

ECOWAS in Face of the Crises in Mali and Guinea-Bissau: A Double-Standard Dilemma?

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In less than two months two young democracies in West Africa experienced sudden interruptions to their democratization processes by military forces. On March 22, a mutiny led by a group of young officers headed by Captain Amadou Sanogo began in the military camp of Kati, located about 15km from Bamako, and eventually escalated into a full-blown military coup. The coup came as a sudden setback to the democratic experiment that had been in progress in Mali since the early 1990s. Elsewhere in Guinea-Bissau, the military, on April 12, seized powers halting democratization in the troubled tiny West African island before completion of a scheduled second round of Presidential elections. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is at the forefront of the search for return to democracy. The comparison between the crises in Mali and Guinea-Bissau could end right there. If Mali's coup came as a surprise to many Malians and keen observers of the regional political scene, Guinea-Bissau's own coup was not in fact so. On the basis of their political history, the two countries are really not comparable. The former was, until the coup on March 22, regarded as one of West Africa's successful and most promising democracies with progressively improving regular elections and functioning state institutions. Guinea-Bissau on the other hand has had a rather difficult, if somewhat chaotic political evolution plagued with

regular coups to keep the tiny West African country in permanent transition.

In front of these two cases of unconstitutional and undemocratic political succession ECOWAS responses might have been inconsistent. In fact, it is difficult not to conclude that the regional organization adopted double standards in its response to the crises. Yet on the face of the regional texts, ECOWAS's position is clear and unambiguous. In both cases – ECOWAS professed “unequivocal condemnation of the overthrow of democratically elected Governments..., [categorical] refusal to recognize any form of legitimacy to the [putschists] and [call for] the restoration of constitutional order”.¹ However strict these written words may be, it soon became clear that ECOWAS' “tough stance” gradually weakened over time. ECOWAS's position has yet to result in any restoration of constitutional order in Mali or even to a lesser extent in Guinea-Bissau. In the first case, following the toppling of Mali's President, the military junta instead of being sent back to their barracks became signatories to the General Agreement, a contract that states in Article 6 that “the

¹ Press release from the extraordinary summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on March 27, 2012 to discuss the Mali situation. The Guinea-Bissau putschists were also ordered to restore constitutional order, more specifically a return to the electoral process that had been taking place pre-coup.



stakeholders should decide ... on the role and place of CNRDRE² members during the transition process”.³ In Guinea-Bissau, instead of restarting the electoral process, as required by ECOWAS in the initial days of the crisis, a transitional government was established for a period of 12 months. If ECOWAS’s stance has gradually weakened in both cases, we also see that the speed of intervention in both Mali and Guinea-Bissau has not at all been the same. This further reinforces the idea that a double standard approach has been used. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, an agreement reached in early May in Dakar, Senegal – less than a month after the coup – allowed for the deployment of a regional military force to ensure peace and security during the transition period. Meanwhile, in the case of Mali, more than four months after the military coup, sending troops on the ground is still little more than a future prospect, and one still subject to various conditions. Several factors may help explain these variations or differences in ECOWAS’s reaction to the situations in Mali and Guinea-Bissau.

One explanation is simply that the two cases are of a different sort altogether. The Malian situation is highly complex, even to the most highly attuned and experienced regional strategists. Mali covers an immense geographical territory with over half of it being desert. It is currently divided into two zones, which makes it difficult to identify credible partners with whom to initiate

negotiations.⁴ Guinea-Bissau, by comparison, appears to be a much simpler case. There are interlocutors with whom to negotiate, even if they are the coupists and the “on-the-ground” situation is much less complex than it is in Mali.

There is a divergence of interests among countries within the region, which may provide a second rationale for why ECOWAS reacted differently in the two countries. Some countries in the region are more sensitive to the presence of Angolan military forces in Guinea-Bissau. This made them act speedily through a military intervention to safeguard the country, especially since the risks (including costs) of the Bissau intervention is relatively lower. In Mali, by contrast, the situation is not the same. In addition to the complexity of the terrain, one must also take account of escalating fighting in the desert area, and therefore the need to send more experienced forces to engagement in the area. Additionally, participation in military intervention remains a risk to the stability of those countries that will intervene, because the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and terrorist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), have

started threatening retaliation on these territories. But the complexity does not end there!

There are yet more explanations to account for why ECOWAS has reacted differently in Mali and Guinea-Bissau. Indeed, the hesitation by the international community, including countries that are likely to support

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2 CNRDRE (Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et de la Restauration de l’État) put in place by the putschists after overthrowing President Amadou Toumani Touré.

3 General Agreement on the implementation of the Solemn Commitment of April 6, 2012 signed by the Mediator, ECOWAS and the Junta.

4 Different army factions are themselves fighting in the North (MNLA, MUJWA, Ansar Dine, AQIM...) and the South is characterized by a division between political parties, civil society, the military, and an interim President and government almost without legitimacy and still without complete control over the situation.



military intervention, make the prospects of an effective military intervention in northern Mali farfetched. It is true that the socio-political context of countries such as the United States (pre-election), France (pre and post-election context), United Kingdom (domestic politics and Olympic Games) and even the international context (the Syrian case that focuses all the attention) contributes to this type of inertia about what to do in Mali. Added to this, are reservations by Malian authorities themselves with respect to external armed intervention and probable lack of internal cohesion within ECOWAS. This latter point is important because there have been conflicting views and approaches on the roles of the putschists during the transition, on whether a United Nations mandate was needed and on whether military intervention was necessary or not.

Finally, and perhaps just to further add to the list of possible explanations for why ECOWAS reacted differently in Mali and Guinea-Bissau, is the fact that both situations

took place during the period of renewal of leadership at both the regional and continental organizations' levels. Indeed, President Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire became Chair of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in mid February while the disagreements within African Union members over the Commission's Chair position did not end until mid-July 2012.

What lessons can we take away from this brief analysis of ECOWAS reactions *vis-à-vis* the crises in Mali and in Guinea-Bissau? First, in attempting to resolve these two crises, ECOWAS has adopted pragmatic and realistic approaches that account for specificities of each country (constraints, favorable factors, etc.). Second, ECOWAS intervention seems to be difficult without countries within the region taking the lead – e.g. Nigeria and Ghana during the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) mission – and a clear backing from international community.

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