

A stylized map of West Africa composed of a grid of grey dots. Several dots are highlighted in red, indicating specific countries or regions of interest.

ECOWAS in Crisis Mode

Strengths and limits of regional security policy in West Africa

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- The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has reacted resolutely and unanimously to the crises in Guinea, Niger and Côte d'Ivoire. Its member states have widely accepted the promotion and enforcement of democratic principles as a common task.
- The ad-hoc crises management comes at the expense of the long-term development of structures needed to cope with such crises; e.g. a coherent action plan in the field of peace and security as well as mediation capacities and effective sanctioning and intervention capabilities.
- The ECOWAS security architecture moreover exhibits blind spots and displays deficits in terms of internal democracy, which pose a danger to the integrity of the organisation.
- International support for the African Peace and Security Architecture needs to focus more on the interfaces between the African Union and regional organisations as well as those between regional organisations and national policy making.

Ever since Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept his election defeat, Côte d'Ivoire has been hovering on the brink of another civil war. As the region faces further destabilisation, West African states are seeking a solution to the crisis, which now also serves as an indicator of the strength of regional security policy in Africa of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in particular. The African Peace and Security Architecture is generally faced with a lot of hopes and expectations, particularly also in Germany and Europe.

ECOWAS is rightly considered to be the furthest developed regional organisation in Africa in this context. In progressive regional protocols, member states have assumed the obligation to prevent crises and to adhere to principles of democracy and good governance. These accords have not only been put to the test in Côte d'Ivoire in recent times, however. The regional organisation has been needed as crisis manager, mediator and guardian of democratic standards in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Niger. What strengths and weaknesses has ECOWAS revealed in these crises, and what does this mean for German and European support to the African Peace and Security Architecture?

Unanimous and resolute: democratic norms and standards gain acceptance

One positive realisation of the last few years is that guarding democratic standards has become widely accepted as a common task of the ECOWAS. Given the fragile nature of, and deficits in, democracy in almost all the member states, the unanimity and resoluteness with which ECOWAS has condemned and applied sanctions for the most recent violations of the regional protocols is remarkable. Three of the 15 member countries (Guinea, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire) have been suspended most recently. In response to acute crises ECOWAS has held several special summits and sent ECOWAS mediators and missions especially to Côte d'Ivoire as well as Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Togo. The member states have taken a clear stance against the military juntas in Niger and Guinea and have insisted that power be handed over to a democratically legitimated government. In Côte d'Ivoire ECOWAS recognised the challenger Ouattara as the winner of the presidential election, condemned incumbent Gbagbo's subsequent coup and requested

him to leave office. In its declaration adopted at its extraordinary summit at Christmas 2010, ECOWAS even threatened to use »legitimate force« if need be. This decision is consistent with ECOWAS protocols and shows that ECOWAS intends to do everything in its power to prevent Gbagbo from succeeding with his coup and thus sending out a fatal signal for the upcoming elections in Africa. This determination is remarkable and displays a new quality in neighbourly relations and the acceptance of democracy as the preferred form of government. Just like in the earlier case of Niger, the heads of states have turned against one of their own. In West Africa, there is a growing consensus that jointly agreed-upon democratic principles – in the case of Côte d'Ivoire the right of an election's winner to assume office – have to be enforced, and that this might also necessitate intervention in internal matters of a member state.

As a regional power and current chair of ECOWAS, Nigeria is playing an active and very constructive role with regard to Côte d'Ivoire, just as it did before in the cases of Guinea and Niger. In view of Nigeria's immense internal political problems and upcoming contentious elections, this is not to be taken for granted.

In the mentioned crises, it has become apparent that ECOWAS constitutes the primary frame of reference for the states of West Africa. Security policy is an important driver of regional integration in West Africa. Without a doubt, ECOWAS seeks and requires the support of the African Union (AU), not least for its own legitimacy. Yet, at the continental level agreements are also a lot more difficult to attain and there are also more regimes which seek to undermine any consensus on democratic standards. The AU, for example, has not reacted as resolutely as ECOWAS in the case of Tandja's constitutional coup in Niger, arguably mainly due to Libya's influence. And with regard to Côte d'Ivoire, the debate within the AU has been largely dominated by those who for various reasons have little interest in empowering regional organisations to enforce compliance with democratic principles. Contrary to the principle of subsidiarity, the AU has quickly taken the leadership in the Côte d'Ivoire question, but its various mediation initiatives have not produced positive results yet and have rather helped Gbagbo buying time. Differences in the approach between the AU and the ECOWAS became apparent. The crisis demonstrates that the division of labour and coordination mechanisms be-

tween AU and ECOWAS still have to be clearly defined. In the meantime, one can conclude that on the whole, ECOWAS has reacted more quickly and resolutely in the face of political crises.

Positive trends have recently begun to emerge in some of the crises which ECOWAS has sought to manage: peaceful elections took place in Togo in March 2010, with a repetition of the violence in the wake of the rigged 2005 elections being prevented in spite of continuing political tensions. In Guinea the most democratic elections in the history of the country have been successfully carried out under extremely difficult circumstances. After almost two years of rule, the military has handed power over to a democratically elected civil government. Following the constitutional referendum in Niger in October, the military junta has hinted that it intends to follow this example in the upcoming elections. Even if ECOWAS' share in these successes cannot be quantified, one can nevertheless assume that the pressure applied by ECOWAS has had a positive impact. These successes of regional security policy on the one hand contrast with enormous challenges in the implementation of the regional security architecture, however.

Blind spots

While the acute conflicts described above dominate the agenda of the regional organisation, other less intense but equally worrying crises, conflicts and regional security risks remain unmanaged. The Sahel, for instance, is being increasingly destabilised by cross-border crime, the Tuareg conflict, terrorism and the spread of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQMI). The borderlines between conflict systems are becoming increasingly blurred. In West Africa, not only Mali and Niger are affected by this crisis, but the long-awaited ECOWAS summit on the Sahel crisis has yet to take place.

Moreover, governments of member states continue to violate the additional protocol on democracy and good governance with impunity. For instance, President Blaise Compaoré, who has been ruling Burkina Faso since 1987, secured himself yet another term in 2010 through a controversial interpretation of the constitution, without any opposition by the ECOWAS. At the same time, he is sup-

posed to be defending democratic values in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire as an ECOWAS mediator. Such blind spots could be interpreted as double standards and jeopardise the credibility of ECOWAS in the medium term.

Lack of instruments

ECOWAS's diplomatic missions moreover quickly showed their limits. For instance, ECOWAS was ultimately not successful in stopping the constitutional coup of incumbent president Tandja in Niger in 2009. ECOWAS did not have the means to force a return to constitutional order. Only the Niger military put an end to Tandja's rule in a coup d'état in February 2010 – which was also rightly condemned by ECOWAS.

At present ECOWAS is running out of options in Côte d'Ivoire. The levers for effective political and economic sanctions (e.g. freezing private bank accounts, limits on travel for members of the government, trade embargoes, freezing of loans and development aid) are in the hands of other actors such as the EU or the USA. And ECOWAS lacks the resources to intervene on any significant scale to restore a democratic system. The ECOWAS Standby Force created for such purposes is still being set up and is not yet ready for action. Moreover, it is being designed for peacekeeping, but not the kind of combat operation which might be necessary in Côte d'Ivoire. In particular, it lacks air transport and naval capabilities. Without international support, successful intervention is not conceivable. ECOWAS needs not only financial, material and logistical aid, but – as was most recently emphasised by the Nigerian President - it above all requires legitimacy through respective resolutions of the AU and the United Nations (UN), which have not been forthcoming to date. Given the AU's hesitant approach and the enormous risks of a military engagement it seems that in its search for solutions to the Ivorian crisis, ECOWAS focused too early on the use of »legitimate force« and now faces the danger of a loss in its credibility due to its potentially empty threat.

Moreover, an intervention that simply aims at toppling Gbagbo would hardly solve the crisis in this deeply divided country. A successful, sustainable peace strategy would have to be much more comprehensive. Yet it is

exactly in such long-term processes and post-conflict situations that ECOWAS's limitations become most evident, as demonstrated in the case of Guinea Bissau. During an extraordinary summit in September 2010, and in response to a request by the President of Guinea Bissau, ECOWAS agreed to provide support and deploy a special force to facilitate the Security Sector Reform (SSR) necessary to stabilize the conflict ridden country. Up until today, however, the required resources have still not been apportioned and no progress has been made. The fact that ECOWAS cannot even mobilise robust assistance for a small country like Guinea Bissau is a worrying signal with a view to post-conflict-scenarios and SSR-processes in countries like Guinea, Niger or Cote d'Ivoire.

Stagnating institutional development

The outlined challenges relate to the fact that the ad hoc management of the various escalating crises in the region is impeding the medium and long-term establishment of necessary structures within the regional organisation. Important instruments and mechanisms of crisis prevention have still not been developed. For instance, the civil component of the ECOWAS Standby Force has not been established yet. The focus of ECOWAS and international support has so far have been almost exclusively on military capabilities. Secondly, the ECOWAS Commission still lacks capacities for the professional preparation and execution of political mediation missions. At least, however, it has been decided to create a mediation unit within the commission. Thirdly, the procedure for appointing persons to vacant positions on the Commission has yet to be clarified and the moratorium on new hiring remains in place, while the Commission remains understaffed; sometimes even vacated as a result of the intensive travelling schedule.

Moreover, the overdue appointment of new ECOWAS commissioners (President, Vice-President and seven Commissioners) remains unresolved. As a result of the need to hold special summits on the Côte d'Ivoire crisis, the regular ECOWAS summit scheduled for December 2010 – which was to agree on the appointments – has been postponed several times. For the time being the team surrounding the interim President of the Commission, James Victor Gbeho, remains in office until further notice. Because processes in the ECOWAS Commission are still less institutionalised and very hierarchical and of-

ten dependent on individuals, the uncertainty over the leadership posts is blocking most long-term planning.

One particularly glaring weakness in this context is that the comprehensive ECOWAS Conflict-Prevention Framework (ECPF) adopted in 2008 has yet to be operationalised. There is still no coherent overarching planning instrument for programmes in the area of peace and security, which also hampers donor coordination.

The donor community itself has not made much progress in coordinating its programmes in the area of peace and security. The large number of different programmes, donor priorities, approaches and requirements are posing considerable challenges to the Commission. It would be fatal to the legitimacy of ECOWAS if it was perceived as being increasingly donor driven.

Dangerous neglect of internal democracy

The enormous external financial and material support channelled through the ECOWAS Commission is not subject to any democratic control within ECOWAS. The ECOWAS budget also remains largely a matter of secrecy and is on the whole impenetrable. ECOWAS would be well advised to live up to its own standards of good governance in terms of budget transparency and control in order to safeguard its credibility and integrity.

The potential role of the ECOWAS Parliament continues to be underestimated in this regard both by ECOWAS and by the donor community. The regional parliament still only has an advisory role. But even formulating opinions has proven a difficult task for the parliament, given its unfavourable internal incentive structures as well as its at times inefficient and rather hierarchical internal procedures. Also, the members of parliament are faced with enormous demands and a role conflict, as they are at the same time members of national parliaments, from which they receive their seats and legitimacy. The direct election of the regional parliament slated for 2010 has been postponed indefinitely. A decoupling of national and regional parliamentary seats is still not being considered, nor has an effective campaign for an enhanced mandate been established.

The regional parliament is not only needed to perform checks and controls – it is also required to bridge the gap

between regional and national policies. ECOWAS largely remains a project of heads of state, the »integration avant-garde« working in Abuja and the donors. Linkages between the ECOWAS and the national capitals still need to be expanded and strengthened. The current crises clearly demonstrate that ECOWAS can hardly enforce adherence to regional standards. Even a perfection of ECOWAS instruments and capacities would not prevent the brunt of the work implementing the Protocol on Conflict Prevention, Democracy and Good Governance having to take place at the national level.

Conclusions for ECOWAS support

The current approaches to regional cooperation for peace, democracy and security in West Africa are remarkable and promising. The AU and ECOWAS still face major challenges in consolidating the African Peace and Security Architecture, however, which also necessitate continued international support. Given the recent experiences, German and European policy should:

1. Focus more on the relationship between regional organisations and the AU as well as relations between regional organisations and the member countries.
2. Support the AU and ECOWAS in applying sanctions and intervening in crises.
3. Continue to encourage and foster long-term processes for the establishment of necessary structures and instruments, in particular the establishment of the civilian component of the Standby Force, the creation of mediation capacities within the Commission and the implementation of programmes aimed at strengthening democratic structures at the national levels.
4. Continue to support ECOWAS in the development of a coherent planning instrument for programmes in the area of peace and security and in improving the coordination of donors.
5. Promote the democratisation of ECOWAS institutions and processes as well as the strengthening of the ECOWAS parliament's mandate.



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