

## Fostering Regional Integration in Africa in the Wake of Military Takeovers in the Sahel: Recasting the Casablanca-Monrovia and Brazzaville Debate?<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel region and the crisis surrounding the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has put back the question of regional integration and African unity to intense scholarly scrutiny. The Sahel has emerged as the epicentre of violent extremism in the world according to the Institute for Economic and Peace's 2024 Global Terrorism Index. The resurgence of military coups in the region further adds to the political dynamics of the region. The intervention of ECOWAS and the AU to restore constitutional order and the counteraction of the military juntas have resulted to the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States in the Sahel which has implications for regional integration in Africa in general. This study adopts a qualitative research strategy and case study design to examine the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel. It is based on desk review, particularly data sources such as Google scholar. The findings reveal that the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel region has implications for regional integration and the objective of unity of the African Union. Military coups in the Sahel have raised the stakes and challenges for Africa unity via regional integration by complicating the role of the regional institution, ECOWAS and ultimately the African Union. It posits that revisiting the foundational discourse of African unity and integration that is the Casablanca-Monrovia and Brazzaville debates is essential to understanding the current political dynamics in the Sahel region.

### Keywords:

Military coups; regional integration; violent extremism; African unity; Sahel region.

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## *Introduction*

The integration of Africa was and has been a major preoccupation of most post-independent African leaders as a solution to the myriad of challenges plaguing the newly independent states. African governments accepted regional integration as an important lever to attaining their development strategies (Hartzenberg, 2011:2, Hakuna & Tanyanyiwa, 2014:104). This quest for development through regional integration resulted in the conclusion of numerous regional integration arrangements (Hartzenberg, 2011). As such, economic motives informed earlier strides for an integrated Africa. In this understanding, the free movement of goods, services, people and capital between national markets has been the aspiration of African governments since independence (Conceicao et al, 2014). Regional integration was conceived to serve as a catalyst for the economic transformation of the Africa such as in its capacity for addressing major constraints to export competitiveness imposed by small national economies, increase competitiveness of local markets and also overcoming geographical challenges such as enclavement (Ibid, 2014:2, Oyejide, 2000).

Several arrangements and agreements have underpinned the efforts of African statesmen towards realising the vision of a united and integrated continent. They range from conferences to institutions-building. The broad consensus in scholarship on regional integration in Africa points to the fact that it has not succeeded in catalysing intra-regional and intra-Africa trade (Oyejide, 2000). The existence of a number of regional blocs initially for economic purposes translates to the commitment to the ideal of regionalism by African leaders as a catalyst to socio-economic and political transformation of the continent. The Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 and the Abuja Treaty in 1991 crystallised into concrete steps to regional economic integration. Still under the aegis of the defunct OAU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) emerged such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Southern Africa Development Authority (SADC) (Olubomehin & Dayo Kawonishe, 2004) just to name a few. The efforts at regional integration gained emphasis with the advent of the African Union (AU) in 2002 due to the weaknesses of the OAU. The role of the AU in fostering regional integration in Africa is specified in Article 3 (c) of the Constitutive Act which is to “accelerate the political and socio- economic integration of the continent” (African Union, 2002). This put the AU at the centre of all efforts to foster a more integrated and united Africa as underscored by Vision 2063 of a more integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena (African Union, 2013).

Despite strides made at regional integration in Africa, the African Union is still grappling with contentious political crises ranging from armed intra-state and inter-state conflicts with its attendant humanitarian consequences, democratic deficits and more recently a resurgence of military takeovers and putschist attempts. The latter is glaring and very recent in the Sahel region. Empirical literature presents the Sahel as a region with complex security challenges ranging from violent extremism, intra-state conflicts,

climate change related difficulties, external intervention among others. These complexities intermingle to create an image of a region sunk in political instability. Some have described the Sahel as a hot bed for extremism (Hassan, 2020). It has become the most violent zone in the world (Makombe and Akinola, 2022). In this purview, jihadists have taken the Sahel as a safe haven (Ibid, p. 202). The humanitarian condition in the region has been described as fragile, complicated by violent extremism and armed conflicts (Dieng, 2022). The Sahelian countries which have come under intense scholarly consideration on political instability of recent include: Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

The Sahelian States of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have since 2020 been governed by military juntas. Since independence, these states have experienced military rule in one or more eras of their political history. Despite certain remarkable moments of civilian rule in these states, the armed forces have remained the pre-eminent political actors (Elischer, 2019). The influence of the military in politics has always often provoked condemnation from both domestic and international institutions and actors. They consider military intervention in politics as undemocratic and unconstitutional. Despite the wind of political liberalization that swept across Africa in the 1990s, military coups have continued to pose a threat to the democratisation process in sub-Saharan Africa (Taruvunga, 2023). It has been argued that the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel in particular is correlated to leadership gaps in attenuating the severe socio-economic, political and security crises in the region (Makombe and Akinola, 2022, Oluayemi, 2024). These acts of military intervention in politics have been criticised as a qualitative reversal of democracy (Ibid, p.8). Some historical factors that underpin violent extremism generally in the Sahel include: Tuareg rebellion, the influence of religion, spillover effects of the Algerian civil war, impact of the Libyan crisis and the Fulani crisis (Sunjo & Nyadi, 2024).

Regional organisations have been vocal in condemning the upsurge of military coups in the Sahel. The African Union from a continental level and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the regional body in West Africa have been the leading institutions in this regard. Silencing of guns is one of the strategic focuses of the African Union to eradicate poverty and insecurity in Africa but the resurgence of military coups only helps to make this vision become more elusive and further compound the aforementioned challenges (Makombe and Akinola, 2022:11). The African Union and ECOWAS have responded to the spate of unconstitutional change of governments by imposing economic sanctions on the juntas, suspending their membership in the continental and regional bodies and called for a return to democratic rule (Adetuyi, 2020). The aborted attempt to use force on the military juntas by ECOWAS and counteraction from the juntas have put the regional bloc in a dilemma of balancing principles with pragmatism that puts it on the path to disintegration (Aning and Bjarnesen, 2024). The concerted efforts by ECOWAS to return the military juntas in the Sahel to civilian rule occasioned a coalition of the juntas against any action against one of them. The failure of both hard and diplomatic measures to revert military rule in this region is reflected in the creation of a military alliance by the juntas (Gbadamosi, 2024).

It is therefore evident that abundant scholarship on the Sahel has concentrated on insecurity, political instability, external intervention and peacekeeping but very scanty about the repercussions of these dynamics on regional integration efforts which is a strategic objective of the African Union. Thus, the issue at stake is the fact that while the African Union is focused on achieving the goal of a more integrated Africa, political developments and dynamics in the Sahel calls regional integration into question. The aim of this article is to critically analyse the political situation in the Sahel regarding the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from the ECOWAS regional bloc to form a new alliance of three military juntas called Alliance of Sahel States (ASS/AES). The objective is to find out how the latter impacts regional integration efforts in West Africa in particular and the African continent in general by invoking the Casablanca versus Monrovia debate which animated earlier discourse on regional integration in Africa. This article is structured into three parts. The first part is the introduction which gives a general background to the political developments in the Sahel region, the second part outlines the research methodology and the third part is the results and discussion on how military takeovers in the Sahel has a bearing on regional integration efforts in Africa.

### *Methodology*

The study utilised a qualitative research strategy and case study design to analyse the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel and how these developments has a bearing on efforts by the continental and regional institutions such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) respectively to foster regional integration and unity in Africa. The study invoked the foundational discourse on regional integration in Africa which is the Casablanca versus Monrovia debates through a historical lens using desk review in order to place the emergent regional bloc of three in the Sahel, the confederation, Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) comprising Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger within current academic discourse on regional integration in Africa. To this end, secondary data sources including published and unpublished works were employed. They include: articles, books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, policy briefs and reports which were valuable sources of the review.

### *Results and Discussion*

#### *1. The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel*

The Sahel has come under intense scrutiny due to the spate of military coups which have rocked the region since 2020. This is not a new phenomenon in the region as it can be said it is just a replay of the political situation of the region in the immediate aftermath of political independence when military dictatorship was the norm (Elischer, 2019). As espoused by Hassan (2020) the Sahel is the hotbed for extremism. This indicates that military coups are just additions to the political complexities of the region and not the sole issue. It is also a pointer to the fact that different conditions inform the different

coups periods. Strong military intervention in politics (praetorianism) in the Sahel in the 1960s and 1970s was enabled by autocratic civilian-led governments, compounded by their inability to live up to their promises made to the people immediately after independence such as economic and political development (Elischer, 2019:10). The above conditions created conducive grounds for the intervention of the military in politics in the Sahel region. Though some differences existed between the Sahel states, the conditions above were pre-eminent and common in most if not all. It is thus imperative to investigate the conditions which inform the resurgence of military coups in this region since 2020 on a country-by-country basis, that is to say: Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, as the cases under consideration in this study.

### *The Case of Mali in 2020 and 2021*

Mali has a history of coup d'Etats but the resurgence of this phenomenon in early 2020 and 2021 points to the accumulation of factors conducive for the intervention of the military in politics. The drivers of the coup has been linked to many factors which include: public dissatisfaction with the manipulation of parliamentary elections as the immediate cause and government`s inability to restore order and protect the civilian population against constant attacks by violent local armed groups and Islamic extremists as remote factors (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). The veracity of this justification is corroborated by the fact that, the coup was celebrated by majority of Malians (Ibid). It can be deduced that the populace saw it as a window of opportunity to exit the difficulties they faced due to governance deficits. Thus, the actions of Assimi Goita were positively received as liberating. By successfully executing two coups in 2020 and 2021 by deposing President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Prime Minister Bah Ndaw respectively, Captain Goita reinforced his public perception that through him, order would be restored with an eventual return to civilian rule. However, some people viewed it as “people in power fighting among themselves” (Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

### *The Military Coup in Niger*

The attempted coup in Niger in March 2021 has been hinged on the irregularities owing to the February 2021 presidential elections in the country. The incumbent as at that time is said to have rejected the outcome of the elections despite persuasion that he should accept defeat in order to go down in records as the first seating civilian President to have relinquished power to another (France 24, 2021 as cited by Akinola & Makombe, 2024). It is reported that the opposition candidate, Mohamed Bazoum had 55.75 per cent of the votes while the incumbent, Mohamane Ousamane polled 44.25 per cent of the votes which was contested by the latter (France 24, 2021 cited in Akinola & Makombe, 2024). The opposition candidate contested the outcome in the constitutional court but it was rejected. The incumbent claimed he had won the election by 50.30 per cent (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). This political conflict created the fertile ground for an attempted military on the eve of the presidential inauguration in which





137 people were killed in western Niger due to a clash with jihadists groups (The Defense Post, 2021 cited in Akinola & Makombe, 2024). Thus, it can be inferred that the jihadists exploited the political skirmishes and vulnerabilities between the incumbent and opposition over the helm of the state to exact violence on the population.

### *The Military coup in Burkina Faso*

The forceful intervention of the military in politics in Burkina Faso in 2022 has been explained to be due to the escalation of the security landscape in Burkina Faso and the failure of the government to contain the jihadists' insurgency (Elischer & Lawrance, 2022). Before now, Burkina Faso was considered the "island of stability" in the conflict-prone region (Haavik et al, 2022). However, it has been posited that the relative stability of Burkina Faso during the reign of Blaise Compoare was due to the complex political network he planted which has been described as the "the big man deep state" which disappeared with his departure (Ibid). This led to the fragmentation of the state as it slid into political violence due to the emergence of multiple forces to contest political power. The two successive coups which took place between January and September 2022 under Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was justified on the inability of the government to contain the jihadist insurgency in the country (Aluyemi, 2024).

From the three cases above, a common denominator can be derived to characterise the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel region. Governance deficits underpin all three cases. The military juntas argued that the civilian Presidents failed to maintain order, protect the citizens and provide for basic economic needs. This was evident in the escalation of extreme violence by Non-state actors with the population bearing the brunt of their actions. Consequently, suspending the constitution in order to restore order for an eventual return to civilian rule is the thesis advanced by the juntas. However, the spate of military coups in the Sahel has been condemned by the African Union, the regional institution, ECOWAS and some members of the international community as unconstitutional and anti-democratic. Particularly important in this regard is ECOWAS which has engaged in both diplomatic and hard measures to roll back putchist tendencies in the Sahel. The reactions of the juntas have made it imperative to interrogate the role of ECOWAS in fostering regional integration in Africa on the heels of the re-awakening of the phenomenon of military coups in Africa, focusing on the Sahel region.

### *2. The Role of the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) in rolling back Coup d`Etats in the Sahel.*

The continental institution, the African Union and the regional body, ECOWAS has not been indifferent to the frequency and scope of military coups in West Africa in general and the Sahel region in particular. Their intervention is expendable on account of

fostering democracy, constitutionality and most importantly, African unity via regional integration.

### *The African Union (AU) and resurgent military coups in the Sahel*

The Lome declaration of 2000 provides basic knowledge on the commitment of the AU to democracy and constitutionality in Africa. Initially drawn under the defunct OAU, the Lome declaration was aimed at fostering democracy in Africa on the tenets of regional peace, sustainable democracy and political legitimacy (Mohammed, 2022). This declaration is centrally based on outlawing unconstitutional governments and confers legitimacy to those that come into power through credible and competitive electoral process (Ibid). The AU's commitment to the rule of law and constitutionality is further crystallised by the Constitutive Act of the AU in which article 30 stipulates that “governments that come into power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union” ( Phakathi, 2018 cited in Mohammed, 2022). The legal instrument which defines what the AU terms unconstitutional government is the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Good Governance (ACDEG) adopted on 30th January, 2007 (Ibid). Having explored the legal and institutional framework of the AU regarding military coups, it is imperative to understand its intervention in the recent spate of coups in the Sahel: Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

In Mali, the AU adopted a tough stance and its decisions were swift against the military junta. It rejected the transitional charter of the junta which extended into 2025 and immediately suspended it from participating in its activities until normal constitutional order has been restored to the country (Mohammed, 2022). The AU furthered its sanctions by imposing tougher measures such as border closures and restrictions on financial transactions (Mohammed, 2022:99). This stance of the AU triggered the second coup as Assimi Goita toppled the interim transitional President, Bah Ndaw and the Prime Minister, Moctar Quane who were pressurised to resign which derailed the transitional timetable (Ibid). In Niger, the African Union immediately condemned the coup and suspended Niger from the AU until the restoration of the civilian-led transitional process (Oluropo et al, 2024). The AU went further to impose travel restrictions and targeted sanctions against the junta and their family members (Ibid, 34). In the Burkina Faso, similar measures were adopted. This created a contagion effect among the military juntas in the Sahel which will be explored in details subsequently.

### *ECOWAS and the creation of a junta contagion in the Sahel*

The tough stance adopted by the continental body, the African Union against the juntas was amplified by the regional body, ECOWAS. The original mission of ECOWAS was to foster regional integration among West African States. However, the imperative of responding to the multiple threats to peace, development and integration expanded its mandate (Kohnert, 2023). Following the speed and scope of military coups in the Sahel,



principally in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the regional body, ECOWAS adopted a common stance against coup plotters in terms of condemnation and sanctions. In addition to the sanctions imposed by the African Union, ECOWAS, led by the regional power, Nigeria threatened a military intervention in Niamey, Niger if Bazoum was not released and reinstated within a week (Kohnert, 2023:2). Nigeria even went further to cut electricity supply to its neighbor, Niger which depends on 70% electricity from Nigeria (AFP & Le Monde, 2023 cited in Kohnert, 2023:3). This strategy further created problems for ECOWAS following the reactions of the coup leaders.

### *3. Emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS/AES)*

The coup leaders in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso withdrew their membership from the regional bloc, ECOWAS on the grounds that it is ineffective and influenced by external powers (Africanews, 2024). According to Niger's military ruler, General Abdourahman Tchiani, ECOWAS has become a threat to their states (Ibid). They accuse ECOWAS of complicity with the West which does not serve the interest of the people but the former. General Abdourahman argued: "we are going to create an AES of the people, instead of an ECOWAS whose directives and instructions are dictated to it by powers that are foreign to Africa" (Ibid). The alliance of three countries culminated in an agreement of cooperation to fight armed rebellion and external aggression (Aljazeera, 2023). The eventual charter drawn in Niamey, Niger is known as the Alliance of Sahel States which binds the signatories to assist one another- including militarily in the event of an attack against any one of them (Ibid). The Liptako-Gourma Charter creating the Alliance of Sahel States is stated to have emerged due to the crisis within ECOWAS following the coup in Niger (Grutjen, 2024). This action further divides ECOWAS in a context where regional integration and African unity is a paramount goal of the African Union. It also raises important concerns about foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of the Sahel which requires a critical lens.

### *4. External influence in the political landscape of the Sahel region*

The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel has provoked concerns of foreign influence in the coup occurrence, scope and dynamics. Among the divided opinions, one school of thought argues that military interests and access to natural resources underpin external intervention in military coups in the Sahel which includes removing leaders who stand in their way (Institute for Security Studies, 2023). This perception is emboldened by the controversial positions some western countries take regarding the resurgent coups. Examples include the fact that the U.S and France endorsed the military coup in Chad in 2021 but condemned the coup and suspended aids in other Sahelian countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. They considered the case of Chad as a counter-insurgency move in the greater Lake Chad Basin but condemned that in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as unconstitutional (Ibid). However, the perception of western intervention has been strongly rejected by the African Union during its 1772nd Peace and Security Council session following the 26th July Niger coup (Ibid).



The role of the Russian Paramilitary Company, Wagner further crystallises the geopolitical dynamics of external influence in the resurgent military coups in the Sahel. Russia has been touted to heightening the geopolitical dynamics of foreign role in the resurgent coups in the Sahel. According to this account, Russia acts through the Paramilitary Company, Wagner to project Russia's influence in Africa generally (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2021). To achieve the above objective, Russia leverages anti-western sentiments in Africa that dates back to European colonialism (Vuksanovic, 2023). France is a frequent target in Francophone Africa (Ibid). In addition, Russia views Africa as an arena to gain foothold on the continent and project its great power status (Ibid). There has been a drastic shift away by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from their traditional allies, U.S and France towards Russia and China (Melville, 2024). The above analysis underscores the controversial role of foreign actors in the evolving political landscape of the Sahel region.

The emergence of a new alliance in the Sahel, the growing division within ECOWAS and the intervention of external powers in the Sahel necessitates an interrogation of integration and African unity by revisiting the foundational discourse of regional integration which is the Monrovia-Casablanca and Brazzaville debates. This debate forms the basis of contemporary study and practice of African unity and integration.

### *5. The Casablanca-Monrovia and Brazzaville debates on African unity and integration*

These were the major schools of thought which emerged, having diverse ideologies for African unity and integration. Despite their differences, they were united by the common sense of a united and integrated Africa. They were made up of different states and consequently, blocs. A careful consideration of the positions of the three schools is imperative to understand how it still informs contemporary discourse and evolution of African unity.

#### *The Casablanca Group*

The Casablanca Group comprised Ghana, Guinea, Morocco, Algeria, Mali and Libya. They were preoccupied with the controversial role of external powers in the internal affairs of Africa and so advocated for political and economic unity among African states (Muyangwa & Vogt, 2000). The group was guided by the conviction that Africa states should be independent and feared the intervention of colonial powers in the internal affairs of African states to compromise their independence (Ibid). The Congo crisis which erupted in 1960 was used by the group as a justification for external interference and destabilisation of Africa and so argued strongly for the unity of Africa in order to defeat such tendencies (Ibid). In essence, the Casablanca bloc of African unity stood for immediate independence and unity of African states as a bulwark against external intervention in the political evolution of the continent. Key figures in this radical bloc



of African unity included: Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea and Gamal Abdel- Nasser of Egypt (South African History Online, 2023).

### *The Monrovia and Brazzaville Group*

On their part, the Monrovia and Brazzaville group held a common position. They advocated for a gradual and piecemeal approach to African unity. Their version of African unity was based on the argument that unity could be better attained when the sovereignty of all independent African states were maintained (Muyangwa & Vogt, 2000). The group comprised of Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Togo, Tunisia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo Brazzaville, Dahomey, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Malagasy, Mauritania, Senegal, Upper Volta and Niger (Burkina Faso), twelve countries comprising the Brazzaville group (Ibid, p.4). The peculiarity with the Brazzaville group is that they did not want to compromise their relationship with their former colonial master, France. This explains why they adopted a cautious approach to the Algerian liberation war of 1954-1956 by sorting mediation in the conflict without alienating France (Ibid). They posited that African unity was paramount but that former French colonies should continue their relationship with France. Their main position is captured in this excerpt from Congo Brazzaville`s Foreign Minister “we want to keep our own personality within the framework of African unity” (Ibid).

The foregoing analysis shows that though African had different pathways to the question of unity and integration, the quest for a united and integrated Africa trumped over the ideological divide. While the Casablanca bloc vouched for a radical approach to unity, the Monrovia-Brazzaville group advocated for a gradual and procedural approach to African unity and integration. Also, while the former rejected external interference in Africa through a politically and economically united Africa, the latter argued for unity framework which gave room for the independence and sovereignty of all African states. However, both blocs met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 1963 and thirty-two countries signed the charter creating of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The organisation had the following objectives: to promote the unity and solidarity of African countries, defend the sovereignty of members, eradicate all forms of colonialism, promote international cooperation, having due regard for the charter of the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and coordinate and harmonise the policies of member states in the educational, health, welfare, scientific and defense sectors (Muyangwa & Vogt, 2000). The weaknesses of the OAU, led the establishment of the African Union in Durban, South Africa in 2002. Regional integration as the stepping stone to a more integrated Africa is among the strategic frameworks of the AU.

With the resurgence of military coups in the Sahel, the fragmentation of the regional body, ECOWAS, the defiance of the coup leaders with the formation of a new regional bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS/AES), invoking the fundamental discourse on African unity and analysing its implication in contemporary Africa is crucial. Having discussed the founding schools of thought on African unity, the subsequent sections

delve into its relevance, stakes and opportunities in understanding and advancing regional integration and African unity.

### *6. The stakes, challenges and opportunities for regional integration in Africa with the formation of a new political bloc in the Sahel*

The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel region have called into question the structure of the post-colonial State in Africa following the upsurge of anti-French sentiments across Francophone countries in the region in particular and West Africa in general. This dynamic which is currently gaining traction across the region has geopolitical undertones of great powers. For example, Russia is touted to be the architect in driving anti-French sentiments in West Africa as part of its anti-Western logic. Anti-French sentiments are resentment by former French colonies in the Sahel in particular against internal influence in their domestic politics which serves the interest of former. For instance, the infamous Francafrrique policy undergirds the relationship between France and her former colonies to maintain France`s dominance in West Africa (Kohnert, 2023b). Under this relationship, major political and economic decisions of the former colonies are determined by France. The upsurge in resentment against this unequal relationship is based on the fact that it violates the independence and sovereignty of African States. In the Sahel, the sentiment is rife as citizens argue that the presence of French troops in the region has not significantly translated into the reduction of violent extremism (Kohnert, 2023b). This has been exploited by coup leaders in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to gain popular support. This brings the Casablanca argument of African unity into focus. This school of thought rejected external influence in the political evolution of Africa. Thus, the emergence of the new regional bloc in the Sahel can be considered an extension of the defense of the Casablanca position.

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States also calls into question the legitimacy of ECOWAS and its role in fostering regional integration in West Africa in general and the Sahel in particular. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS reveals crisis in the regional institution. This withdrawal reflects an interplay of political, economic and security dynamics in the regional bloc (Musa, 2024). Scholars and analyst have pinned this withdrawal on the intervention of ECOWAS in member states during political crisis which though anchored on promoting democracy and stability have sometimes resulted to tensions and perceptions of external interference among member states (Ibid, 39). It is therefore evident that ECOWAS is undergoing a crisis of legitimacy wherein its role in regional stability and fostering unity and integration in West Africa in general and the Sahel in particular is increasingly being questioned and contested.

### *Conclusion*

The resurgence of military coups in the Sahel has had regional and continental implications with regards to regional integration and African unity. The spates of military juntas in the Sahel particularly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have necessitated



the interrogation of the concept and practice of regional integration in Africa. The emergence of a new regional bloc by the military juntas known as the Alliance of Sahel States which runs parallel to ECOWAS, the regional institution in West Africa warrants revisiting the fundamental debates which animated the formation of the OAU and more recently, the AU. The Casablanca, Monrovia-Brazzaville debates inspired contemporary discourse on African unity and regional integration. At a time when African unity underpins AU`s strategic objective, the emergence of a new regional institution in West Africa, puts a question mark on the role of ECOWAS and the AU broadly construed in fostering regional integration and African unity.

External intervention and complicity in Africa which was rejected by the Casablanca bloc has resurfaced in the argument of the military juntas with regards to ECOWAS. The drastic sanctions and threats of military intervention by ECOWAS to return constitutional order in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger provoked the juntas to accuse the regional bloc of complicity with the western powers to undermine the sovereignty of Africa States. To address this concern, the military juntas have whipped up anti-western sentiments in the Sahel among the citizens. This is demonstrated in the demands for France to vacate the region such as withdrawing their forces stationed to combat violent extremism. However, it has provoked a great power rivalry dimension as western media reports that the spread of anti-western sentiment is a propaganda having Russia as its architect. They posit that the Russian mercenary group, Wagner is the tool used by Russia to spread anti-western sentiments in Africa in general and the Sahel in particular. The political situation in the Sahel including the emergence of a parallel bloc to ECOWAS, the division within ECOWAS, the role of external actors portends high stakes for African unity and regional integration in Africa.

### *Notes on Contributors*

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### *Conflict of Interests*

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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