



AFRICAN NARRATIVES

The Sahel: Birth of a Regional Bloc with Geopolitical Dimensions



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Introduction

Since Sub-Saharan African countries gained independence from European colonizers in the mid-20th century, many continue to struggle to break free from external influence, where powerful entities impose their political, social, religious, and economic visions. Amidst the imbalance of global power and the existence of loopholes exploited by influential figures, the gap between the weak and the powerful remains wide, and suffering continues. To counter this, regional blocs have emerged across Africa, pursuing a partial unity meant to pave the way for the great-

er unity of the African continent. Early leaders such as Anwar Sadat, Patrice Lumumba, Modibo Keita, and others fought political battles to create a united force, aiming to regain Africa's position and strength rather than remain divided. Examples of this push for unity include the Arab Maghreb Union in the north, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the east, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in the west, alongside several other monetary and political unions.

Accelerating Events in West Africa

The pace of events has accelerated in West Africa over the past four years, particularly in the coastal Sahel regions. These regions, encompassing countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, form the transitional zone between the Sahara Desert and the forests and savannas to the south. The consequences of this acceleration have included popular protests, military coups, the expulsion of French forces, and the entry of Russia as a new ally, all indicating the region is entering a new phase characterized by shifting balances and visions.

ECOWAS's Stance on Coups

Following the wave of military coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, ECOWAS exerted pressure on the military regimes to return power to civilians and restore constitutional order. The bloc imposed sanctions on those countries, freezing their financial assets in banks, and even threatening military intervention. These measures were met with large street protests, denouncing what protestors saw as unjust measures and affirming their support for the new rulers.

The Sahel Countries' Decision to Withdraw from ECOWAS

The leaders of the three Sahel countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) believed that withdrawing from ECOWAS was necessary to fulfill the popular desire to break free from colonial influence and create a politically, socially, and economically harmonious environment. ECOWAS, in line with its established charters

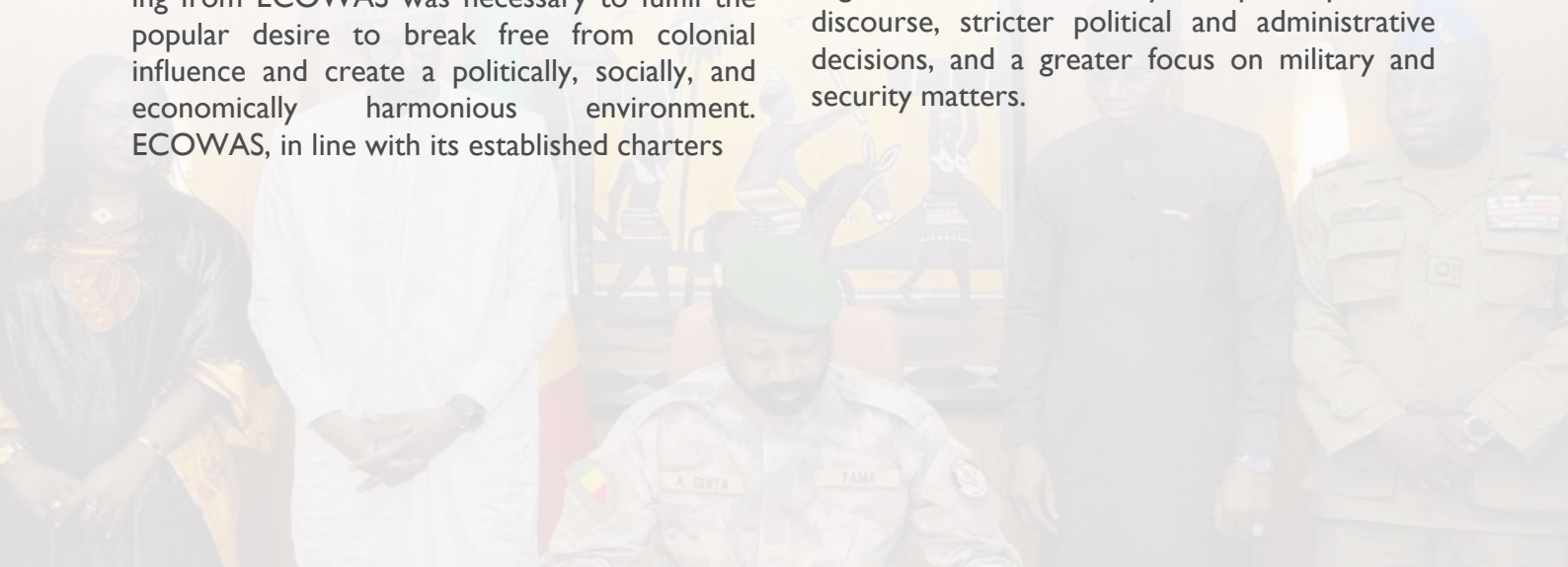
emphasizing democracy and good governance, exerted pressure to remove the military from power, which the leaders opposed. ECOWAS's principles dictate that power should only be obtained through the ballot box, rejecting military coups.

However, some observers believe that the declaration to leave the bloc is simply a political maneuver aimed at prolonging the military leaders' time in power without being subjected to international and regional pressures, particularly the imposition of sanctions that negatively impact their landlocked countries' economies. Remaining under the ECOWAS umbrella would require an elected, civilian government abiding by the constitution, which the military is unwilling to do.

Official statements and speeches from the highest levels of the executive authorities in the Sahel countries followed, confirming the withdrawal of the ECOWAS coalition countries, even amidst attempts by the organization to persuade the military leaders to reverse this decision. Senegalese President Macky Sall was tasked with conducting mediation efforts, but the attempts proved unsuccessful.

The Sahel Coalition's New Path

Since the coup that overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2020, the Sahel coalition countries, led by Mali, have embarked on a new diplomatic and political path. The new military rulers have adopted an approach markedly different from the policies and practices of previous regimes, characterized by sharper diplomatic discourse, stricter political and administrative decisions, and a greater focus on military and security matters.





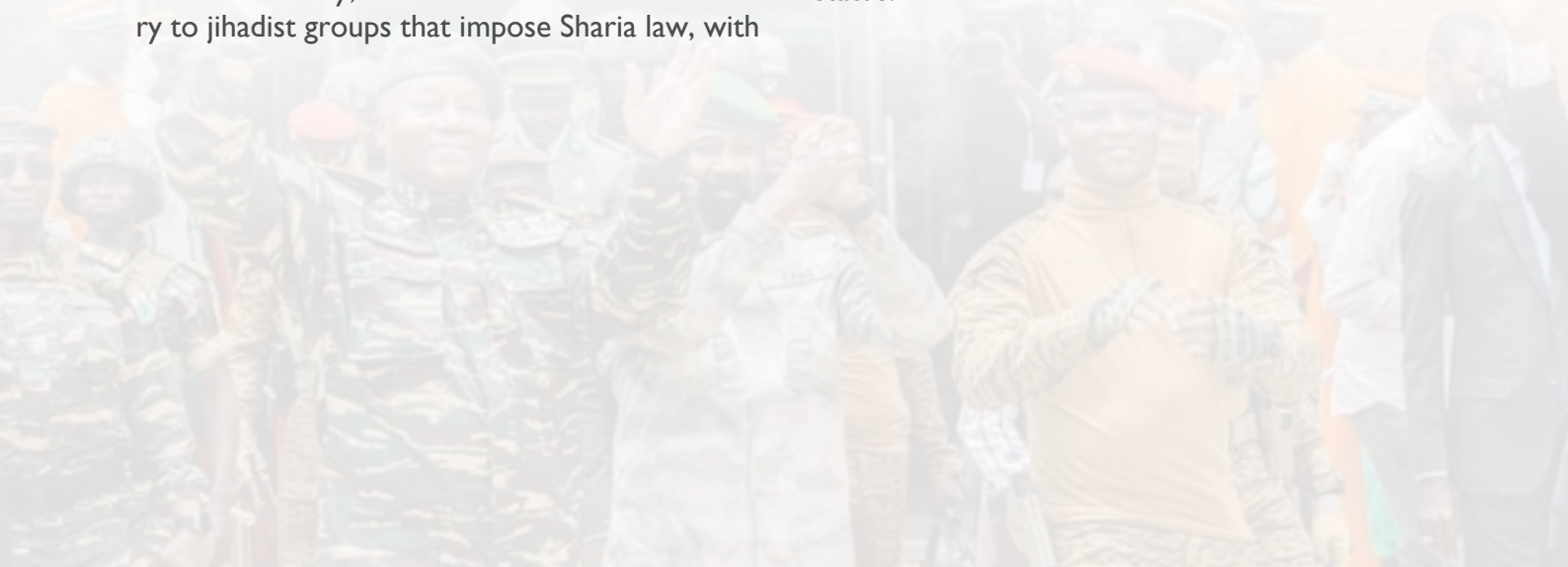
Reasons for Integration

Several reasons motivated the coalition countries to adopt a unified approach, culminating in the establishment of the Confederation of Sahel States, created through the Liptako-Gourma Charter on December 16, 2023. The Confederation aims to build a joint defense against security threats posed by jihadist or rebel movements, or any military attacks.

To understand the urgency behind establishing such an alliance, it is worth noting that Burkina Faso has lost three-quarters of its territory, with only the capital, Ouagadougou, and the city of Bobo-Dioulasso remaining under government control. Similarly, Mali has lost much of its territory to jihadist groups that impose Sharia law, with

villages and towns subjected to mass killings despite the presence of French and international military forces.

From a political standpoint, the Sahel countries felt it was necessary to adopt unified political positions to strengthen the official character of their sovereign decisions and to fulfill the popular demand to free the Sahel countries from Western dependence, especially from France. France has been associated with corrupt politicians, the evasion of terrorist groups, and dealings with armed rebel movements. Mali has even demanded that France be stripped of its pen-holding status.



Record Achievements

The coalition countries have managed to achieve strategic goals in record time, surpassing ECOWAS's accomplishments over many years. On the security front, the Malian authorities were able to extend their control over all major cities and important towns, including the city of Kidal, the stronghold of the rebellion, and their progress even reached the border town of Tinzwatene with Algeria, thanks to intelligence coordination with Niger and Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso was also able to return more than 600,000 displaced people and refugees to their countries and villages, and 1,000 schools were reopened.

However, some observers consider these military achievements to be ambiguous, citing the military regimes' secrecy and selective presentation of information. Accusations of human rights violations by members of the army in conflict zones and a blackout on the activities of terrorist groups further complicate the picture, especially in the tri-border area.

Despite these ambiguities, the return of order to remote towns and major cities remains a significant security achievement welcomed by the people. It is expected that governments will

extend their control over the countryside of cities, supported by Russian planes and the African Legion fighting alongside the Malian armed forces.

The return to the eastern camp, specifically to Russian, Chinese, and Turkish allies, has yielded tangible positive results, particularly regarding the supply of equipment and weapons. The Sahel countries have increased their military arsenal and have been able to obtain good military equipment, including planes, armored vehicles, tanks, and drones, leading to an increase in their effectiveness on the ground and achieving several successes.

However, the participation of the Russian Legion in combat operations against terrorist or separatist movements remains a thorny issue. While the military raises the slogan of sovereignty, the involvement of a private security company, easily labeled as mercenaries, presents a moral problem to the people. The official narrative maintains that Russian soldiers are present only for training purposes related to modern equipment.



Record Achievements

Several challenges cast a shadow over the fledgling confederation, tasked with dismantling the colonial legacy at all levels. The confederation believes that France is using ECOWAS as a platform to exert influence over the Sahel countries. Challenges in implementing its vision include:

- **Guaranteeing the free movement of people and property:**

The ECOWAS countries included 15 countries with more than 300 million people, whose citizens had the right to move and live within the West African space. With the withdrawal of the Sahel countries, it became necessary to find legal mechanisms that guarantee movement within the Sahel countries, and to consider creating mechanisms and legislation that would facilitate movement for the well-being of the people.

- **Establishing a unified force:**

Work is underway to establish a military force of 5,000 fighters, but the number remains small compared to the size of the security challenge posed by ISIS, Al-Qaeda, the Macina Liberation Front, Ansar al-Islam, and Boko Haram, in addition to rebel movements and criminal gangs. However, joint operations between army corps are ongoing and are yielding good results on the ground.

- **Maintaining political stability:**

The ruling regimes face internal pressure from political parties that call for a return to the constitution and the organization of elections. Political parties issue statements and hold conferences in this regard, which may lead to a series of demonstrations that undermine political stability, even if the regimes enjoy broad popular support.





Conclusion

The Confederation of Sahel States, or the Sahel Coalition, is a significant historical turning point for West Africa, and even for the entire continent. It served as the starting point for demonstrations demanding the withdrawal of French forces, a demand that spread to most African countries, even allied ones. The Sahel countries have thus exported a valuable concept in African politics: the imposition of a country's own vision without deference to the former colonizer.

The Confederation enjoys popular support from which it derives its legitimacy, and as long as governments continue to move forward towards extending security, achieving peace, and improving living conditions, the people will stand by it until it achieves the elements of a decent life.

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