

ECOWAS and the Promotion of Democratic Governance in West Africa

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Abstract

This paper reviews the role of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in promoting democratic governance in West. The review is necessary to keep up the effort of the Organization in promoting democratic governance. ECOWAS has been able to build consensus among the West African states about democracy and democratic governance, as attested to in its instruments and its stance on states where unconstitutional practices occurred like Niger, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and recently Mali. But it has not gone far enough to ensure real popular participation in governance within member states. The mechanisms put in place by ECOWAS, namely the Treaty and the Protocols are not fully deployed, which weakens the performance of the Organization. Moreover, the supranational institutions responsible for implementation, notably the Commission, and the Community Court have weak enforcement authority and operate in an incoherent and disjointed manner. This paper therefore examines ECOWAS institutional mechanisms and strategies for promoting democratic governance. It highlights areas that require review to make democratic governance more effective.

Key words: ECOWAS, Democracy, Governance, Regional Integration

1. Introduction

In 2012 the Assembly of Heads of State Government of the African Union (AU) declared the "Year of Shared Values". But it was not clear what precisely constitute these shared values and so it was left undefined by the Assembly.

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The former President of Ghana, late John Atta Mills of blessed memory, in his address at the Summit had this to say “We recognize our shared values instinctively even though we may not be able to always adequately define it in its multidimensional complexity” (AU, 2012:2). This lack of clarity is a testimony of the complex and diverse character/problems of Africa and acknowledgement of its not being homogenous as many are wont to believe. Some attempt was made by the Department of Political Affairs of the AU Commission, on whom the onus lies for translating this abstract and contentious declaration into something concrete and realizable, to define what has been declared ‘shared values’ by the continent’s leaders. The Department of Political Affairs defined shared values as ‘those norms, principles and practices that were developed or acquired which provide the basis for collective actions and solutions in addressing the political, economic and social challenges that impede Africa’s integration and development” (AU, 2012: 2). However, to put it in a more precise way, shared values are the pan African struggles against the many challenges facing the continent. These include poor leadership and lack of accountability in governance, dictatorship and authoritarianism in politics, economic underdevelopment, ecological crisis, social exclusion, disunity, disharmony and violence in many African societies. The AU has been playing a leading role in the struggle to liberate the continent from these woes.

However, these shared values are not as diffused as one will wish within the regional economic communities (RECs)² that constitute the building blocks of the African Economic Community (AEC). Nonetheless, some of the RECs have followed AU’s lead with some degree of faithfulness. Among the leading ones is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which in that regard can be seen as exemplary. ECOWAS has adopted, and is working with, several continental initiatives of the AU. The other RECs- South Africa Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), East African Community (EAC)- have largely contented themselves with daunting task of market integration.

² South Africa Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), East African Community (EAC)

The need for democratic governance is among the shared values of the African states today. It is one of the priorities of the AU and some of its regional economic communities (RECs). The imperative of good and democratic governance in Africa has been appreciated by scholars and policy makers (Adejumobi, n.d; Diamond, 2002). It has been recognized that without political stability the continent's goals of integration and economic development will remain a toll order. Therefore, the African Union, having recognized the value of political stability, established a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in Africa on 29th June 1993 and an African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance on 30th January 2006. These instruments embody rules, principles, norms and values that are to ensure prevention of political instability and conflicts through adherence to the principles of democracy and democratic governance. A number of institutions, procedures, measures and safeguards were designed and provided for in the instruments to guide inter and intra-state political life. ECOWAS is the only REC of the AU that has adopted similar instruments and is making good use of them, even though not without some challenges.

Some of the recent achievements of ECOWAS with respect to application of regional instruments of enthroning democratic governance were the vehement rejection of attempt to subvert constitutionalism by former President of Cote d'Ivoire, Laurent Gbagbo, and threat by the Organization to use force as option in resolving the matter. ECOWAS has also applied sanctions on some of its member states. This include the suspension of Niger, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire for unconstitutional practices like manipulation of constitution, and Guinea and Mali for coup d'état. Consequently, 'zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means' (ECOWAS, 2001:8) is becoming a norm in ECOWAS. The consensus among the member states is that democracy and democratic governance is not negotiable.

Furthermore, as a testimony to the consensus on democratic rule and human rights, ECOWAS is today the only organization in Africa that has maintained a regional stance on the possibility of arbitration by its Court involving a citizen and a state without recourse to exhaustion of national remedies.

Recently the Southern African Development Community (SADC) the Heads of State and Government, at their 32nd Summit of which held in Moputo 17-18 August 2012, rescinded on their commitment to human rights protection at the sub regional level by deciding to limit the jurisdiction of the SADC Tribunal to interpretation of SADC Treaty and protocols and withdrawing access of individuals to the Court (Karimakwenda, 2012). In ECOWAS, when Gambia proposed introducing caveat to the Protocol according individual access to the ECOWAS Court only when local remedies are exhausted, it was shot down by a landslide majority vote at meeting of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government in 2009. Thanks to the active mobilization of the civil society under the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOFF) which was itself established by ECOWAS (WACSOFF, 2009).

Despite of these efforts by ECOWAS to enthrone democratic governance, West Africa is still threatened with 'democratic recession' (Gbesan, 2010) or reversals of democratic gains. This is evident in the recent crises that occupy the Organization, which include among others general political instability and recurrence of coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau and Mali and temptations to flout constitutionalism, as was the case in Senegal with former President Wade. This paper therefore attempts to explain the 'two step forward, one step back' in democratic governance in West Africa. It argues that the failure to fully deploy the preventive aspects of the ECOWAS frameworks for political stability, good governance and democracy partly explains the situation. It also contends that weak powers and inefficiency in the Organization's supranational institutions, namely the ECOWAS Court, the Parliament and the Commission, undermine the performance of the ECOWAS in promoting democratic governance in West Africa. The paper is divided into four parts: Part I examines the concept of democratic governance; part II presents ECOWAS institutional frameworks for the promotion of democratic governance; part III analysis ECOWAS strategy for enthroning democratic governance and; part IV presents the conclusions of the paper

2. The Concept of Democratic Governance

Democratic governance is a new concept developed by African scholars as an alternative to the much touted concept of 'good governance' advanced by the World Bank in response to 'gross mismanagement by African government'(Mafeje, 2002). Unlike good governance which emphasises such technocratic issues like efficiency, transparency, and accountability in governments, democratic governance seeks to link governance with the people, their participation in the institutions and processes of government based on equality of opportunity and equity (Mafeje, 2002). Democratic governance therefore, emphasises the 'social' aspect of governance by making it to be human-centred. The sense in seeing governance from this perspective lies in the fact that 'good' governance can exist but devoid of democracy. So the people, who ought to be the main subjects of concern, are left in limbo, while emphasis is put on some less meaningful technical and procedural issues. Based on the foregoing, Mafeje (2002) views democratic governance as implying what emerges over and above technical efficiency and probity, (that is) regular interactions between government and civil society, and the free participation of civil society through its institutions and popular organs (Mafeje, 2002:16). Popular participation, rather than mere concern with technocratic issues, is the key element of democratic governance. This is not to downplay the relevance of such issues like transparency and accountability. They are relevant in so far as the concern of the people and their welfare is paramount.

Cheema, (2005) defines democratic governance as the range of processes through which a society reaches consensus on and implement regulations, human rights, laws, policies and social structure-in pursuit of justice, welfare and environmental protection' (Cheema, 2005:1). Defined in this way, democratic governance is then about democratic institutions and processes by which authoritative allocation of values is undertaken. It is about democratic institutions because it is concerned with such sites of governance like political parties, electoral bodies, legislature, executive branch etc. It is also about democratic processes, because it focuses on the myriads of dimensions of democratic processes like elections, access to justice and human rights norms enforcement, decentralization and local governance capacity, transparency and anti-corruption strategies, legislative process and relations with constituents, the role of civil society and media, and the impact of the global forces including the role of external partners (Cheema, 2005). All these dimensions are indication of the complex nature of governance.

It also shows that democratic governance requires concerted efforts across different social strata and from different levels of governance-local, national regional and international. Therefore in analysing the role of regional organizations in the promotion of democratic governance, (in this case ECOWAS) activities relevant to some of these democratic institutions and processes will be the focus.

There is again another thing to consider in examining in the promotion of democratic governance. This is the substance, not the form of democratic governance that emerges out of the process. In a world that is burgeoning with democratic regimes, there are many systems that mimic democracy but when unpacked actually reveal a façade. Diamond (2002) makes a distinction between liberal and illiberal democracies. Liberal democracy is a democracy in which there are not only regular, free and fair elections but also a strong rule of law, buttressed by an independent judiciary and other institutions of accountability that check the abuse of power, protect civil and political freedoms, and thereby help to foster a pluralistic and vigorous civil society'(Diamond, 2002:5). While illiberal democracy is a *pseudodemocracy*, which provides for holding regular multi-party elections, but limits the space for opposition parties and candidates to operate. Within this form of democracy, governance is characterized by ills such as corruption, wastefulness, incompetence and unresponsiveness (Diamond, 2002:6). Illiberal democracy also entrenches poverty, obstructs economic development, disposes the country to recurrent crisis, and prevents poor countries from making effective use of international assistance'(Diamond, 2002:6). Therefore, when examining democratic governance, there is need to look at the nature of institutions that exist to guarantee peoples' participation in governance. The absence of these institutions can undermine peoples' support; engender insecurity, instability and reversal of democratic gains.

3. ECOWAS and the Development of Institutional Frameworks for Democratic Governance in West Africa

The pursuit of democratic governance in ECOWAS can historically be linked to the desire of the Organization to attain and maintain peace and security for integration and development of the West African sub region. ECOWAS is a sub regional organization that was established in 1975 by fifteen (15)³ West African States to promote the goals of economic integration and development. The countries that presently constitute ECOWAS are Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte' d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia and Togo. The main focus of this Community of states was thus integrating their disparate economies with aim of uplifting the standard of living of their peoples. Until the 1990s, the organization's main preoccupation was, therefore, limited to market integration through the establishment of free movement of people and goods. The rationale behind this agenda is the economic argument that an enlarged market could help the countries obtain economies of scale by overcoming structural challenges posed by their small and weak national markets.

The end of Cold War in the early 90s, however, brought ECOWAS face-to-face with new challenges to the attainment of its goals. The sub region was threatened by violent intra-state conflicts, which started in Liberia in 1989. With little or no prospect of intervention by the international community, ECOWAS was provoked to venture into conflict management, resolution and peacekeeping in Liberia in 1991. That development came with some resistance and lack of consensus among the member states as it was seen as an aberration. A year after, ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), the peace-keeping outfit of ECOWAS that was given birth to as a result of the war in Liberia, had its mandate expanded to include Sierra Leone, where another violent crisis was looming. Since Liberia and Sierra Leone, ECOWAS has seen its purpose and objectives transformed to include political and security matters. New legal and institutional frameworks were developed to safeguard and promote new values such as peace, security, democracy, good governance, and human rights. In 1991, the member states of ECOWAS made a Declaration of Political Principles in the pursuit of freedom, people's right and democratization within the Community.

³ which later became sixteen (16) with the accession of Cape Verde, and then returned to fifteen (15) with the exit of Mauritania

They called on each other to work towards enthroning democracy and respect for fundamental human rights. Safeguarding these shared values is seen as *sine qua non* for the economic integration and development of the West African sub region.

Therefore, in 1993 a revised Treaty was enacted by the Authority of Heads of State and Government, which explicitly set our security and political goals for the Organization. Articles 56 and 58 of the Treaty urged members of the Community to cooperate in realizing objectives set in agreed instruments like the Community Declaration of Political Principles and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and to establish and strengthen appropriate mechanisms for the timely prevention and resolution of intra-State and inter-State conflicts respectively. The Treaty also established supranational institutions like the ECOWAS Parliament and the ECOWAS Court of Justice. This was done based on the conviction of the member states that 'the integration of the Member States into a viable regional Community may demand the partial and gradual pooling of national sovereignties to the Community within the context of a collective political will; and their acceptance of 'the need to establish Community Institutions vested with relevant and adequate powers' (ECOWAS, 1993:1). These new institutions were therefore to be the main drivers of the regional integration and development processes. The Treaty left room for further developments of the instruments by way of protocols.

With regards to the promotion of democratic governance two protocols were successively developed: the Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security in December 1999 and the supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in December 2001. It must be noted here that the protocols drew their inspirations from earlier AU instruments, namely the Cairo Declaration of 29th June 1993 on the establishment of a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in Africa adopted by the 29th Session of the defunct Organization of African Unity (OAU) Conference of Heads of State and Government, and the Decision AHG.DEC 142 (XXV) on the framework for OAU's reaction to unconstitutional change of government adopted in Algiers in July 1999. Thus, ECOWAS was inspired by, and adopted these instruments to suit its situation.

Nonetheless, the 1999 ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security was enacted based on the concern of the ECOWAS Community about the proliferation of conflicts within the sub region that threaten peace and security, and undermine efforts to improve the living standards of the people. It was therefore meant to, among others, alleviate the suffering of people affected by conflicts and provide them with humanitarian relief. The Protocol also reflects the conviction of the ECOWAS Community that good governance, the rule of law and sustainable development are essential preconditions for peace and conflict prevention (ECOWAS, 1999:4-5). Therefore, one of the principles of the Mechanism was the promotion and consolidation of democratic governance as well as democratic institutions in each Member State. Some institutions and procedures were established for the realization of the objectives of the protocol. The institutions, in order of decision-making authority, are the Authority (of Heads of State and Government), the Mediation and Security Council, the Executive Secretariat. They are to be assisted by three supporting organs namely, the Defence and Security Commission, the Council of Elders and the ECOWAS Cease-fire and Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). The difference between the Institutions of the Mechanism and the supporting organs is that the former is responsible for strategic policy and decision making, while the latter carry out or implement decisions of the institutions.

In addition to these institutions, a peace and security observation system (early warning) has been set up within ECOWAS. It is a preventive mechanism for early detection of, and response to security problems within the sub region. The system is equipped with different indicators, precisely eleven (11) clusters, of sources of insecurity such as crime, corruption and safety; economy, trade and manufacturing; governance, political action and the law; health, education and social services; security, arms and armed conflict; natural disasters, accidents and the environment; women, children, refugees and gender inequality to mention just a few. Under these clusters there are 66 specific indexes that are monitored periodically, analyzed and reported to the ECOWAS Commission. There are different reports: daily highlights, weekly situation reports, monthly situation report, monthly country policy briefs, early warning report and quarterly overall peace and security report (EWD, 2011). This mechanism keeps the Organization well informed about the general political and security situations in the sub region. It forms the basis of decision-making and interventions at the sub regional level.

The Early Warning System has broadly two components: an Observation and Monitoring Centre (situation room) located at the Commission, and four observation and monitoring zones. The centre and the zones work together in collection of different sets of data on indicators that impact peace and security; analyse the data and come up with recommendations on how ECOWAS can take pre-emptive response to crises situations before they escalate (ECOWAS, 1999:16). A number of options for response exist. These include mediation, humanitarian intervention and military force. Based on the system therefore for an early warning to be effective there must be a strategic link between analysis and action (EWD, 2011: 5), or early warning and early response.

On the whole, however, the 1999 Protocol was more focused on conflict management and security leaving out the important component on the promotion of democratic governance and democratic institutions in member states, which is pertinent for conflict prevention and protection of human rights and freedoms. Therefore, two years later (December 2001), the supplementary protocol on Democracy and Good Governance was enacted to complement the Mechanism through the provision of issues on prevention of internal crises, democracy and good governance, the rule of law, and human rights (ECOWAS, 2001:6). One of the contributions of the supplementary law was the provision of constitutional convergence principles, which have become the basis of recent ECOWAS actions with regards to unconstitutional practices in the sub region. Section I, Article (1) of the supplementary protocol contains the consensus of the ECOWAS member states that 'every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections; zero tolerance to power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means; popular participation in decision-making, strict adherence to democratic principles and decentralization of power at all levels of governance' (ECOWAS, 2001:8) among others. For example, regimes that came to power most recently through coup d'état in the sub region, precisely in Guinea and Mali, were somewhat cut short by pressure from ECOWAS.

Moreover, the supplementary protocol contains detailed provisions on general principles regarding elections, election monitoring and the role of ECOWAS, and the role of the armed forces, the police and the security forces in a democracy.

The provisions are aimed at forestalling any decisions or actions on the part of governments or any of their institutions to manipulate or undermine democratic processes. Some undertakings and consensus regarding democratic governance were also provided in the supplementary protocol. These include agreement on the recognition and promotion of rule of law in the member states, institutional capacity building for human rights protection, pluralism in the information sector, fighting corruption, and transparent, equitable management and distribution of resources (ECOWAS, 2001). These provisions now form part of the strategic goals of ECOWAS, which its institutions are working to achieve.

Within the above frameworks, ECOWAS has been able to some degree establish a system of promoting and defending democratic governance in West Africa. There is an evolving norm and practice of intolerance to undemocratic accession to or maintenance of power. Yet ECOWAS has not been able to check the recurrence of such practices in the sub region. There is still some level of vulnerability of the frailty in the 'stability' that has been achieved. The current concern therefore is with the preventive aspects of ECOWAS frameworks for political stability, good governance and democracy. Why is the ECOWAS region still threatened with coups and manipulation of democratic institutions despite the frameworks that have been put in place?

4. ECOWAS Strategy for the Promotion of Democratic Governance in West Africa

As mentioned earlier ECOWAS has been involved in the promotion of democratic governance albeit essentially as a matter of conflict prevention, management or resolution strategy. ECOWAS involvement with democracy started with an attempt to stabilize post-conflict zones, where ECOMOG intervention had taken place. As part of the exit strategy, ECOWAS, with the support of its international partners, such as the UN, AU, EU and individual countries like France, United States (individually or clustered as International Contact Groups), and local civil society groups, initiate the processes of democratic rule through organization of elections. It happened in Liberia, for example where political parties, local civil society groups assisted in transition to democratic rule after the war (ECOWAS, 2003). This pattern has become the dominant strategy even in countries where coup d'état occurred or constitutionalism broke down due to some circumstances like the death of a Head of State.

In such situations, ECOWAS will issue condemnation and demand the return of constitutional rule through mediation and mobilization of international support to pressure the new authorities to comply with its democratic governance rules and guidelines. Often under duress, the new authorities may yield power to some interim civilian regime that will organize and conduct elections based on the provisions of national constitution. Moreover, when there is an election in normal democratic regimes, ECOWAS get involved in two ways: exploratory mission and observer mission. The exploratory mission is a kind of pre-election assessment mission. At this stage ECOWAS provides various forms of technical and financial assistance to member states. And the observer mission is an election monitoring mission, which terminates as soon as the election results are announced (ECOWAS: 2008:11-12). Unfortunately, there is no monitoring mission after the elections, which means that ECOWAS does not get to monitor the processes of judicial contests that follow faulty or rigged elections. Often badly handled, these judicial contests are the causes of in crises in the sub region.

Another strategy of ECOWAS in relation to promotion of democratic governance is its engagement with democratic institutions such as political parties and civil society organizations. These institutions had proven invaluable partners to ECOWAS in its peace-making and peace-building in Liberia and Sierra Leone. It was also the case with the attempted effort of former President Tandja Mamadou of Niger to extend his tenure. Opposition political parties and CSOs protested in Niamey and mobilized themselves to address their grievances and recommendations to ECOWAS Heads of State and Government extraordinary meeting in Abuja, which resulted in suspension of Niger from the Organization, and subsequently the fall of his government (Plaisse, 2009). Therefore ECOWAS is supporting and working with them. The establishment of WACSO in 2003 by ECOWAS, for instance, is aimed at galvanizing 'the emerging 'civic' power and facilitate constructive partnership with states authorities, political parties, as well as ECOWAS' (WACSO, 2009). Also, in July 2010, ECOWAS Commission convened a regional meeting on Political Parties and Internal Party Democracy in Cote d'Ivoire to examine the state of political parties in West Africa with respect to their internal organization, financing and their ability to articulate visions and agenda to positively transform governance in the region.

It was also to deliberate on networking possibilities and opportunities among political parties across the region, with a view to sharing experiences and best practices, enhancing their capacities, as well as the support that ECOWAS could render in this direction (ECOWAS Communiqué, 2010)

The meeting was attended by political parties from eleven member states, some members of ECOWAS Parliament, representatives of Electoral Commissions of Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Niger and Togo, governance experts, representatives of research institutions and the media from ECOWAS Member States. The democratization process in the sub region was reviewed in that meeting with a focus on the effort of ECOWAS and the place of parties within the process. This form of communication with political parties in the sub region assists ECOWAS democratic governance agenda in the sub region.

Despite this progress of ECOWAS in enthroning democracy and democratic governance some challenges and problems abound. The recurrence of undemocratic rule persists in West Africa despite all the safeguards. Part of the problem is lack of internal democracy within member states and the overreliance of the ECOWAS structure on the heads of governments (cprs, 2011). Within the ECOWAS member states democratic institutions are weak. Gbesan (2010) describes the polity in West Africa as characterised by politicization of administrative machinery of government, zero-sum politics, non independence of the electoral administration and management agencies, weak and ineffective political parties, marginalization of the youth, circumscribed media and defective constitutions (Gbesan, 2010:9-11). In this kind of situation peoples' voice and rights are systematically suppressed using the state apparatuses. Mass protests, political crises and violence usually result from this situation which may threaten the security and political stability in the states and the sub region. Elections, which represents a critical democratic governance juncture is often the trigger. Therefore, the ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance was more explicit on regional involvement in the preparation and delivery of a safe election process. It left out issues that will guarantee effective democratic governance through enthronement of rule of law, human rights protection and good governance. Article 34 of the protocol states that 'member states and the Commission shall endeavour to adopt at national and regional levels, practical modalities for the enforcement of the rule of law, human rights, justice and good governance' (ECOWAS, 2001:19).

But this statement has remained open and unimplemented. The illiberal character of the democratic regimes in the sub region does not help matters. Thus, the usual ECOWAS capacity building assistance to member states through seminars, workshops, meetings, and mobilization of resources (Field notes, 2012) towards enthroning democratic governance is in order but not sufficient. A detailed provision on ways of addressing internal democratic challenges needs to be developed.

Moreover, the ECOWAS Court of Justice is potentially another space for deepening democratic governance given its competences in human rights matters and interpretation of the Community instruments. The Court has received many cases related to elections and democratic governance crises from across the sub region. For instance, in the case of *SERAP v The Federal Republic of Nigeria* the Court ruled that “the right of Nigerian children to free, quality and compulsory basic education, as the most effective way to address the root causes of the post election violence and killing” (Mumini, 2012). Similarly the court listened to the case of *RADDHO v Senegal*, where the plaintiff, an NGO, sought the court to intervene over the 2012 election crises in Senegal in which the Government of former President Wade used force to quell opposition before the elections (Centre for Human Rights, 2012). The challenge however is the Court lacks enforcement capacity. It relies on member states goodwill for implementation to take place. This arrangement clearly negates the effort of the Court. The member state governments often ignore the verdicts of the Court. Consequently, the Court’s Vice President, Justice Benefeito Mosso Ramos, said “more than 60 per cent of the court’s rulings are not enforced as many of such cases end on preliminary objection” thereby undermining the impact of the court (Nigeria Daily News, 2012). This problem also undermines the deepening of democratic governance in the sub region. Governments acting in the name of the state exploit the people and use the state apparatuses to defend their actions. With an effective regional court, such abuses can be checked.

This institutional challenge together with the illiberal nature of the democratic governments in the sub region makes political instability to become inevitable. The governance situation in most of the member states leaves a lot to be desired. In Togo, Nigeria, the Gambia among others the people are treated as objects of rule and those in authority are above the law. In the end what is established are electoral authoritarian regimes, where regular, multiparty elections exists only to obscure the authoritarian domination (Diamond, 2002).

There is absence real democratic governance. Therefore, peoples' wills are easily subverted. In this situation, ECOWAS role is largely reactive, rather than proactive. The preventive mechanisms are not fully deployed. For instance, arms that got into the hands of groups during the war in Libya were long envisaged to be a source of instability in West Africa. Yet, no serious preventive action was taken until Northern Mali was overrun by rebels and coup d'état occurred. The Organization is now fighting tooth and nail to cure the illness that would have been prevented. Although, as mentioned earlier, part of the problem is ECOWAS limited authority to carry out some of its policies in the face of state's sovereignty. Giving the situation the civil society remains the fulcrum of democratic governance. The people can acquire and retain their voice and influence in governance as organized CSOs. That was seen in Niger when they mobilized to activate ECOWAS response mechanisms against the intransigent regime of President Tandja Mamadou. Therefore, ECOWAS needs to review its democratic governance instruments to explicitly accord CSOs specific roles in monitoring and safeguarding regionally agreed democratic principles and norms. ECOWAS development partners like the European Union (EU) need to further support the democratization of ECOWAS activities as it seeks to become people-centred.

Furthermore, the supranational institutions of ECOWAS namely the Parliament and the Commission, the Court lack effective intra and inter institutional collaborations (Field notes, 2012). This renders them ineffective. For instance, within the Commission there is territoriality and poor communication between the directorates. Working relations is hampered by the fact that the directorates are physically separated from each other as two annexes exist in some distant locations away from the main office within Abuja. In addition, there is virtually no administrative connection between the Parliament and the Commission. The Commission is not effectively informed and incorporated in the affairs of the Parliament and vice versa. There is no institutionalized forum for collaboration on day-to-day basis. It is only at occasions, like the opening of new parliamentary session that the President of the ECOWAS Commission attends to give speech. This situation hampers the effective role of ECOWAS in promoting democratic governance in West Africa. I must say that these challenges are not unknown in ECOWAS. But bringing solutions to them require more than policy pronouncements. It requires review of institutional links within and between the institutions.

ECOWAS effort in promoting democratic governance also requires effective involvement and participation of the Community citizens. Fortunately, this process has been initiated by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government with its adoption of a Vision 2020 programme in 2007. The programme is primarily focused on achieving a transformation from an "ECOWAS of States" to an "ECOWAS of the peoples", and 'establishing a community space where the peoples can live in dignity, peace and under good governance, whilst ensuring their successful integration into the global village' (CDP, 2011:10). This vision reflects ECOWAS desire to further institutionalize democratic governance at the regional level. It is an effort to make ECOWAS more accountable the people rather than governments or states. Attaining this democratic vision requires the review of the institutional frameworks of ECOWAS within which the Organization operates. If that is done, the democratic norms and practices being established in West Africa will be consolidated with effective institutions that will guarantee, promote and defend democratic governance at both the regional and national levels.

5. Conclusions

ECOWAS has played a significant role in the entronement of democracy and democratic governance in West Africa through the institutionalization of democratic norms, principles and practices. There is a consensus among the member states to fight unconstitutional accession to, and maintenance of, power, protect human rights and respect rule of law. This consensus is built into the ECOWAS instruments namely the revised Treaty and the protocols on peace, security and democracy. However, there are no effective mechanisms for deepening democratic governance within the member states. The establishment of supranational institutions, namely the ECOWAS Court, the Parliament and the Commission, was to better position the Organization in implementing and enforcing regionally agreed policies, rules and norms. However, the supranational authority of the institutions remains rather limited by the sovereignty of member states. This is also aggravated by the weak performance of the Organization due to lack of internal cohesion and inter-institutional collaboration between the institutions. Strengthening the ECOWAS institutions and advancing the Vision 2020 of transforming to an ECOWAS of the Peoples from an ECOWAS of States will greatly help in entrenching democratic governance in the sub region.

The Early Response component of the early warning needs to be developed further to prevent reversals of democratic gains and breakdown of order and political stability. Moreover, to advance the regional efforts of ECOWAS in deepening democratic governance and forestall recurrence of coups and temptations by politicians to temper with constitutions, a peer review mechanism, akin to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) needs to be adopted and institutionalized. This will go a long way in checking excesses of governments and proliferation of illiberal democracies in the sub region.

Aside from these institutional challenges, ECOWAS has on the whole enlarged the democratic space in the West African sub region. It has provided a political space for people to express themselves, even though it is limited. This can be seen through the regional court's decisions on matters of human rights; the engagement of ECOWAS by political parties and civil society organization to intervene in national political crises, as was the case in Niger in 2009. ECOWAS role in promoting dialogue on, and enforcement of, regionally agreed democratic governance values and human rights is assuring enough for checking the Arab Spring type of civil unrest and mass protests. Indeed, the absence of effective sub regional organization in the Maghreb to promote dialogue on democracy, adopt and institutionalize the AU democratic governance instruments was partly responsible for the violent popular uprising that engulfed the North African states. The people did not have any alternative sub regional space for political manoeuvre as the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) has remained moribund for a very long time. Therefore, as the case of ECOWAS has shown, the transformation of RECs in Africa into political spaces for the promotion of dialogue, consensus, and enforcement of democratic governance norms and values is important in establishing vents for discontentment within member states and for having an effective African content in solving Africa's problems.

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