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REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN AFRICA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ECOWAS AND SADC

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Abstract

Regional organizations and their role in the promotion of democratic governance in Africa have been the subject of increasing scholarly interest, especially since the revolutions towards democracy in various African states in the early 2020s. This paper compares and contrasts how Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) have operationalized their mandate to be a tool of democratic consolidation in their respective sub-regions. Based on the institutional theory and normative diffusion models, the paper examines the structural capabilities, legal tools, and track records of both institutions in reacting to unconstitutional alterations of government and democratic backsliding. The paper concludes that whereas ECOWAS has established comparatively strong enforcement mechanisms and has shown a stronger readiness to impose sanctions on member states by means of suspensions and targeted actions, SADC has done so by means of diplomatic persuasion and silent dialogue which can be explained by the difference in political cultures and hegemonic interests within each organization. The paper assumes that the success of regional organizations with consolidating democracy does not only hinge on the institutionalization of these organizations, but also on the political will of the powerful member states, the consistency of the regional norms as well as the extent to which these norms have popular legitimacy among citizens. The paper ends by giving recommendations on how to empower the democratic governance structures of the two organizations. The qualitative approach used is based on secondary data since it depends majorly on the organizational reports, articles in academic journals, policy reports and reliable institutional databases.

Keywords: *African Politics, Democratic Consolidation. ECOWAS, Normative Diffusion, SADC*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most controversial questions of the modern African political science and international relations is whether regional bodies can become effective agents of democratic consolidation in Africa. Ever since the wave of political liberalization that rocked the continent in the 1990s in the wake of the collapse of the cold war, African states have been grappling with the issue of how to maintain and strengthen democratic governance outside the electoral processes. The vulnerability of democratic institutions and the necessity of external anchoring mechanisms have been highlighted by the proliferation of coups, constitutional manipulations, and authoritarian relapses in different countries (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015; Omotola, 2011).

Regional institutions have increasingly aligned themselves as the enforcers of democratic principles in Africa, and anti-coup clauses, electoral oversight systems, and peer review systems have become embedded in their toolsets. The New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD), the African Union (AU) Constitutive Act of 2000, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) of 2007 are all continental moves towards normative conditionality in governance. Nevertheless, the translation of these continental patterns into effective sub-regional practice has not been even, and the disparity is most evident in the difference in the approaches of ECOWAS and SADC (Jaye, 2008; Levitt, 2011).

ECOWAS was founded in 1975 and initially as a mere economic integration structure. However, it grew over time (especially after the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s) to become a security and governance actor, resulting in the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance in 2001. This protocol outright forbids unconstitutional alteration of government and requires collective action against threats to democratic order (Hartmann, 2017). However,

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SADC was formed in 1992, signed the Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections in 2004, and revised its electoral norms in 2015. However, it has been said by critics that the democratic governance structure of SADC is more of a declaration than the bite of the ECOWAS democratic governance structure (Nathan, 2013).

In this paper, a systematic comparative analysis of ECOWAS and SADC as agents of democratic consolidation will be conducted, based on their institutional frameworks, documented interventions, and the elements that can explain differences in their performance in democratic governance. The study is inspired by the immediacy of the democratic crisis in Africa, best exemplified by the military coup in Mali (2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Niger (2023), and Gabon (2023), all of which happened in the geographic scope of the ECOWAS, and the larger governance infrastructure of the African Union. The research question that will inform this paper is: How and how much do ECOWAS and SADC play a role in democratic consolidation within their respective sub-regions, and what explains their varying success?

Literature Review

Democratic consolidation is the process through which a newly created democracy is stabilised, established and accepted to such an extent that the likelihood of democratic failure becomes far-fetched. According to Linz and Stepan (1996), a consolidated democracy is one in which no single national, social, economic, political, or institutional actor devotes considerable resources to pursuing its goals by establishing a non-democratic state. This is a behavioural, attitudinal and constitutional notion of consolidation, which suggests that democracy should not just be welcomed as the least evil system, but rather as the sole game in town.

Diamond (1999) extends this definition to a sense of the quality of democratic institutions by stating that the consolidation would require not only electoral routinization but also horizontal accountability, the rule of law, and civil liberties. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) have stressed the structural and historical barriers to consolidation in the African context, such as the legacies of colonialism, the culture of neo-patrimonial governance, and the ineffective state institutions. These barriers render the external scaffolding that is offered by regional organisations especially pertinent.

More recently, researchers have cautioned against so-called democratic backsliding, which, as Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) define, is the slow destruction of democratic norms by elected leaders via legal but authoritarian actions. This is a different phenomenon that cannot be compared to the classic coup but it is also as destructive to democratic consolidation. Regional organizations need to act in response, however, not only to such dramatic breaks like coups but also to the gradual undermining of democratic norms internally.

Regional Organisations as Democratic Actors

Regional organisations and their role in promoting democracy have been theorised under various frames. Pevehouse (2002) claims that the more regional organisations have high membership conditionality and democratic density, the better they are at enhancing democracy within member states. The reason is that thick democratic institutions are credibility institutions: they give domestic actors, investors, and citizens an assurance that the government is devoted to democratic rules that will be imposed by external actors.

Normative diffusion, which is based on the constructivist international relations theory, is the idea that international norms may be internalized by states, through socialization, persuasion, and strategic calculation (Checkel, 2005; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The regional organizations enable this diffusion by providing the norms of commonality, providing socialization platforms like summits and peer reviews, and using naming-and-shaming mechanisms which change the reputational calculus of member states.

The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) established by NEPAD in Africa, in particular, is an effort to normative diffusion on a continental scale. However, its voluntary and non-binding character has limited its democratic governance impact (Cilliers, 2008). Sub-regional blocs such as the ECOWAS and the SADC have thus been sought to offer a more binding layer of democratic governance with binding protocols and collective action mechanisms.

ECOWAS and its Democratic Governance Architecture

The development of ECOWAS as a community of economic actors into a security and democratic governance actor is one of the most important institutional changes in African regional integration. The Protocol Relating to the Mechanism of Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-keeping and Security of 1999 provided the basis of the collective intervention and the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of 2001 provided the normative pillars of ECOWAS engagement with democracy. These pillars are the denial of illegal access to power, conducting free and fair elections, independence of the judiciary and media liberty (ECOWAS, 2001).

Over the years, the ECOWAS Commission has formulated various democratic governance promotion tools, which include the deployment of the election observation missions, imposition of the coup leaders, and in worst cases, the threat or use of military force by the ECOMOG, the ECOWAS Monitoring Group. The examples that are often referred to include the interventions in Sierra Leone (1997), Cote d'Ivoire (2011), and The Gambia (2017) as the examples of the ability of ECOWAS to implement the normative commitments (Hartmann, 2017; Chafer, 2020).

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SADC and its Democratic Governance Architecture

SADC was formed in 1992 at the expense of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) and covers sixteen member states that comprise southern and east-central Africa. The SADC Treaty, its founding document, expresses the promise of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law as some of the key principles of the community. SADC institutional tools of democratic governance are the Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections which were adopted in 2004 and the SADC Electoral Advisory Council (SEAC).

The democratic rule of governance has however been very criticized as SADC has been seen to be quite lenient towards the incumbent governments and has not been keen on punishing the member states. Nathan (2013) suggests that the approach that SADC has is conditioned by a norm of non-interference that was carried down to the politics of the liberation movement of southern Africa, whereby solidarity with liberation governments in the past had priority over democratic values. This history has led SADC to be particularly unwilling to criticize hegemony members such as Zimbabwe, Angola and South Africa whenever their democracy has been dubious.

Electoral Governance as a Measure of Democratic Consolidation

Electoral governance is a system of rules, institutions and procedures that structure and govern elections. The literature generally considers it to be one of the most visible and consequential aspects of democratic consolidation, as elections are the main mechanism by which citizens exercise popular sovereignty, and by which governments attain and renew their democratic legitimacy (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002). Quality of electoral governance, such as independence of electoral management bodies, fairness of voter registration rules, fairness of campaign financing rules, and impartiality of dispute resolution mechanisms, are high-frequency proxy variables on the overall quality of democratic consolidation in a particular country.

The role of regional organizations in electoral governance has taken a centre stage in the African context by the implementation of election observation missions. These missions are not only aimed at certifying the results of an election but also evaluating the quality of the overall electoral process against regional and international benchmarks, prevent fraud and intimidation by the presence of external observers, and make technical suggestions to improve electoral administration in later cycles. The success of regional election observation as a mechanism of democratic consolidation is largely determined by the independence of the observation mission and the standards of methodology used and political desire of the regional organization to release findings that criticize the governments of the member states (Kelley, 2012).

Since the late 1990s, ECOWAS has been sending election observation missions to all of its member states and has elaborated more and more uniform methodological frameworks to carry out its missions. SADC has also increased its election observation operations but critics have always pointed out that the standards which SADC observer missions use to assess the situation has always been to lower the threshold of acceptability usually declaring an election as free and fair despite credible reports by domestic observers of gross irregularities. This disparate norm in electoral observation is a tangible expression of the larger institutional and normative divide between the two institutions in the sphere of democratic governance.

Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Consolidation in Africa

A question of civil-military relations is one of the dimensions of democratic consolidation that is under-explored in the literature on the regional organizations. The connection between the civilian government and the military formations is a crucial predictor of democratic sustainability in Africa, considering the central role played by the military in the African political life in the past (Decalo, 1990). Democratic consolidation needs not only electoral routinization of the transfer of political power but also the successful subordination of military to civilian control, the professionalization of security service and the creation of strong civilian control mechanisms.

The series of military coups in West Africa in 2020-2023 is the most spectacular example of how weak the civil-military relations in the sub-region were and how inefficient the existing regional mechanisms to maintain the civilian authority over armed forces had become. Researchers like Conteh-Morgan (2004) have suggested through the conditions that lead to military coups in Africa, which include chronic economic mismanagement, institutionalized corruption, ethnic tensions in the military, and politicization of military, are entrenched and can be effectively resolved only through external diplomatic pressure. The regional bodies should hence supplement their democratic governance systems with more serious security sector reform as a precondition to democratic consolidation.

In this regard, both ECOWAS and SADC have come up with some progress. The Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) of 2008 by ECOWAS has come up with a security sector reform framework which seeks to solve the problem of democratic civilian control over the security institutions. SADC has also included the security sector governance in its organ on politics, defence and security cooperation (OPDS). Nevertheless, these frameworks have not been widely implemented in practice, which is indicative of the greater difficulty of convincing governments of member states to be open to external review of their security institutions. The 2021-2023 coup wave has revealed the insufficiency of current governance provisions of the security sector and has highlighted the necessity of more systematic approach to

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civil-military relations as part of the strategy of democratic consolidation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that support the paper are two complementary theories, institutional and normative diffusion approach that has roots in constructivist international relations theory. Collectively, these frameworks can offer a strong analytical prism of exploring the functioning of regional organizations as actors of democratic governance and explaining their differences in effectiveness.

The institutional theory, which is formulated by March and Olsen (1989) and advanced by North (1990), is the theory that teaches that institutions influence the behavior of actors by offering rules, norms and enforcement mechanisms which inhibit and facilitate specific courses of action. When applied to regional bodies, this framework guides the focus to formal rules and enforcement mechanisms which are incorporated into organizational charters and protocols. It is hoped that the effectiveness of the promotion and protection of democratic governance by the organizations will be more effective in the organizations that have stronger institutional structures, such as clearer norms, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and more effective bureaucracies.

This framework describes why there is a difference between ECOWAS and SADC, in terms of institutions. The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) of ECOWAS is more prescriptive and binding than the SADC instruments. The protocol clearly outlines the unconstitutional alteration of the government, sets timelines on the way electoral conduct should be, and requires concerted action regarding breaching. In comparison, Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections by SADC (2004) are not binding but merely advisory and do not have similar enforcement mechanisms (Nathan, 2013; SADC, 2004).

The normative diffusion model is based on the constructivist work of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and Checkel (2005): it is believed that the international norms disseminate in a life cycle of emergence, cascade, and internalization. Regional organizations are viewed as norm entrepreneurs and socialization forums, where democratic governance norms are relayed to member states by imparting persuasion, social influence and conditionality mechanisms. According to the theory, the cascading and internalization of democratic norms are most probable when the norms have the backing of norm leaders, socialization processes are long-lasting and institutionalized, and when the domestic actors perceive the norms as instrumentally or intrinsically valuable.

When applied to the ECOWAS-SADC comparison, the normative diffusion analysis attracts focus to the density and coherence of democratic norms in each organization and the role of norm leaders in it. Nigeria has traditionally been the norm leader of the democratic governance in ECOWAS whereby it has used its hegemonic status to trigger collective action against anti-democratic activities by member states. Historically, South Africa has limited its potential as a norm leader in SADC due to its post-apartheid adherence to African solidarity and tendency to focus economic interests first at governance conditionality (Nathan, 2013; Hammerstad, 2005).

Combined these two structures shed light on the structural aspects of the regional democratic governance as well as the ideational and social mechanisms in which norms are propagated and absorbed. The paper does not use these frameworks as strict hypotheses that can be tested but rather as analytical prism through which the empirical data provided by the case studies of ECOWAS and SADC will be viewed.

Methodology

The research design used in this study is a qualitative research because the research questions are interpretive and the phenomena being investigated are complex. The systematic document analysis is the major data collection technique, which is based on various secondary sources such as organizational treaties, protocols, official communiques of ECOWAS and SADC; reports and working papers of African Union, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA); and peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and policy briefs of the identified African Furthermore, the paper relies on the reliable media stories and the annual governance indices by Freedom House and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) by Mo Ibrahim Foundation to complement the documentary study with the empirical evidence on democratic governance trends among the member states of these two organizations.

The research design is a comparative case analysis, also known as a most-different systems design (Przeworski and Teune, 1970) whereby the cases of ECOWAS and SADC are chosen due to having a similar organizational mandate, the desire to focus on regional integration, and membership in the larger architecture of the overall system of the African Union, although differing considerably in institutional structure, political culture and democratic govern The design enables the identification of the institutional and contextual variables that explain the difference in effectiveness of democratic governance in the two bodies. The data were themed using the institutional theory and normative diffusion theoretical frameworks deductively and the empirical data inductively. It was analyzed based on the concept of analytical rigor and compared the results in various sources to increase reliability and reduce interpretive bias.

Results and Discussions

Capacity in the institution and the mandate in democratic governance

When the institutional structures of ECOWAS and SADC are compared, one can observe a major difference in the level of depth and enforceability of the democratic governance mandate of these two institutions. The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of ECOWAS (2001) is arguably the most broad-ranged sub-regional governance tool in Africa, which provided zero tolerance against the unconstitutional change of government, conditions under which the conduct of

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elections should be free and fair, judicial independence and the need to protect the freedom of expression and press. More importantly, the protocol provides the gradual system of penalties, starting with diplomatic isolation and membership suspension, and moving on to economic penalties and, finally, the joint military action with the ECOWAS Standby Force (ECOWAS, 2001; Hartmann, 2017).

The governance structure of SADC, in turn, is much less prescriptive. The Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections (2004) established aspirational standards of the election practices such as equality between all political parties, the right of association and the creation of unbiased electoral commissions. But, in contrast to the ECOWAS protocol, the guidelines of SADC do not impose binding obligations on the member states, do not specify unconstitutional changes of government in terms of operations, and do not provide sanctions in case of violations. The SADC Electoral Advisory Council (SEAC) was formed in 2012 to facilitate electoral observation work but it is based on a technical assistance model, instead of a conditionality model (SADC, 2004; Nathan, 2013). This institutional imbalance between the two organizations is long way to explain their difference in the capacity to promote democratic governance.

ECOWAS: Interventions and Democratic Governance in Practice

The history of democratic governance intervention by ECOWAS is among some of the greatest in the developing world. Since the ECOMOG interventions in Liberia (1990-2003) and Sierra Leone (1997-2000) which were security-motivated, albeit with democratic governance implications, ECOWAS has built a more governance-oriented intervention repertoire. The 1998 military overthrow of the RUF-AFRC coup by ECOMOG was followed by the restoration of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in Sierra Leone that is generally seen as a turning point in the democratic consolidation efforts of ECOWAS (Jaye, 2008; Levitt, 2011).

More lately, the reaction of the ECOWAS to the post-election crisis in The Gambia in 2016 to 2017 has been referred to as an effective instance of democratic defense. When Jammeh, who was the incumbent President of The Gambia, refused to admit his defeat in the elections to Adama Barrow, ECOWAS formed a coalition of diplomats supported by a credible military presence through the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG), which finally made Jammeh accept his defeat without the use of full-scale military force (Chafer, 2020). The case revealed the potential of ECOWAS to work its democratic standards of governance into collective action, at least in the hopeful environment of regional political agreement and a definite constitutional responsibility.

Nevertheless, the democratic rule of ECOWAS is not without faults. The ways the organization has reacted to the wave of military coups in the Sahel in 2021-2023 have been frequently criticized to be slow and inefficient. In Mali, the ECOWAS first imposed total economic sanctions in response to the August 2020 coup by Colonel Assimi Goita but eventually a transition framework that put the military in a normalized situation but did not restore full civilian control. Further sanctions by ECOWAS in response to the subsequent August 2021 coup that replaced the transitional civilian president with Goita himself did not prove to be effective to oust the junta, as it drew the Wagner Group mercenary organization closer to Russia (Chafer, 2020; Sanderson and Duggal, 2021). The same restrictions were felt by the way ECOWAS dealt with coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger, where the junta leaders were happy to accept the price of suspension and sanctions instead of relinquishing power.

The incidences indicate the institutional constraints of the democratic governance ability of ECOWAS. The coercive means that the organization employs such as military action and economic sanctions, work best against weak states with little popular legitimacy and a heavy reliance on regional economic connections. In cases where the junta leaders are in a position to tap into the domestic popular dissatisfaction with the civilian regimes, and where they can tap into regional hostility to France, and where they can tap into other security and economic allies, the strength of ECOWAS becomes significantly weak. The Sahel crisis can therefore be seen as a basic stress test of the democratic governance architecture of ECOWAS, the disjuncture between normative commitment and operational effectiveness.

SADC: Quiet Diplomacy, Mediation, and Democratic Governance

The style of democratic governance adopted by SADC has been typified by a lean towards quiet diplomacy, facilitation and non-confrontational encounter with the member states. This style is indicative of the political culture of the founding membership to the organization, most of whom were liberation movements that ruled their states as the ruling parties and were extremely distrustful of foreign intervention in their internal matters. The idea of solidarity that was at the core of the anti-apartheid movement and the supportive networks of the liberation movements was transformed into a principle of non-interference that has traditionally limited the ability of SADC to take strong democratic governance action (Nathan, 2013; Hammerstad, 2005).

The best example of such dynamic is the way SADC has dealt with the 2000-2010 political crisis in Zimbabwe. With the Mugabe government progressively stripping away democratic institutions, terrorizing the opposition, and rigging fraudulent elections, the SADC reaction was to send election observation missions that continued to certify highly compromised electoral procedures and to turn to South African quiet diplomacy under Presidents Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma. Nathan (2013) makes a sound argument that the strategy taken by South Africa, where the interest of the regime stability and liberation solidarity were put above the interest of democratic rectitude, actually crippled the SADC to bring about any significant governance pressure to Harare. Most notable in terms of democratic governance intervention in Zimbabwe was the Global Political Agreement that had been brokered by SADC in the year 2008 leading to the formation of the

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Government of National Unity between the incumbent ZANU-PF and the MDC and however, its implementation was accompanied with further manipulation by the incumbent regime and ultimately did not lead to democratic consolidation.

The management of the political crises in Lesotho by SADC gives a more detailed view. Since 2014 when a military mutiny threatened the elected government of Prime Minister Tom Thabane, the organization has been sending several mediation missions to Lesotho. The SADC mediation yielded the Maseru Facilitation Declaration of 2016 and then sent a SADC Preventive Mission (SAPMIL) into Lesotho to stabilize the nation. De Wet (2019) evaluates these interventions as a partial success because, although they stopped complete democratic disintegration, they did not tackle the institutional flaws underlying Lesotho and predisposing it to a series of political crises. The SADC was also involved in the political crisis of 2009 in Madagascar, which was the result of the unconstitutional overthrow of President Marc Ravalomanana, although the mediation process of the SADC was a slow and was characterized by internal differences between the member states, resulting in a negotiated settlement that still left much of a governance vacuum.

The democratic governance constraints of SADC are therefore structural and not just episodic. They are indicative of the political culture in which the organization was founded, its own poorly enforceable mechanisms, and the domination of the norms of solidarity of the liberation era, which makes state sovereignty more important than democratic conditionality. Although the cases of SADC mediation have shown the capabilities of the organization to participate actively in the field of diplomacy, the lack of binding instruments of governance and political reluctance of the most powerful member states imply that SADC is not a practical tool that can enforce the principles of democracy as ECOWAS, at least in theory, can.

Electoral Governance and Observation: Comparison Standards and Results

Electoral observation is one of the most concrete arenas where the difference in the democratic governance style of ECOWAS and SADC can be seen. The election observation missions have been widely used by both organizations in their respective sub-regions, but the rigor of the methods and political independence of the missions have varied widely. The methodological approaches used by ECOWAS election observation missions are becoming more detailed and more consistent with the principles of the Declaration of Principles in International Election Observation and are becoming more inclined to publish findings that are critical when the electoral process does not meet the required standards. The final reports of the ECOWAS observation missions in Nigeria (2023), Senegal (2024), and Sierra Leone (2023) were all detailed reports that identified certain deficiencies in electoral administration and provided specific recommendations on reform, a sign of a determination to engage in a real assessment and not just an endorsement (Kelley, 2012; Omotola, 2011

The situation with electoral observation in SADC is even more concerning. The 2008, 2013 and 2018 observation missions by the organization in Zimbabwe were extensively criticized by independent electoral observers and civil society groups as condoning highly problematic electoral processes. An example is the 2013 Zimbabwe election which was declared by the SADC observer mission to have been carried out in a peaceful and credible way, despite having been marked by systematic voter roll manipulation, partisan behaviour by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, and a high level of intimidation of opposition supporters. This trend is supported by the 2023 governance data provided by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, as the average score of SADC member states in the electoral process quality indicators is lower than that of ECOWAS member states, despite the fact that both organizations claim to be committed to free and fair elections as the fundamental norm of governance (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023).

This electoral observational difference is indicative of the institutional and normative differences as seen earlier in this paper. The tendency of SADC to go easy on governments in power, based upon the solidarity principles of the liberation era, is directly translated into a reduced acceptability standard in its electoral judgments. So long as SADC can not create truly independent observation procedures, professionally staffed, with transparent procedures and actually free of any diplomatic influence, its electoral observation practices will remain detrimental to democratic consolidation in southern Africa.

Civil-Military Relations and The limits of External Democratic Governance

The 2020-23 wave of military coup that rocked the member states of ECOWAS has compelled a radical reconsideration of the constraints of regional systems of democratic governments in the context of structural failures in civil-military relations. The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of ECOWAS forbids unconstitutional governmental changes and has to respond to military coups collectively, yet does not touch on the circumstances under which military coups take place and, in certain instances, are popularly endorsed. Coups in Africa are not usually opportunistic, as argued by Conteh-Morgan (2004), it is normally a circumstance whereby the civilian governments have lost much popular legitimacy due to corruption, economic mismanagement, or security failures, and where the military still has the organizational ability and institutional disposition to take on the task.

The 2020-2023 coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger were preceded by years of civilian government failure to control the worsening security situation due to jihadist insurgencies, popular discontent with corruption and elite capture, and the loss of state control in the peripheral areas. The coup leaders were even initially received with popular celebrations in a number of cases which complicated the efforts of ECOWAS to couvert its anti-coup efforts as a

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defense of popular will against military usurpation. This dynamic reveals an inherent contradiction within the ECOWAS democratic governance structure which is aimed at addressing the formal institutional transgressions but not the quality deficits in governance that create the popular circumstances of democratic failure.

The governance structure of SADC security sector, which is hardwired into its Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation (OPDS), has also failed to translate to the effective mechanisms of encouraging civilian control of security forces in member states. Although the epidemic of military coup that has plagued West Africa has not affected southern Africa, this comparative calm is the result of the specific politics and economies of the southern African states, and not the success of the governance structures at SADC. Other nations such as Angola and Mozambique have had extremely personalized civil-military relationships where security formations are directly connected to ruling party formations, and informal, but not formal, systems of civilian control are opaque to external research and analysis. A broader strategy to democratic consolidation in the two sub-regions should then include long-term involvement with reform of the security sector as a structural precondition to democratic sustainability.

Comparative Analysis: Factors Explaining Differential Effectiveness

The cross-Comparison of ECOWAS and SADC as actors of democratic governance identifies various important factors that underlie their varying success. The initial and the most primary is the power of their institutional structures. ECOWAS has more comprehensive, binding and enforcement oriented democratic governance structure than SADC as it has been recorded above. The 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, with its specific outlawing of unconstitutional transitions of government and its system of graduated sanctions, provide ECOWAS with a legal and institutional basis to take democratic action incomparable with the advisory guidelines of SADC.

The second one is the influence of the hegemon of the region and its adherence to democracy. Historically, the political leadership required to initiate collective democratic governance action has been supplied by the size, the economic weight and the democratic credentials of Nigeria, especially in the context of civilian governments, in ECOWAS. Nigeria has not been an ideal model of democratic governance at the domestic level but its leadership has generally aligned itself with the democratic principles enshrined in the protocols of the ECOWAS especially in its opposition of military coups in other countries in the region. South Africa has been affected by its post-apartheid governance culture, economic interests in the stability of the region, and domestic constraints in its politics, including the historical solidarity of the ANC to the governments of liberation in Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique to become a democratic hegemon in SADC (Hammerstad, 2005; Nathan, 2013).

The third reason is the legitimacy and coherence of regional norms of democracy. The history of disastrous civil wars in the 1990s in ECOWAS instilled a strong desire in the society to have the democratic governance principles that were entrenched in the 2001 protocol. The atrocities of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars have created a widely held perception among the people of West Africa and political elites that meant that unconstitutional change of government was unacceptable. Such a popular legitimacy of democratic norms enhanced the ability of ECOWAS to take decisive action against coup. In southern Africa, the reference was the liberation fight against apartheid and colonialism that created norms of solidarity that made it difficult to impose democratic conditionality on post-liberation regimes.

The fourth one is the external geopolitical environment. Traditionally, ECOWAS has been functioning in a West African security context which has been influenced by French and American security alliances which have in general acted in favor of democratic governance practices at least to the extent that they corresponded to the western strategic interests. This alignment has been shattered by the anti-French backlash that has taken place in the Sahel after 2020, revealing the reliance of the capacity of ECOWAS to govern democratically on a friendly geopolitical environment. SADC is situated in a geopolitical space of southern Africa where the economic power of China is significant and where the conditionality of the western governance is perceived with more doubt, especially by the leading member states such as Angola and Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

This paper has made a systematic comparative study on ECOWAS and SADC as tools of democratic consolidation in Africa. The analysis reveals that there are major disparities between the two organizations in their organizational structure, the track record of intervention, and the determinants that influence the success of the two in democratic governance. A stronger, more binding and action-oriented democratic governance structure has been created by ECOWAS, making it more decisive in dealing with unconstitutional change of government and electoral crisis in West Africa. With the same liberation-era solidarity norms and weak implementation mechanisms, and the political reserve of powerful member states, SADC has mostly resorted to quiet diplomacy and facilitation to achieve less steady democratic governance results.

Nevertheless, the analysis also shows that the institutional benefits of ECOWAS have failed to help it to shield itself against the structural constraints of regional democratic governance. The Sahel coup wave of 2021-2023 has shown that even the most institutionally prepared regional organization can be outsmarted by stubborn juntas that tap into domestic popular resentments, anti-Westernism, and other geopolitical alliances. This observation highlights the core learning of the institutional theory and normative diffusion models that have been utilized in this paper: to produce effective regional democracies, it is not sufficient to

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have good institutions but also the political goodwill of the member states, the acceptability of regional norms among citizens, and a positive geopolitical environment.

The general conclusion of this discussion is that regional organizations are not enough to bring about democratic consolidation in Africa. Regional governance structures may offer valuable external points of reference on democratic norms and may respond and prevent the most heinous breaches of democratic norms, yet cannot replace the internal political environment, robust institutions, active civil society, accountable political parties and an independent judiciary, which maintain democracy internally. The finest thing that ECOWAS and SADC can do is to help develop these internal conditions by maintaining capacity building, electoral technical assistance and norm socialization as opposed to coercive intervention.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, this paper provides a set of recommendations that can be made to enhance the democratic governance structures of the ECOWAS and SADC.

The first is that SADC needs to conduct an extensive review and reinforcement of its democratic governance tools to go beyond the advisory Principles and Guidelines Governing Democratic Elections to a binding protocol in the pattern of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001). This protocol ought to have clear definition of unconstitutional alterations of government, binding electoral practices, and progressive sanction system that has well-defined implementation procedures. South Africa, being the economic and political giant in the region, ought to take a more proactive role of leading by norm in this.

Second, ECOWAS and SADC must also invest in the establishment of standing democratic governance early warning systems that can help them to notice democratic backsliding early enough before it turns into a crisis. The Continental Early Warning System (CEWS) that is already in place within the African Union ought to be enhanced and its early warning signals need to be better channeled into regional organizational response systems. Early alert should be accompanied by early action structures, which require organizational responses to premeditated democratic risk alerts.

Third, ECOWAS is in urgent need to re-focus its policy towards the Sahel security-democracy nexus, formulating a more advanced policy that conditions security aid and counter-terrorism collaboration to actual conditionality of democratic governance. This is due to the current strategy that has in effect decoupled security cooperation and governance conditions in practice that has allowed junta leaders to invoke security imperatives as throws against democratic accountability. A renewed strategy would render regional security collaboration contingent upon plausible democratic transition plans.

Fourth, the two organizations need to increase their citizen engagement and collaboration with the civil society dramatically. Promotion of democratic governance that is purely at the inter-governmental level is especially prone to elite capture and diplomatic paralysis. Through the establishment of direct alliances with civil societies, media houses and human rights agencies in member countries, ECOWAS and SADC will be able to establish domestic constituencies of regional democratic standards that can scarcely be compromised by the government in power or by the junta. Fifth, the African Union ought to promote the harmonization of tools of democratic governance in all the economic communities of the region, to come up with common minimum standards of electoral practices, anti-coup measures, and democratic conditionality. This harmonization would mitigate the threat of forum shopping among the member states and enhance the overall continental democratic governance structure under which ECOWAS and SADC exist. Sixth, both entities must establish stronger post-crisis follow-through strategies to make sure that democratic settlements, mediated, are put into practice and held. Institutional gap of monitoring and compliance of democratic engagement in governance is observed in the pattern of successful mediation and consequent inconclusive or failed implementation as experienced in Madagascar, Lesotho and Zimbabwe. The secretariats of the two organizations should have dedicated transition monitoring units which have clear mandates and timelines.

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