

ECOWAS @ 50: Achievements amid threat of disintegration

In May this year the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) will roll out the drums to celebrate a landmark 50 years of being an enduring regional organization promoting West Africa's economic cooperation and integration. The trajectory of this region has been a mixture of trials, tribulations and triumphs on the historical forces that shape the circumstances of the region in varied perspectives within the context of international politics. The regional bloc was born in 1975 during the perilous period of the Cold War filled with divisive tendencies triggered by the principal actors – the Communist bloc led by former Soviet Union and the Capitalist bloc spearheaded by the United States. It was a very challenging time in history and the emergence of ECOWAS pioneered a new sense of belonging and identity probably taking a cue from the formation of the then Organization of African Union (OAU) now African Union (AU) in 1963. The achievements of ECOWAS over the last 50 years have been enormous in the sense that it has transitioned from creating an organization to building a community purposefully-driven to change the lives of the citizens for the better.

One significant achievement of ECOWAS is the protocol on the free movement of persons, goods and services (1976), which gave citizens the right of abode in any member state. It entails that people in West Africa do not have to use a visa when they cross borders within the region. The regional bloc has over the years tried to resolve the crises in member states rocked by civil wars and conflicts. In the 1990s and upwards, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea were plunged into civil strife but ECOWAS raised the ECOWAS Monitoring group (ECOMOG) plus the political savvy that brought peace, stability that brought democracy back to these countries. ECOWAS also played a prominent role in resolving the crisis in Cote d'Ivoire that erupted in 2011 after a disputed presidential election that pitted the then incumbent Laurent Gbagbo and current president Alassane Ouattara and many others. ECOWAS has made stringent efforts to float a single currency (ECO) to coordinate, grow business and enhance financial cooperation. However, this has been racked by the issues of poor adherence to the convergence criteria of which many of the countries are yet to meet, lack of political will and external influences.

In recent times also the region has been ravaged by crises of high proportion with significant challenges such as widespread insecurity, including terrorism, political instability, organized crime, and the spread of illicit weapons, compounded by poor governance and economic stagnation. Poor Governance wrought by weak institutions and corruption have undermined stability, while economic stagnation leading to poverty and inequality have caused regional unrest and deepened terrorism and violent extremism. And to make matters worse, in recent times, the region has witnessed a spate of military coups that blazed through Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger Republic where democratic governments were swept away in a gale of army takeovers that broke the democratic protocol of the region. The bloc is at the moment facing a threat of disintegration after three of the 15-member states -Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger last year announced their intention to quit the community, following disagreements over military coups that toppled democratic governments in the three countries. All entreaties for them to return have failed to persuade them.

ECOWAS imposed crippling sanctions on Mali, Burkina Faso and

especially on Niger and threatened to invade Niger to restore democratic order after an ultimatum. The ultimatum quickly expired but ECOWAS did not carry out its threat even as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso had formed an alliance of the Sahel and stuck to their guns. Former Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, who is the only surviving founding father of ECOWAS, has been compelled to appeal to the Authority of Heads of State and Government of the ECOWAS currently led by Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu, the three countries. Gowon's appeal was contained in a letter addressed to the Heads of State and Government of the region, which he read during a press conference in Abuja, which was sent through the ECOWAS Commission. He said "Since its inception, the regional bloc has made a number of major accomplishments, including trade liberalization, right of West Africans to live legitimately in any country within the Community, as well as successful peacekeeping operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone. ECOWAS, despite its shortcomings, has become an example of regional integration for the wider continent. "Having

achieved all of the above, it saddens me to learn that ECOWAS is threatened with disunity following the announcement by Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 3 important Member States, of their intention to leave the Community. The impact of such a decision will have far-reaching implications for the ordinary citizens who have been the major beneficiaries of regional integration."



Joining her voice to integration, the speaker ECOWAS Parliament, Rt. Hon. Hadja Mémounatou Ibrahima called for bold institutional reforms to strengthen governance structures, improve financial sustainability, and enhance the effectiveness of regional decision-making. The Speaker, during the First Session of the 2025 Parliamentary Seminar in Lagos in March, emphasized the need for a revised ECOWAS Founding Treaty that reflects West Africa's evolving political and economic landscape. Former Nigerian High Commissioner to Singapore, Ogbole Ode, gave insights as to how ECOWAS will overcome some of its challenges. He said "regional leaders must respect democratic constitutions by adhering the terms of office. A situation where some leaders will change the constitution of their country to elongate their stay in power is a recipe for chaos and an invitation for a military coup, which we do not want in the region". Nigeria's expert in international relations and Director of the Centre for China Studies, Charles Onunaiju insists that ECOWAS should not have threatened Niger with war but employ "more diplomacy and understanding to the prevailing circumstances in Niger and other countries under military rule". He added that West African leaders must strengthen the democratic institutions to avert coups. The regional bloc appears to be facing a fait accompli over the three estranged countries which have hardened their positions not to return to the regional fold. This is where ECOWAS Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security is needed to address these challenges. The region irrespective of its challenges has the potential to develop into an economic powerhouse judging by its rich human and material resources bolstered up by an energetic youth population. The region needs massive investment in infrastructure, modernized agriculture and jobs that will stem the tide of youth migration.

ECOWAS @50: “The Media has been a strategic partner”

The Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, has emphasized the important role the media has played in shaping the regional body in the last 50 years as it institutes a media excellence award to honour journalists. This is as the regional body has unveiled a seven-member jury for its maiden ECOWAS Journalistic Excellence Award. ECOWAS was set up in May 1975 as an economic bloc to foster trade and free movement amongst member states, with the aim of improving the lives of its citizens. It has lined up various activities to mark the Golden Jubilee Celebration, and the media award is one of such. Speaking at the unveiling of the jury, Dr. Omar Touray said that the media remained a strong partner and pillar in the regional body's journey towards promoting democracy and good governance,

peace and security, regional integration, and overall development and welfare of the community citizens. Touray, who was represented by his Special Advisor, Economic & Financial Integration and Partnerships, Mr. Mambury Njie stressed that journalists in West Africa are not merely chroniclers of events but educators, mentors, and nation leaders. He said: “Over the last 50 years, the media has remained a strong partner and pillar in our journey towards promoting democracy and good governance, peace and security, regional integration, and overall development and welfare of our community citizens. “As we mark 50 years of ECOWAS, it is imperative for us to recognize and celebrate the journalists who have shaped our collective memory and those who have supported our challenges, championed our successes, and given voices to our aspirations.” He added that: “The ECOWAS Media Excellence Award launched as part of our Golden Jubilee Celebration is more than a commission of journalistic achievement. It is a reaffirmation of our commitment to fostering a free, dynamic, and responsible media landscape, one that promotes regional integration, democratic governance, peace, and development. “Journalists in West Africa are not merely chroniclers of events. They are educators, mentors, and nation leaders.” He noted that in this digital age, where apps often copy misinformation, “it is imperative that we recognize and celebrate those who report with integrity, accuracy, and courage.” Touray also tasked members of the jury to

uphold the highest standards of evaluation, guided by the principles of objectivity and impartiality. He added that merit should be upheld while applying a rigorous assessment approach to each entry with fairness and consistency.

“These hours are not just accolades. They are part of a legacy we are building for the next 50 years in our community. And that legacy begins with your dedication to identifying and honouring the best of West African journalism,” he added.

The award, according to the Director of Communication, ECOWAS Commission, Joel Ahofodji, is instituted as part of the regional body's 50 anniversary programme. The categories are print, television, radio, online, and photography. Ahofodji said it aimed at celebrating the

media, who have been reporting the affairs of the commission. The jury is headed by Prof. Abdoulie Gassama, a Gambia veteran journalist and academia, is expected to review entries by the journalists and pick the eventual winners. Other members of the jury are Dr. Adrienne Diop-Senegal; Paul Douakoutche- Benin Republic; Ms Filomena Silva- Cape Verde; Bamba Mafoumbe-

Cote d'Ivoire; Dr. Ibrahim Mohammed Awal- Ghana; Mrs. Yemi Kolapo – Nigeria. Ahofodji outlined the principles that should be followed in the selection process to include the impact of the write ups, originality, and quality. He added that: “Our ambition is to make this event an annual activity that ECOWAS launches to build loyalty among the African media, but also and above all to encourage journalists to take an interest in its major achievements and its development programmes, which have a positive impact on the lives of the people of our member states.” The Chairman of the jury, Prof. Gassama assured the commission that the team would do its utmost best to carry out its assignment. He said: “We are tasked with recognising and celebrating those who have demonstrated exceptional skill, creativity, and commitment to their craft. “We, as a seven-member jury, represent a diverse range of expertise and perspectives within the media landscape. This diversity is our strength, ensuring a comprehensive and fair assessment of the entries before us.”

