of deeper political and social fractures. Addressing these requires investment in local conflict resolution, inclusive governance, and developmental infrastructure that strengthens state capacity from the bottom up. Additionally, ECOWAS and other regional actors need to reform their security architecture to include hybrid responses—combining military, political, and socio-economic strategies. It is also vital to rebuild trust between member states and regional bodies. This entails not just punitive measures against coup leaders but proactive engagement with citizens to restore the legitimacy of integration projects. The broader international community has a role to play, but its involvement should prioritize African agency.⁶

The rise and evolution of Jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel, 2011–2023

The rise of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel must be understood within the broader context of state fragility, regional instability, and the aftershocks of global geopolitical events, chief among them being the 2011 NATO-backed overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. The collapse of the Libyan regime unleashed a torrent of arms and combat-hardened Tuareg fighters into the Sahel, especially Mali. These returning fighters, many of whom had served in Gaddafi's security forces, coalesced with local grievances and separatist ambitions to form the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).⁷ However, the secular agenda of the MNLA was soon eclipsed by the rise of jihadist groups such as Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), who exploited the chaos to establish a theocratic foothold in northern Mali.⁸ By early 2012, these groups had taken control of key cities, such as Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, effectively carving out a quasi-state governed by sharia law.⁹ This marked a turning point: jihadism was no longer merely ideological but territorial. The French-led Operation Serval in 2013 succeeded in dislodging these militants temporarily, but it failed to address the root causes of instability. Militants simply melted into rural

areas, rebranded, and regrouped. The conflict's drivers—marginalization, poverty, ethnic rivalries, and weak governance—remained unresolved, creating fertile ground for jihadist resurgence.

From 2014 onward, jihadist groups in the Sahel underwent significant evolution marked by expansion, tactical sophistication, and fragmentation. A pivotal development occurred with the emergence of the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) around 2015. This group, originally led by Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, broke away from MUJWA and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS), introducing new dynamics into an already complex insurgency landscape.¹⁰ ISGS concentrated its activities in the borderlands of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—areas often referred to as the “tri-border” zone. This region’s lack of strong state presence made it an ideal theater for insurgent activity.¹¹ Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda affiliates including Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front formed a coalition in 2017 known as Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly.¹² This group maintained ideological ties to Al-Qaeda and focused on pragmatic alliances with local communities, often exploiting grievances related to land disputes, ethnic rivalries, and government repression. Both ISGS and JNIM employed brutal tactics, such as ambushes, bombings, and assassinations of local leaders, but they diverged in their community engagement. While ISGS was often more indiscriminate in violence, JNIM pursued a more calculated approach aimed at winning local support or compliance.¹³ The result was a competitive yet coexisting insurgency framework that allowed both entities to thrive in different contexts. Burkina Faso, once seen as relatively stable, descended into violence by 2018, with entire provinces falling under jihadist influence. In Niger, jihadist attacks targeted both civilians and military outposts, undermining public confidence in state institutions. By 2020, over 5,000 people had been killed in jihadist-related violence across the Sahel, and the numbers continued to climb each year.¹⁴ The proliferation of actors and the localization of jihadist agendas made the conflict increasingly difficult to contain.

A crucial reason for the durability of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel is their strategic incorporation of local conflicts into their operational playbook. These groups have excelled not only in guerrilla warfare but also in leveraging socio-political fractures, particularly those involving ethnic and intercommunal tensions. In central Mali, the Macina Liberation Front, an affiliate of JNIM, capitalized on long-standing tensions between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers.¹⁵ By positioning themselves as protectors of marginalized Fulani communities, jihadists gained recruits and safe havens. In Burkina Faso, similar patterns emerged, with militants embedding themselves within rural communities and offering protection, dispute resolution, and economic incentives in areas where the state was absent or predatory. This model of insurgency—blending ideology with service provision and community integration—echoes the strategies employed by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Taliban in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Jihadist courts in parts of Mali and Burkina Faso adjudicate local disputes, and some residents prefer them to corrupt or inaccessible state systems.¹⁷ This legitimacy, however coerced, enables militants to entrench their influence. Moreover, militants have infiltrated artisanal gold mining operations, taxing production and laundering profits to sustain their campaigns.¹⁸ Jihadists have also weaponized environmental crises, including desertification and land scarcity, to manipulate intergroup competition. The state's failure to address these multidimensional problems leaves a void that insurgents are all too willing to fill. Consequently, efforts to defeat them through force alone have proven futile. Even where regional or foreign troops launch operations, jihadists frequently resurface once those forces withdraw, demonstrating the resilience of their networks. Their deep social entrenchment makes them more than just combatants; they are increasingly political actors in local governance vacuums.

International interventions have played a central role in the Sahelian jihadist crisis, though their outcomes have been ambivalent at best. France’s initial military success with Operation Serval in 2013 gave way to the more extensive Operation Barkhane in 2014, which aimed to stabilize the broader Sahel region. Yet despite its scale, Barkhane was unable to decisively defeat jihadist insurgents. Local populations often viewed French forces with suspicion, perceiving them as neo-colonial actors. In some cases, alleged civilian casualties from airstrikes and raids further alienated communities.¹⁹ The United States also contributed through intelligence-sharing, drone bases, and Special Forces, but its involvement was more limited and lacked a coherent regional strategy.²⁰ Meanwhile, the G5 Sahel Joint Force, launched in 2017 with support from France and the EU, suffered from inadequate funding, poor interoperability, and conflicting national interests among member states. Multilateral efforts struggled with coordination, while bilateral military arrangements sometimes undermined regional solidarity. The eventual withdrawal of French forces from Mali in 2022, prompted by a diplomatic rift with the ruling junta, signaled the failure of Barkhane to create a sustainable security framework.²¹ Russia, through the Wagner Group, has since filled the vacuum, particularly in Mali, though its presence has brought new allegations of human rights abuses and opaque deals. These developments have reshuffled the geopolitical landscape, with military juntas favoring alternative patrons over traditional allies. Civil society actors and analysts increasingly criticize external interventions for focusing too narrowly on counterterrorism at the expense of governance and development. Without a political solution, they argue, military victories are hollow and transient.²² This critique reflects growing consensus that international interventions must be reoriented toward supporting local peace-building, reforming security sectors, and rebuilding state legitimacy, not merely eliminating terrorists.

The long-term implications of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel are profound, not only for the countries directly affected but for the broader West African region. The insurgency has catalyzed the collapse of public institutions in large swaths of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, turning these zones into ungoverned spaces that threaten regional stability. Beyond immediate security concerns, jihadism is eroding state legitimacy, undermining democratic norms, and entrenching cycles of violence and poverty. Cross-border displacement and refugee flows are straining neighboring countries like Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin, which are themselves experiencing jihadist infiltration along their northern borders.²³ The insurgency's persistence raises serious doubts about the viability of current regional security frameworks and challenges the foundational assumptions of ECOWAS-led integration. Furthermore, military coups in response to jihadist threats suggest a dangerous feedback loop: jihadism justifies authoritarianism, and authoritarianism often exacerbates the very conditions that fuel jihadism. Addressing this crisis thus requires more than military might; it demands a holistic approach that integrates conflict resolution, inclusive governance, community engagement, and sustainable development. Regional and international actors must invest in institutions that prioritize legitimacy, accountability, and justice. The Sahelian crisis also offers lessons on the dangers of neglecting peripheral regions and the perils of overreliance on foreign security paradigms. If jihadist insurgencies are not curtailed through comprehensive, regionally led solutions, the specter of jihadism may continue to metastasize, threatening not only the Sahel but the entire West African subregion.²⁴ Hence, the urgency of reimagining security, not as a militarized endeavor, but as a community-rooted, state-building project is now more critical than ever.

Military coups and the return of authoritarian rule in the Sahel

Between 2011 and 2023, the Sahel region experienced a notable resurgence of military coups, reversing earlier democratic gains. Mali witnessed three coups: in 2012, 2020, and 2021. The 2012 coup, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, was driven by dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist insurgency.²⁵ In 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta led a coup against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, citing corruption and insecurity. Goïta staged another coup in 2021, detaining interim President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, and was subsequently declared interim president by Mali's Constitutional Court.²⁶ Burkina Faso experienced two coups in 2022. In January, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, citing the government's failure to address jihadist violence.²⁷ However, in September, Captain Ibrahim Traoré deposed Damiba, accusing him of failing to quell the insurgency.²⁸ Niger's coup in July 2023 saw General Abdourahamane Tchiani detain President Mohamed Bazoum, citing deteriorating security and governance. These coups reflect a pattern where military leaders capitalize on public dissatisfaction with civilian governments' inability to address security challenges, leading to a cycle of military interventions and political instability.

The successive coups in the Sahel have led to the erosion of democratic institutions and the entrenchment of authoritarian rule. In Mali, the military junta has delayed elections and suspended political activities. A national dialogue in April 2025 recommended naming junta leader Assimi Goïta as president for a renewable five-year term and dissolving political parties.²⁹ In Burkina Faso, the junta has suppressed dissent, with reports of opposition figures facing exile, imprisonment, or enforced silence. Niger's junta suspended the constitution, closed borders, and imposed a curfew following the 2023 coup. These actions undermine the rule of law, restrict civil liberties, and concentrate power in the hands of military leaders, reversing years of democratic progress in the region.

The return of authoritarian rule in the Sahel has been influenced by external actors and shifting geopolitical alliances. Following the coups, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have distanced themselves from traditional Western partners and sought closer ties with Russia. The Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization, has been reported to operate in Mali, with allegations of human rights abuses, including summary executions. These countries have also formed the Alliance of Sahel States, aiming to bolster regional security and reduce reliance on Western support. This realignment reflects a broader trend of authoritarian regimes seeking alternative partnerships that may offer military assistance without the democratic conditionalities often attached to Western aid.

Public response to the military takeovers in the Sahel has been mixed. In some instances, populations have expressed support for the juntas, viewing them as a means to restore order and address security concerns. In Burkina Faso, thousands rallied in support of the military junta following a failed coup attempt, displaying anti-Western sentiment and solidarity with Russia. However, civil society organizations and opposition figures have faced repression. In Mali, political parties boycotted the national dialogue, deeming it unrepresentative and unconstitutional. The suppression of dissent and the curtailment of political freedoms have raised concerns about the long-term implications for governance and human rights in the region.

The resurgence of military coups and authoritarian rule in the Sahel has significant regional and international implications. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, imposing sanctions and calling for the restoration of constitutional order.³⁰ However, the effectiveness of these measures has been limited, as the juntas have consolidated power and sought alternative alliances. The instability in the Sahel threatens to spill over into neighboring countries, exacerbating security challenges and

undermining regional integration efforts. International actors face a dilemma: engaging with military regimes may legitimize authoritarian rule, while disengagement could lead to further instability and increased influence of rival powers.

Challenges to regional integration: Security, sovereignty, and governance

i. Security challenges and the proliferation of armed groups

Security remains a paramount concern hindering regional integration in Africa. The continent has witnessed a surge in armed groups exploiting porous borders and weak state institutions. For instance, the Sahel region has become a hotspot for extremist groups like Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). These groups operate across national boundaries, making it challenging for individual states to combat them effectively. The lack of a unified regional security strategy exacerbates the situation. In West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has struggled to coordinate a cohesive response to these threats. The ECOWAS Standby Force, intended to be a rapid deployment mechanism, suffers from inadequate funding, logistical challenges, and political disagreements among member states. Moreover, the African Union's peacekeeping missions, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), face similar challenges, including insufficient troop contributions and financial constraints. These security challenges not only threaten the stability of individual nations but also impede the broader goal of regional integration by fostering mistrust among states and diverting resources away from integration efforts.

ii. Sovereignty concerns and reluctance to cede authority

A significant impediment to regional integration in Africa is the reluctance of states to cede aspects of their sovereignty to supranational bodies. Many African nations, having recently emerged from colonial rule, are particularly sensitive to issues of sovereignty and are wary of external interference in their domestic affairs. This sensitivity manifests in the hesitance to fully implement regional agreements or to empower regional institutions with binding authority. For example, the East African Community (EAC) has faced challenges in enforcing decisions due to member states' resistance to supranational oversight. Similarly, in West Africa, ECOWAS's efforts to enforce democratic norms have been met with resistance, as seen in the recent withdrawals of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from the bloc following coups in these countries.³¹ These actions underscore the tension between national sovereignty and regional commitments, highlighting the need for a balance that respects state autonomy while promoting collective regional goals.

iii. Governance deficits and institutional weaknesses

Governance issues, including corruption, lack of transparency, and weak institutional frameworks, pose significant challenges to regional integration. Many regional organizations suffer from inadequate funding, limited enforcement capabilities, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. For instance, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has been criticized for its inability to enforce decisions and for the dominance of certain member states, which undermines collective decision-making. Moreover, overlapping memberships in multiple regional organizations lead to duplication of efforts and conflicting obligations, further complicating integration processes. The lack of political will among member states to prioritize regional commitments over national interests exacerbates these issues. Without strong governance structures and genuine commitment from member states, regional integration efforts are likely to remain superficial and ineffective.

iv. Economic disparities and infrastructure deficits

Economic disparities among African countries and inadequate infrastructure hinder the progress of regional integration. While some countries boast relatively strong economies, others struggle with poverty and underdevelopment, leading to unequal benefits from integration initiatives. This imbalance fosters skepticism among less developed countries about the advantages of integration. Furthermore, poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation networks and limited energy access, restricts the movement of goods and people across borders. For example, despite the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aiming to boost intra-African trade, logistical challenges and non-tariff barriers continue to impede trade flows. Addressing these economic and infrastructural challenges is crucial for realizing the full potential of regional integration.

v. Political instability and conflicts

Political instability and conflicts within and between African states significantly obstruct regional integration efforts. Civil wars, coups, and border disputes not only destabilize individual countries but also strain relations among neighboring states. For instance, the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region has had spillover effects on neighboring countries, complicating regional dynamics.³² Similarly, the long-standing dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) has heightened tensions in the Nile Basin.³³ Such conflicts divert attention and resources away from integration initiatives and foster an environment of mistrust. Moreover, the prevalence of authoritarian regimes in some countries undermines the democratic principles that underpin many regional organizations, leading to inconsistencies in governance standards and hindering cohesive policy implementation.

ECOWAS's responses to regional challenges

ECOWAS has historically played a proactive role in addressing political instability and promoting democratic governance within the region. For instance, the bloc has intervened in member states experiencing coups or unconstitutional changes in government, aiming to restore democratic order. In the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, ECOWAS imposed sanctions and suspended their memberships following military takeovers, signaling its commitment to democratic principles. Additionally, ECOWAS has engaged in diplomatic efforts to mediate conflicts and encourage dialogue among member states. These actions underscore the organization's dedication to maintaining regional stability and upholding its foundational values.

Despite its efforts, ECOWAS faces several limitations that hinder its ability to effectively manage regional integration. One significant challenge is the tension between national sovereignty and supranational authority. Member states often prioritize their national interests, leading to resistance against ECOWAS's interventions, as seen in the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Furthermore, the organization's enforcement mechanisms are limited, relying heavily on consensus and lacking the means to compel compliance. Financial constraints and logistical challenges also impede ECOWAS's capacity to implement its initiatives fully. These limitations highlight the need for institutional reforms to enhance the bloc's effectiveness in promoting regional integration.

Looking ahead, ECOWAS's ability to adapt and reform will be crucial in determining its future role in regional integration. Strengthening institutional frameworks, enhancing financial resources, and fostering greater political will among member states are essential steps toward revitalizing the organization. Moreover, ECOWAS must navigate the complex dynamics of regional politics, including the emergence of alternative alliances like the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which reflects a shift in geopolitical alignments. By addressing its internal challenges and engaging constructively with new regional actors, ECOWAS can reaffirm its relevance and continue to serve as a platform for cooperation and integration in West Africa.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of jihadist insurgencies and the resurgence of military rule on regional integration in West Africa, with particular focus on the period from 2011 to 2023. The study sought to analyse how growing insecurity and authoritarianism have affected the effectiveness of regional institutions, particularly the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); investigate the internal and external challenges confronting regional cooperation; and assess the responses, limitations, and future prospects of ECOWAS and other regional bodies in promoting integration.

The findings reveal that the persistent spread of jihadist violence across the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has undermined state authority, destabilised border regions, weakened public confidence in state institutions, and heightened distrust among member states, thereby eroding the foundations of effective regional integration. At the same time, the resurgence of military coups has reversed democratic gains, disrupted constitutional governance, and generated tensions between military-led governments and regional organisations. Collectively, these developments have weakened the principles of solidarity, democratic governance, shared responsibility, and multilateral cooperation that ECOWAS and the African Union seek to uphold.

The study further found that although ECOWAS has responded through diplomatic mediation, economic sanctions, peace and security initiatives, and policy frameworks, its effectiveness has been constrained by limited enforcement capacity, financial dependence, divergent national interests, and concerns over state sovereignty. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS not only exposed a growing crisis of confidence within the organisation but also reflected an emerging trend toward sub-regional fragmentation, exemplified by the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States.

Despite these challenges, the study concludes that regional integration remains indispensable for addressing the interconnected security, political, and economic challenges confronting West Africa. It therefore recommends comprehensive institutional reforms within ECOWAS, strengthened conflict prevention and peace-building mechanisms, enhanced financial and operational autonomy, deeper collaboration with member states, and governance reforms that promote democracy, accountability, and inclusive development. Such measures are essential for rebuilding trust, strengthening regional solidarity, and advancing a more resilient, adaptive, and sustainable framework for regional integration in West Africa.

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