

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger exit ECOWAS democratic transition in limbo

The announcement that Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso will withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) "without delay" has put an abrupt end to fractious talks on organising elections and reinstating civilian rule. With their emphasis on restoring "national sovereignty" and driving out terrorist groups, the three West African countries' military governments have made it clear that organising elections is not their primary concern. Since successive coups in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been trying to get the countries' military leaders to commit to holding elections to reinstate civilian governments. Despite the heavy sanctions imposed, fractious negotiations between the three West African countries and ECOWAS have failed to produce tangible results. In their joint withdrawal announcement on January 28, the interim leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger criticized the West African regional organisation for its lack of support in the fight against terrorism and for adopting "illegal, illegitimate and inhumane" punitive measures. Their exit marks the end of negotiations regarding each country's electoral timetable, which the military governments had shown little inclination to put in place.

In Mali, the first country to be affected by the wave of coups that has spread across West Africa in recent years, talks initiated by ECOWAS on the duration of the transition period have seen many twists and turns. Following the August 2020 coup that toppled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, ECOWAS imposed an economic embargo, closing its borders with the country while maintaining deliveries of essential goods. The military then installed a civilian government committed to holding elections within two years, scheduled for February 27, 2022. However, a second putsch in May 2021 shattered this promise. Speaking to FRANCE 24 months after the second coup, Mali's Prime Minister Choguel Maiga described the February 2022 deadline as unrealistic. "It is better to have a few more weeks, even a few more months" than to have another post-electoral crisis, like the one that led to the fall of President Keïta, he said.

Since then, the length of the transition period has changed several times. At the end of December 2021, following a "national consultation", Mali's interim President Assimi Goïta proposed extending it by five years. This was later reduced to two years under pressure from ECOWAS. Before announcing their withdrawal from the West African regional organisation, the Malian authorities had again postponed the presidential election, scheduled for February 4, 2024, for "technical reasons", without giving a new date. Prioritizing fight against terrorism, the electoral timetable established for Burkina Faso has also been consigned to oblivion. Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in January 2022, had pledged to hold elections in July 2024 until he himself was overthrown by the young Captain Ibrahim Traoré in September 2022. Traoré initially said that he wanted to respect this timetable, but then changed his mind. "It's not a priority, I'll tell you that clearly, security is the priority," he said, when asked about holding elections a year later.

In Niger, which has been less affected by terrorist attacks by groups linked to al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) group, coup leaders have also justified their actions by citing the "deteriorating security

situation". Following the July 2023 coup, ECOWAS once again entered into negotiations with a military junta to establish an electoral timetable. It threatened the new leaders with military intervention in order to re-establish constitutional order, but failed to bring them to heel. "These military regimes' approach, which consists of prioritizing the fight against terrorism over the question of democracy, effectively puts the return to constitutional order at risk, because no one knows when security will return," said Abba Seidik, a journalist specializing in the Sahel. "It's true that the situation in Burkina Faso is particularly difficult, but what about in Mali, where the authorities have regained control of Kidal [a town in northern Mali]? Or Niger, where it was possible to hold a presidential election at the end of 2020? Not all situations are identical. Although elections may not have been the primary reason why the three countries withdrew from ECOWAS, it is worth mentioning that [their exit from the group] removes any possibility of applying pressure in this area."

The three countries' decision to leave ECOWAS is further evidence of the regional organization's failure to negotiate a return to civilian rule, said Thierry Vircoulon, a Sub-Saharan Africa expert at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI). "The commitments by Mali and Burkina Faso's military governments to hold elections were part of a dialogue with ECOWAS that had already failed," said Vircoulon. "The elections were already doomed and leaving ECOWAS is just the latest proof of this. These countries practice a form of populist militarism; they have no intention of facing up to election results and are organizing popular mobilizations to legitimize themselves." "Regional partners and the international community continue to press them to hold elections – as does a silent segment of their population, which we should not forget," said Seidik. "But these people are living in a society where freedom of expression has been considerably curtailed. In Mali, critical positions expose people to online lynching campaigns, and it is even worse in Burkina Faso, where we have seen that people can be arrested for criticizing the authorities."

In Mali's capital Bamako, very few people spoke out against the decision to leave ECOWAS. The February 20 Coalition (Appel du 20 février), which includes opposition political parties and civil society movements critical of the transitional authorities, issued a press release, denouncing a decision "taken without any form of democratic debate". Meanwhile, the military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – united under the banner of the Alliance of Sahel States, a mutual defence pact established in September 2023 – organised "large mobilisations of support" on February 1 to celebrate a "courageous and historic" decision.

Bexit, Burkina Faso's interim leader Traoré declined to commit to an election timetable. "There must be a minimum of security so that, if there is an electoral campaign, people can go anywhere in Burkina Faso to explain their ideas," he said, before touting the army's accomplishments. "You have to know how to awaken patriotism in a people, to give them confidence, to know that their homeland is the only thing they have left," he added. "That's what we've managed to do."

Interrogating ECOWAS Parliament talk shop on illegal mining

By Linus Aleke

The story of illegal mining in the West African sub-region, cannot be told effectively without interrogating the negligence of national principalities, as well as the sub-regional economic bloc -ECOWAS, in putting in place effective legal instruments and security checks, to checkmate the criminals, pillaging precious and priced minerals, deposited in the womb of the mother earth for the wellbeing, welfare and survival of citizens of the community. The story will also be incomplete, without mentioning the devious and dubious role of some top state officials, in aiding and abetting this illicit enterprise and crime against the state and its population. This is, of course, in addition to the security threats posed by illegal mining wherever it is taking place in the world. Security experts have continually linked insurgency, terrorism and other emerging security threats in the West African sub-region to illegal mining. Though that may not be the only driver of terrorism and insurgency in the sub-region, national and sub-regional authorities also point in the direction of illegal mining, amongst several other underlying factors. It is therefore, on the premise of the above and the urgent need to

find lasting solutions to this cancer that is struggling to rupture the artery of the sub-regional's major sources of revenue and foreign exchange earnings that the community Parliament of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), organized its first Parliamentary Seminar in 2024, to find lasting solutions to the scourge of illegal mining in West Africa. This is as a political science scholar, and Head of, Department of Political Science, Benue State University, Makurdi, Dr Atah Pine, said, ECOWAS has no role to play in curtailing the evil of illegal mining in West Africa. Dr. Atah posited that "ECOWAS has no role in illegal mining. It is part and parcel of the wider crisis and it should be treated as a national security problem".

In his remark at the 2024 first Parliamentary Seminar, held in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the Speaker of ECOWAS Parliament, Rt. Hon. Sidie Mohammed Tunis noted that the threat of illegal mining in the ECOWAS region is having far-reaching implications on the security, socio-economic and environmental fabric of the region, hence the need for ECOWAS to step in to find a lasting solution to the problem. Rt. Hon. Tunis argued that despite the potential of the mining sector to positively impact the lives of community citizens, the complex interplay of security, social-economic dividends, and environmental impacts on the soil and waters have emerged as pressing concerns that demand immediate investigation and finding sustainable solutions.

This is as the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr Julius Maada Bio, disagrees with Dr Atah that ECOWAS has no role to play in tackling the scourge of illegal mining, arguing that Illegal mining is a transnational issue that requires a coordinated regional response. The President further argued: "We recognise that no single country can address this complex issue alone. We must work hand in hand with our regional partners, sharing best practices, intelligence, and resources to combat illegal mining across borders



effectively. The ECOWAS Parliament plays a crucial role in facilitating such cooperation, and I urge all Member States to strengthen their commitment to collective action". Giving credence to President Maada Bio's opinion on the subject under scrutiny, a security expert, Dr. Kabir Adamu, said, the role of ECOWAS is significant in the sense that the trading of illicit mined materials of different types is usually cut across different countries. According to him, "Where border management is improved, where intelligence sharing is also improved and where regulatory competences are enhanced across all the countries, it will go a long way towards reducing this organized crime and illicit trading in mined materials. On the issue of the link between terrorism and illegal mining, Dr. Adamu said that several theories abound but noted that the responsibility is on the government to take control of the sector. "Starting with the issuance of licenses, ensuring that those licenses are issued to capable persons and after they have been issued, ensure that they have the go-ahead to start production in those areas and that there are adequate regulations to ensure that they pay all the royalties and dues to government. The current situation where licenses are issued and then the licenses are not utilized allows for artisanal and illegal mining. But like I said earlier, there is a need for synergy between the federal and state governments. The state government are currently sabotaging the federal government, mainly because they are not comfortable with the

situation where only the federal government issues the licenses and state has nothing to say, that needs to be reversed," he further posited. Dr Adamu also counselled the government needs to enhance the capacity of the regulatory agency to enforce laws in the sector and have a closer synergy of purpose between the state and federal governments. The state governments, he argued, need to have a level of influence in the mining sector. In addition, he said, the security of MDAs should create special units dedicated to the mining sector that can work with the Ministry to enforce regulations.

On his part, the Speaker of ECOWAS Parliament, Dr Sidie Mohammed Tunis, said: "As you already know, the seminar for which we have gathered is expected to consider a topic that has captured the attention of governments, organizations, and local communities, and that is illegal mining and its implications in the ECOWAS region. A careful revision of the numbers available to us provides a compelling need to give attention to the region's mining sector. For instance, nearly 80% of mining in Northwest Nigeria is being carried out illegally, which has increased conflict since 2014, spreading across Kaduna, Katsina, Kebbi and Zamfara States. Referring to the contribution of the mining sector to the GDP of some Member States, the ECOWAS Vision 2050 document indicates that Ghana benefits 7.5%, Burkina Faso 10.2%, Cote d'Ivoire 4%, while Nigeria receives only 9%. The Speaker argued that with a properly regulated mining sector in the region, it is expected that various economies in West Africa, would be far more impactful. He further averred that "illegal mining of precious minerals in West Africa has succeeded in not only depriving Member States of much-needed revenue to grow their economies through improved GDP but has also created instances of instability through banditry, kidnapping, thuggery and in some cases insurgency. Dr. Tunis posited that, to examine the phenomenon of illegal mining, as well as its socio-economic, security and environmental implications on the advancement of Member States, the leadership of the Parliament found i

t befitting to dedicate the last Parliamentary Seminar of the Fifth Legislature to the topic. "We expect that at the end of the seminar, we will have a greater appreciation of the regional mining frameworks and challenges to their implementation and make recommendations where regional collaboration can be fostered to boost the sector," he concluded.

While declaring the Parliamentary Seminar open, the President of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr Julius Maada Bio, observed that illegal mining and trafficking in precious minerals negatively impact peace, stability, security, development, governance, the rule of law, the environment and the economy. Underscoring the importance of collective action in addressing challenges that transcend borders, President Maada Bio, said that the West African sub-region has contended with illegal mining even before nations gained their independence. He disclosed that the African continent possesses over 60 different types of minerals, accounting for a third of the world's mineral reserves. The ECOWAS region, he said, is richly endowed with abundant reserves of a large variety of non-renewable natural resources comprising mineral resources, including gold, uranium, bauxite, iron ore, diamonds, phosphate and manganese, crude oil and natural gas. He said, "These extractive resources account for a significant portion of Africa's proven assets. Mining and other extractive industries have the potential to transform economies. The Extractives Industry sub-sector is the main source of Government revenues in many of our countries, and it accounts for more than half of all exports".

Conceptualizing illegal mining, the President quoted the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as saying, "The illegal mining of precious minerals is the prospecting and extraction of minerals with high economic value, undertaken without appropriate land rights, exploration and mining licenses or mineral transportation and other permits". Illegal mining of precious minerals, the UN agency added, is often accompanied by serious human rights abuses and can have severe environmental impacts, including deforestation, land degradation and pollution. "Illegal mining and trafficking of precious minerals are often linked to economic crimes, such as tax evasion, fraud and corruption, by exploiting loopholes in regulatory frameworks. Due to the high profits associated with precious minerals and the often-low risks of being arrested or prosecuted, organised criminal groups are exploiting this sector," the President said. Proffering solutions to the intractable problem of illegal mining, President Maada Bio, said, "As policymakers, we must make concerted efforts to strengthen further the legal and regulatory frameworks to curb illegal mining significantly. I express my appreciation to all participating nations and stakeholders for their commitment to finding sustainable solutions to combat illegal mining". On the potential of the mining sector, Dr Maada Bio said, "There is immense economic potential in our mineral resources if managed effectively. There are lucrative opportunities for the future development of new uranium deposits in Niger; iron ore in Guinea and Senegal; bauxite in Guinea; gold in Mali, Ghana and Burkina Faso; and even phosphate in Mauritania. These mineral resources contribute up to 5% of regional exports, making them the main or second source of foreign exchange earners for many West African countries. Togo, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and Niger are all examples of countries that depend heavily on mineral exports. But it must be said that all this wealth has not yet led to the economic emergence of the West African region for several reasons, the principal of which is illegal mining". He said that the losses to West Africa's economies resulting from illegal mining amount to millions of dollars every year, adding that these losses are further compounded by the lack of agricultural land, pollution, environmental degradation, and the challenges posed by rising insecurity through banditry and insurgency, as well as the financing of terrorism. He said the theme of the final seminar of the 5th Legislature, "Illegal mining and its consequences in the ECOWAS region", is timely in recommending solutions to put an end to this scourge, which is seriously damaging countries at every level. In Sierra Leone, he said: "We have witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of illegal mining. Our once pristine landscapes have been marred by unregulated mining activities, leading to deforestation, water pollution and loss of biodiversity. Moreover, illegal mining deprives our Government of much-needed revenue and aggravates social tensions within our communities. However, we are not alone in facing this challenge. Illegal mining is a transnational issue that requires a coordinated regional response. That is why forums like this are crucial for fostering collaboration and sharing best practices among ECOWAS Member States". He said that in Sierra Leone, they are taking decisive actions to tackle illegal mining head-on, noting that they are intensifying efforts to streamline the licensing process, enhance monitoring mechanisms, and clamp down on illegal mining operations. Additionally, he said that his administration is investing in education and skills development programs to provide viable alternatives to those involved in illegal mining. He further proffered the foregoing solutions, "We must strengthen our legal frameworks, enhance cross-border cooperation, and invest in sustainable mining practices that benefit our economies and the environment".

The President stressed that the government must address the root causes that drive individuals into illegal mining, such as poverty, lack of alternative livelihoods, and weak governance. He noted that by promoting inclusive growth and empowering local communities, the authorities can create opportunities for economic development while safeguarding natural resources for future generations. He concluded by expressing optimism that, from the presentations and fruitful debates of the seminar, recommendations will emerge that will accelerate the implementation of regional policy frameworks to eradicate illegal mining in West Africa and strengthen areas of regional collaboration for a viable mining sector. Also, International Affairs Analyst, who did not want his name in print said that ECOWAS Institutions are notorious for talks without commensurate actions. He noted that the ECOWAS

Parliament is not an exception, stressing that Parliamentary Seminar, Ordinary or Extra-Ordinary sessions, or even delocalized meetings, are all about institutional rituals that have no impact on the community members. According to him, "If you ask the leadership of ECOWAS Parliament to mention one of its profound achievements in the past four years that impacted the lives of community members, they will think from now to eternity without mentioning one. Unless they would want to mention some unverifiable stuff as usual. Under their watch, ECOWAS is losing weight. Just last week, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger left the economic grouping. This move reduced its numbers from 15 to 12. Is that also an achievement?". The talk shop under the guise of a Parliamentary Seminar, he concluded, will yield no single benefit to citizens of the community.

Community Parliament: A Toothless Bulldog, Heads of State Must Empower it – Senator Adeyemi Fumes

A member of the Nigerian delegation to ECOWAS Parliament, Senator Smart Adeyemi, has criticised the lack of power and implementation of resolutions by the ECOWAS Parliament, calling it a "waste of resources" unless empowered by regional leaders. Senator Adeyemi, representing Nigeria at the recently concluded 2024 First Extraordinary Session in Freetown, republic of Sierra Leone, expressed his frustration during a press briefing. He argued that the Parliament's current form resembles a "talk show" with resolutions that are routinely ignored by West African heads of state. "The resolutions passed by the parliament are not implemented by the heads of government," Adeyemi said. "It's a problem because whenever we discuss issues, our resolutions are not respected. The Speaker himself is not even invited to present reports at meetings of the heads of government." He highlighted the numerous challenges facing West Africa, including poverty, insecurity, and inadequate healthcare, emphasising that these issues require concrete action, not just empty discussions. "People are dying, they cannot pay their bills, and schools are falling apart," Adeyemi stated. "We need to make a difference in the lives of the people, not just gather for tea parties." Adeyemi proposed reforms to the Parliament, suggesting it convene only once a quarter and focus on producing meaningful discussions and decisions that complement the efforts of member states. He also emphasised the need for the Parliament to have the power to enforce its resolutions



and hold regional leaders accountable.

"The heads of government must decide if they truly want this Parliament to exist and function effectively," Adeyemi concluded. "Without their support and empowerment, it will remain a mere talking shop, wasting resources while the people continue to suffer."

Senator Adeyemi's remarks raise critical questions about the effectiveness of the ECOWAS Parliament and its ability to address the pressing issues facing West Africa. His call for reform and empowerment resonates with concerns expressed by many citizens and regional stakeholders. Whether leaders heed this call and take concrete steps to strengthen the Parliament remains to be seen.