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Coups d’états in West Africa are not entirely negative
Will a new Peace and Security Council make a difference?

The 37th ordinary session of the African Union (AU) Assembly elected 10 new members to the Peace and Security Council (PSC) to serve a two-year term. At a challenging time for regional, continental and multilateral responses to crises, the new Council faces a herculean task. It must transform its efficacy to address Africa’s numerous peace and security issues, while forecasting, anticipating and preventing future challenges. Will the new PSC members achieve this or will it be business as usual?

Leveraging PSC reform

The election of new members coincides with two major events that impact the PSC mandate. The Council celebrates its 20th anniversary in May 2024, having started its work in 2004 after the adoption and entry into force of the PSC protocol in 2002 and 2003 respectively. This event requires a crucial stocktake of its conflict prevention strategies and crisis management response. New, enthusiastic members, can provide a more sober examination of the Council’s mandate against increasingly complex peace and security matters.

The election also happens alongside ongoing discussions on the timely African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) review requested by the Council itself in July 2023. This process demands a rethink of the design and implementation of AU peace and security frameworks. As the PSC is the central APSA decision-making pillar, enhancing its role and function is paramount. This should include a review of the Council’s composition, the adequacy of its human and financial resources and capabilities, and enhanced modalities for the implementation of its decisions.

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<th>Acronyms and abbreviations</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACLED</td>
<td>Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project</td>
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<td>APSA</td>
<td>African Peace and Security Architecture</td>
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<td>ASF</td>
<td>African Standby Force</td>
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<td>AU</td>
<td>African Union</td>
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<td>DRC</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
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<td>ECOWAS</td>
<td>Economic Community of West African States</td>
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<td>MNJTF</td>
<td>Multinational Joint Task Force</td>
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<td>PSC</td>
<td>Peace and Security Council</td>
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<td>PSOs</td>
<td>Peace support operations</td>
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<td>RECs</td>
<td>Regional economic communities</td>
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<td>RMs</td>
<td>Regional mechanisms</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern Africa Development Community</td>
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<td>UCGs</td>
<td>Unconstitutional changes of government</td>
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<td>UN</td>
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<td>UNISFA</td>
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It is important that new members bring fresh dynamism to Council engagements as this will generate ideas and sustain interest in ongoing processes. Newcomers such as Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Egypt and Sierra Leone, which have benefitted from continental management of transitions and conflicts, could contribute significantly to the APSA review. Experiences, knowledge and expertise are crucial in refining mechanisms and processes.

**Bidding farewell**

Burundi, Congo, Ghana, Senegal, South Africa, Tunisia and Zimbabwe exited the Council on 31 March 2024 after two years of noteworthy achievements. Ghana, for example, championed the AU’s response to unconstitutional changes of government, hosting forums in Accra in 2022 and 2024. Despite enormous pressure, it tabled several sensitive topics for discussion, including the Tigray crisis and the recent Ethiopia-Somalia tension over Somaliland.

The APSA review should take stock of the Council’s composition, its human and financial resources and implementation of decisions

Burundi championed the role of youth during its tenure, while South Africa – a top financial contributor to the AU’s budget – played a pivotal norm-enforcement role. These key members exit as the Council’s performance is overshadowed by major challenges including the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government and conflicts in Sudan and DRC. Outgoing members bid farewell to a Council that faces increased pressure amid weakened prevention and response capacities.

**Can new members make a difference?**

At their recent induction, incoming members Angola, Botswana, Côte d’Ivoire, DRC, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea and Sierra Leone displayed great enthusiasm and energy for tackling the continent’s issues. However, as mentioned, their failure or success will depend greatly on their political will, collective efforts and the extent to which the Council will make concrete and implementable decisions.

Another determinant will centre on whether members will promote national interests or whether continental priorities will inform decisions and outcomes. The inclusion of some member states already points to the former. Growing DRC and Rwanda interstate tensions, for example, have started to play out, with Rwanda strongly opposing the PSC’s endorsement of the Southern African Development Community’s mission in eastern DRC. Egypt’s priorities will certainly be informed by its commitment to finding solutions to the many conflicts in neighbouring countries and their spillover effects.

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**Current PSC Chairperson**

HE Emilia Mkusa, Namibia’s Ambassador to Ethiopia and Permanent Representative to the African Union.

**PSC members**

Burundi, Cameroon, Republic of Congo, Djibouti, The Gambia, Ghana, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe
What to expect

New membership will shape Council dynamics over the coming years, determining which thematic and country case issues reach the agenda. With the incoming ‘heavyweight’ members, crises such as eastern DRC and Sudan may be discussed more regularly. Whether the cohort can alter substantively the decisions and outcomes of PSC communiques and the Commission’s subsequent implementation remains to be seen.

Regional consensus or lack thereof will have significant implications. It is dependent on member states consulting and fostering regional positions on crises. For example, whether DRC can influence and align the positions of its fellow Central African Council members, Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea, could determine their support for the search for solutions in its eastern region.

If the trend of discussion of thematic rather than country cases persists, concerns will continue as to whether member countries are driven by pan-African interests

In the same vein, although geographically located as a North African state, Egypt’s ability to build consensus in East Africa with Tanzania and Uganda may strengthen Council decisions to move the needle on the Sudan crisis. Therefore, dynamics within and between regions will shape the Council and its response and effectiveness. In addition, Council members are required to individually and independently form their positions on the various crises plaguing the continent to avoid undue influence.

The exit of the seven outgoing members may lead to new agenda items being discussed. The tendency is that while serving on the Council, member states block the tabling of domestic issues. The constitutional crisis, slow creep into authoritarian rule in Tunisia and prolonged Zimbabwe misgovernance and human rights violations were not discussed during the past two years but can now be tabled. However, if the trend of discussion of thematic rather than country cases persists, concerns will continue as to whether member countries are driven by pan-African interests.

Resourcing required

Incoming member states face the behemoth task of course-correcting the Council and enhancing its efficacy. While at face value the members seem energised to address gaps in the Council’s working methods, the real undertaking is sustaining momentum throughout their two-year mandate. This will require greater consultation and collaboration with the AU Commission, AU Assembly, other AU organs, civil society and external partners. It will demand a well-resourced, political and technical Council using its mandated powers as per the protocol.

The Council will have to address current conflicts and prevent future ones. It must grapple with the reform and revitalisation of APSA and leverage its 20th-anniversary celebration to substantively inform and improve its work.
**Abyei must ascend the PSC agenda**

The planned PSC ambassadorial discussion on Abyei on 12 March 2024 was derailed by scheduling complexities, Sudan’s suspension from AU activities and Sudan’s official postponement request with the argument that the issue is being handled bilaterally.

It is not the first time this has happened. Discussions were deferred in 2023 despite the region’s place on the annual indicative PSC programme and deadly clashes in parts of the area. In November of that year, unknown gunmen killed 32 people in Wuncuei and Nyiel. In 2022, fighting between the Ngok Dinka and Messeriya tribes led to the death of more than 40.

Notwithstanding the region’s precarious security situation, its contested status and numerous pending issues, the last time the Council discussed Abyei was on 29 September 2022. This raises questions as to whether engagement on and attention to the region are commensurate with the gravity of its situation.

**What is currently at stake in Abyei?**

The Abyei crisis is linked to age-old tensions in the relationship between the Ngok Dinka and Messeriya, natural resources management and the region’s status. International efforts so far have contributed to demilitarisation and administrative and political oversight. These and the deployment of the United Nations Interim Force for Abyei (UNISFA) for civilian protection have helped to contain violence in the region. However, they have not necessarily resolved the underlying drivers of recurring violence plaguing the region.

While the main tensions are reported to have died down following mediation after the April 2022 clashes...

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**Chart 1: Armed clashes in Abyei villages, 3 December 2023 – 4 February 2024**

- **3 DEC.** Titweng and SSPM/A clash with members of Ngok Dinka militia at Agok West, Majak Deng Kaya, and Jul Jok, killing at least six and wounding 35.
- **4 DEC.** Titweng and SSPM/A allegedly attack Wau Yicin, wounding four.
- **12 DEC.** Titweng and SSPM/A clash with members of Ngok Dinka at Malual Aleu, reportedly killing one and wounding four.
- **15 DEC.** Titweng and Ngok Dinka clash at Atonj-Ayuak, reportedly killing one and injuring two.
- **17 DEC.** Titweng and Ngok Dinka clash at Abyei town.
- **31 DEC.** One person is killed and 11 injured after Titweng and SSPM/A members attack and clash with Ngok Dinka youth at Athony-Ayuok and Jul Jok.
- **2 JAN.** At least seven people are reportedly killed and two wounded after members of the Titweng clashed with members of the Ngok Dinka at Kadhiang.
- **3 JAN.** Armed Titweng allied with SSPM/A killed the deputy administrator of the Abyei area and five others at Wunpoth.
- **19 JAN.** Gunmen suspected of coming from Abyei burned houses and raided livestock in Anyiel Kuac boma in Turalei Payam, Twic, Warrap.
- **27 JAN.** Armed youth allied with SSPM/A attack in Majak county, Abyei, killing one person and reportedly kidnapping three.
- **28 JAN.** Armed youth allied with SSPM/A attack in Rumanier county, Abyei, killing one person and reportedly kidnapping 52.
- **3 FEB.** A market in Abyei, Aleel county, was burned, and the Warrap state information minister blamed armed Titweng allied with SSPM/A.
- **4 FEB.** Gunmen suspected of coming from Abyei burned houses and raided livestock in Anyiel Kuac boma in Turalei Payam, Twic, Warrap.
- **4 FEB.** Armed Titweng allied with SSPM/A attack in Majak county, Abyei, killing 14 and kidnapping another 52 people.

**Source:** ACLED 2024
between the two tribes involved, major clashes persist. Contestations over the Annet border, for instance, have strained relations between the Ngok Dinka and Twic Dinka and have been blamed for a number of clashes.

In January 2024, further clashes in Nyinkuac, Majbong and Khadian resulted in more than 50 casualties, including one Ghanaian and one Pakistani peacekeeper. Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data suggests that about 136 fatalities were recorded from incidents in Abyei between January and February 2024.

While tensions in the region may not be new, three current dimensions require close attention. The first is the apparent lack of government security force efforts to stem revenge attacks. This has led to the Ngok Dinka, in particular, defending itself and to perceptions of government complicity in certain attacks. Second is the tendency for the current attacks to increase in the lead-up to this year’s South Sudan elections due to possible attempts by rival groups to gain control over territories.

An additional factor became evident from the January 2023 attacks by Ngok Dinka gunmen in Rumamier in response to killings by Twic Dinka and Bul Nuer militias a week earlier. The spate of attacks on rival communities, apart from increasing association with annual grazing patterns, is also driven partly by the desire for revenge for previous unsolved killings by rivals.

This raises questions about, for example, the killing of Ngok Dinka Chief Koul Deng Koul and the need for long-term management of its impact on relationships and perceptions of justice among communities.

The first element is a grassroots-level solution that pursues lasting intercommunal reconciliation among the Twic Dinka, Ngok Dinka and Messeriya. While not necessarily within the direct ambit of multilateral institutions, given the layered nature of such processes and the place of sovereignty, the involvement of the Ugandan government in resolving the April 2022 clashes between the Ngok Dinka and Messeriya provides a good template.

Replicating the successes of such an approach under the auspices of UNISFA will diminish tensions in the region. Given the multilayered drivers, this might not be the only solution to address the crisis, but it will help to prevent underlying inter-tribal tensions worsening it.

There is also the need for long-term solutions based on resource sharing that admits and incorporates the benefits of mutuality and interdependence among the region’s tribes. Clashes and tensions originating from sharing of pastures, water and boundaries tend to be cyclical, particularly given the seasonal need for pasture and its associated crossing of boundaries into rival territories.

Expediting Abyei’s status and cooperation between the Sudans are key to a sustainable solution

The PSC’s 2020 call for an expedited resolution of Abyei’s status and cooperation between South Sudan and Sudan should remain central to the search for a sustainable solution. Achieving the latter is closely linked with managing the conflicts facing the Sudans.

Until the ongoing Sudan war is resolved, it will be difficult to secure and sustain the interest of Sudanese stakeholders in the search for stability in Abyei. The major implication of this situation on other challenges facing Sudan, in particular, is yet another reason why the ongoing crisis in Abyei should be a major preoccupation of the Council.

Given that the March tabling by Namibia did not happen, succeeding chairs of the Council, supported by the PSC secretariat and Political Affairs Peace and Security department, should re-table the issue for consideration without delay.

The need for increased Council attention

The current situation provides the impetus for the escalation or repetition of security crises unless conscious efforts are made to end the violence. This is worsened if the region’s unresolved status is added to the mix. It is, therefore, important that the PSC gives Abyei the attention needed to avoid a more complex situation later. The Council should, however, consider the above dynamics and the three-pronged solution described below.
Could the African Union make better use of regional deployments?

At its 1 203rd meeting on 4 March 2024, the PSC discussed the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) deployments to Mozambique and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While the Council registered its concerns about developments on the ground, it also noted the deployments’ contribution to managing insecurity.

The meeting also endorsed the extension of the Southern African Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). It commended the mission’s ‘significant contributions, continued sacrifice and commitment to fight and defeat terrorism, restore peace, security and stability, and alleviate Cabo Delgado’s humanitarian crisis’.

The ASF was to be a central pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture since 2002, but full implementation has taken time

Apart from the Council’s interest in specific cases, discussions on the missions represent the AU’s continuous support for and appreciation of the need for regional deployments to manage continental insecurity. As with the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), G5-Sahel force and Accra Initiative, the two SADC deployments form part of a plethora of regional security initiatives. These are often activated in response to emerging transnational threats and regional conflicts.

In the absence of the African Standby Force (ASF) amid insecurity, such deployments have become a significant tool for regional institutions to manage insecurity. Given their recent achievements and the challenges the ASF faces in becoming fully operational, the question remains whether deployments should be encouraged and mainstreamed.

Why is the ASF not fully operational?

Many observers agree that the PSC and member states have made strides in implementing the ASF over the last two decades. As a political project, the concept has successfully developed endogenous approaches to realising the African common defence policy. It has contributed markedly to ensuring joint training and capacity-building among AU member states, crucial in bolstering deployment preparedness of country contingents and civilian personnel.

AFS progress was the basis for most of the 27 AU-led, -authorised and -endorsed peace support operations (PSOs) over the last 20 years. Regionally, ASF implementation has created a community of practice with a standardised training background and doctrine, fostering the deployment and management of various AU-led PSOs.

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The ASF was to be a central pillar of the African Peace and Security Architecture since 2002, but full implementation has taken time. Although the PSC declared it operational in 2015 and the AU Assembly followed suit in 2020, the force is yet to be used in the strict sense for which it was conceptualised. Instead, ad-hoc mechanisms have been deployed in several scenarios and are considered as part of the ASF framework.

According to experts and policy actors consulted, notwithstanding the considerable resources and manpower invested over the years, the deployment has not been as planned for two reasons. First, it has never benefitted from an agreed-on and predictable decision-making process for authorising deployments. As clarity is lacking in the force’s mandating process, its deployment has become highly dependent on the will of member states, regional economic communities (RECs) and regional mechanisms (RMs). Yet none has demonstrated strong political buy-in to deploy the ASF under Article 13 of the PSC protocol and per the six scenarios.

The second is the absence of adequate, predictable and sustainable funding. This has precluded ASF involvement even where there is dire need. Beyond preventing the force’s deployment, financial challenges affect force generation and training exercises. Such negative impacts manifested in the 27 PSOs.

Funding constraints have also often caused premature transitions of PSOs to United Nations (UN) missions and affected drawdown timelines, as with the AU Transition Mission in Somalia.

Room for ad-hoc deployments

In the absence of the ASF, regional deployments have contributed significantly to continental efforts for stability, as demonstrated by tangible results in West Africa, the Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique, and Somalia. In Lake Chad Basin, the MNJTF, authorised by the AU in 2015, has secured areas affected by Boko Haram and other violent extremist groups and facilitated Lake Chad Basin Commission stabilisation programmes.
It has equally advanced humanitarian operations and assisted affected populations through innovative and improved civil-military relations approaches in line with its mandate. Additionally, the force’s experience has offered lessons to similar regional arrangements, such as the Accra Initiative, which seeks to secure West Africa’s coastal countries from the spillover of Sahel violent extremism.

Similarly, SAMIM’s deployment has recorded significant achievements amid violent extremism in Mozambique. It has recaptured territories, considerably degraded insurgents’ operational capacity and helped vulnerable civilians.

Strong political buy-in has not been demonstrated to deploy the ASF under Article 13 of the PSC protocol and per the six scenarios.

While endorsing the mission and SADC’s decision to deploy it, the AU underscored the utility of regional response to security threats. As the PSC did for the MNJTF a few years ago, it requested the AU Commission to avail equipment from the Continental Logistics Base and urged states to mobilise additional resources to support SAMIM.

**Should the AU encourage more ad-hoc deployments?**

The benefits of regional ad-hoc deployments are evident in the absence of the ASF. Some argue that such benefits are among the reasons for the lack of resolute action to implement the ASF. However, the reality remains that Africa’s peace and security landscape would have been worse without the contribution of regional ad-hoc initiatives.

As the force has yet to realise its potential, policy actors should consider reconceptualising it to include ad-hoc deployments, which may have several advantages. Primarily, they could offer the ‘new’ ASF flexibility to respond across states’ borders to pursue militia, armed groups or insurgents. Secondly, they could serve as urgent military solutions and strengthen the force’s operability through practical experience-sharing in counter-terrorism and civil-military relations.

In so doing, the PSC should work closely with RECs/RMs and existing ad-hoc coalitions. This would create a sustainable mandating process and ease the management of command-and-control issues and challenges between regional and continental players. Ultimately, such collaboration will foster learning and improve the ASF modus operandi and deployment capability amid the continent’s current volatile security.

The PSC could also look at capitalising on gains from deployments to shape a robust continental structure to effectively coordinate regional efforts. Additionally, the adoption of Resolution 2719 by the UN Security Council on 21 December 2023 should be a catalyst in funding the regional interventions that are at the forefront of containing insecurity on the continent.
Can a new champion revive African Union reforms?

In 2016, African leaders recognised the imperative for a swift and substantial reform of the AU. The initiative led by Rwandan President Paul Kagame aimed to realign AU institutions for better service delivery, ensure operational efficiency and sustainable financing, and connect the organisation with African citizens.

Some milestones have been achieved since implementation began in 2018. A new management team and directors were appointed, the number of AU Commission departments was reduced, gender and regional representation at leadership level was emphasised, a merit-based recruitment system was introduced, and all departments underwent a skills audit and competency assessment.

Good progress has been made in setting up the AU Peace Fund, the principal financing instrument for peace and security activities launched in November 2018. Its governance structures are fully operational, except for the Independent Evaluation Group, which should be set up this year.

Member states’ resistance to creating a more powerful AU Commission limited progress of the reform process

The peace fund has raised US$384 million – 96% of the initial target of US$400 million – entirely from AU member states. In 2023–24, US$22 million was allocated through the Crisis Reserve Facility and pilot projects. US$2 million went to the East African Community Regional Force in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, US$2 million to the AU Transition Mission in Somalia, and US$1 million to implement Ethiopia’s Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.

Despite these achievements, many reforms are yet to be implemented. This is partly due to member states’ resistance, some not supporting Kagame as champion, and others pushing back against creating a more empowered AU Commission. The high cost of reforms is another limiting factor that was not properly considered beforehand.

Implementation delays and some reforms themselves (like having fewer AU summits) raise questions about whether the process has inadvertently weakened instead of strengthening, the AU.

When the reform process started, member states focused on human resources as a solution to the AU’s ineffectiveness – avoiding the problem of AU Assembly decisions not being implemented. An example of decisions not being followed is the 15 March executive council statement on voting for the 2025 senior leadership, some of which don’t align with past assembly decisions. This underscores how weak decision-making and compliance with agreed working methods and rules of procedure have become.
The skills audit and competency assessment, aimed at enhancing recruitment, promoting diversity and ensuring all member states are represented in the AU Commission, has fallen short. Progress was hindered by a 2018 moratorium on recruitment, which led to an over-dependence on short-term staff and consultants, high staff turnover and performance problems. Although most commission employees passed the competency assessment, some countries felt the results were manipulated to exclude their citizens.

This complicated working relations between the commission and the Permanent Representatives Committee, which conducts the AU’s day-to-day business on behalf of the AU Assembly and executive council. The commission is accused of illegal appointments and corrupt hiring processes for high-profile positions; competent individuals are often overlooked.

The 2020 adoption of the commission’s new departmental structure has also been slow. The reduction in the number of departments from eight to six has led to conflicts about who does what.

Creating a merged Political Affairs, Peace and Security Department provides for greater synergies, but weak coordination and competition among directorates, notably on election monitoring, is a problem. And placing the AU’s Continental Early Warning System under ‘conflict management’ has limited the organisation’s ability to anticipate and prevent conflict.

Having been clear that the AU needs ‘fixing’, Ruto can now push for the change he talks about.

Financing remains another hurdle. Five years into the process, the AU still grapples with chronic pre-reform budget issues, including low budget execution and unapproved expenditure. The overdependence on external funding is even more serious. Member states cover the AU’s entire operational budget, but external partners such as the European Union provide over 85% of its programme budget.

Although the Peace Fund is active, contributions and disbursements are insufficient, given deepening insecurity in parts of Africa. Besides, many member states are reluctant to meet their commitments. As of 31 October 2023, only 31 of 55 had paid 100% of their annual contributions, leaving a gap of US$56.3 million. This diminishes ownership of AU programmes and the body’s financial autonomy.

At the February AU summit, Kagame expressed frustration about the slow progress of reform, citing member states’ resistance to genuine transformation. Having championed the process since its inception, the handover to Kenya’s President William Ruto presents an opportunity to consolidate gains and renew momentum.

Kenya is well-positioned to lead the reform as a top-six contributor to the AU’s budget.

Ruto has emphasised the need for genuine reform so the AU can deliver on its priorities. He has repeatedly called for a stronger and financially autonomous AU and for member states to cede some sovereignty to ensure a strengthened AU Commission. Having been clear that the AU needs ‘fixing’, Ruto can now push for the change he talks about.

Kenya is well-positioned for the role. The country is a top-six contributor to the AU’s regular budget, paying around US$7.2 million annually. Geopolitically, Ruto is a leading African voice on reforming the global climate agenda and multilateral financial and policy bodies. The new champion will need to lobby and engage states that resist the reform process. He should anticipate that the thorny issue of giving the commission more power will make the job difficult.

An effective AU will largely depend on a strong and well-capacitated commission, and the consistent implementation of AU decisions. Ruto will need to engage in high-level consultations with member states, the commission, and AU partners and strengthen working relations between the Permanent Representatives Committee and the commission.

 Achieving financial autonomy is also vital. Rallying leaders in Africa’s private sector could breathe new life into the AU and ensure delivery of reform priorities.
Coups d’états in West Africa are not entirely negative

Coups allow the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its member states to self-assess and improve governance, says Ambassador Francis Oke, ECOWAS Permanent Representative to the AU.

ECOWAS’s response to the upsurge in unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) is not producing convincing results, unlike it did in previous decades. What is your assessment?

The coups d’état and crises witnessed are evidence of West Africa’s mature democracy. They are manifestations of the discontent of the region’s citizens, who are demanding that the rules of the democratic game be respected. Contrary to perceptions, these issues are not totally negative. I see them as an opportunity for ECOWAS and its member states to assess themselves and adjust certain aspects of their governance.

Coups in West Africa are manifestations of the discontent of the region’s citizens, who are demanding that the rules of the game be respected

ECOWAS has the same instruments and mechanisms that helped resolve similar crises in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea and Niger a few decades ago. However, are they being implemented in the spirit in which they were drafted in and if so, why are there limitations? If not, we need to correct the situation.

We also need to make ECOWAS more effective. Member states must fully transfer their supranationality to the organisation. If ECOWAS is struggling with current crises, it is partly because its power to act is limited by increased member sovereignty, notwithstanding the community conventions to which most subscribe.

How consistent is ECOWAS in managing UCGs?

Responses have varied from one state to another, depending on the type of UCG. ECOWAS has sometimes fumbled in its responses to constitutional manipulations. On the other hand, it has been more reactive to seizures of power by the military, imposing sanctions and adopting strict political measures against those involved in coups.

As a result, a feeling of ‘double standards’ has emerged in public opinion and among putschists in countries affected by recent coups. The legitimacy of ECOWAS to respond to unconstitutional actions of the military has been somewhat undermined, creating fertile ground for putschists to resist the sanctions imposed on them.
Today, coup plotters believe that the use of arms is the only difference between them and state heads who manipulate constitutions to extend their mandates. However, military or civilian, once you exploit your position to ‘trample’ on fundamental texts and illegally seize state power, you are committing a coup. ECOWAS should, therefore, have sanctioned such occurrences with determination, instilling in the perpetrators and any would-be coup plotters that good governance frameworks must be respected despite their shortcomings.

When I was in the United States in 2008 during the election, Americans, Republicans and Democrats alike constantly repeated ‘our constitution has its shortcomings, but it’s our constitution and we abide by it’. We need this culture in Africa, particularly in our region. This is why ECOWAS – in the name of equity of sanctions and impartiality – should have reacted to both the extension of mandates and military coups.

By leaving ECOWAS, countries would forfeit advantages such as free movement of people and goods across the region.

Secondly, ECOWAS should be proactive, strengthening and implementing its mechanisms for monitoring democratic practices in member states. Indeed, a major characteristic of coups over the last five years has been the emergence of popular acclaim for military regimes. Such reactions by sometimes large sections of the population are explained partly by the hope of access to socioeconomic dividends to which there was no access under the rule of ousted leaders.

ECOWAS and its members should shoulder their responsibilities to ensure that populations have full access to the dividends of democracy. This requires strong regional mechanisms to ensure the accountability of both civilian and military leaders. Our organisation would also benefit from assistance frameworks that go beyond elections to deal effectively and sustainably with the causes of repeated coups in West Africa.

Civil society must be an integral part of the assistance architecture, given its role as a ‘bridge’ between politicians and civilians. Measures must be taken to ensure its independence from political powers, contrary to what is seen in most of our countries nowadays.

What motivated ECOWAS’s lifting of sanctions against Niger, even though the primary objective of restoring the status quo ante was not achieved?

Only sanctions that severely affected the people of Niger were lifted, according to ECOWAS texts that call for the adoption of repressive measures bearing in mind the wellbeing of populations. In addition, many voices had been raised deploiring civilian suffering due mainly the impact of
economic sanctions and border closures. Political and administrative sanctions imposed on members of the junta remain in place.

Also prompting the lifting of sanctions is the desire by heads of state and government to create conditions conducive to a rapid and peaceful transition in Niger. Lifting sanctions will facilitate intensified talks with transitional authorities to uncover their objectives and establish a schedule for a return to constitutional order.

The population must understand that a constitutionally established power generates more confidence among development partners and brings greater socioeconomic benefits. In this new phase, ECOWAS will, therefore, raise awareness of the population and accelerate the transition through dialogue.

However, despite the lifting of economic and financial sanctions and the announcement of border reopening, Niger authorities are slow to act. They are keeping borders closed, raising questions about the real motives behind their seizure of power. Does it serve the interests of the people or their own?

The severity of sanctions on Niger can be attributed to the putsch against President Bazoum’s regime followed by several others that should have served as warnings. ECOWAS sent a clear message that it would not tolerate coups d’état in the region and applied its ‘zero tolerance’ policy firmly.

This was no mistake, as a similar measure applied to Niger in 2011 yielded convincing results – specifically, a return to constitutional order. However, this recent move risked being counterproductive and failure. And so it transpired.

**Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have threatened to withdraw from ECOWAS. What could be the consequences?**

No community, organisation or alliance is without challenges. So leaving ECOWAS is not viable for any of these countries. They would forfeit the advantages acquired over decades in ECOWAS, notably free movement of people and goods across the region. The decision would also further complicate political transitions, as withdrawal would automatically end all ECOWAS assistance. In the long run, the move, which would be more political than social, may not necessarily serve the interests of their citizens.

The Alliance of Sahel States is not incompatible with participation in ECOWAS, given the many sub-regional organisations whose states are also members of the regional body. These include the Mano River Union and Conseil de l’Entente.

**AU and ECOWAS are unable to find a basis for collaboration during crises**

The submission of withdrawal requests gives ECOWAS around 12 months to try, with its own resources and AU support, to resolve the dispute. ECOWAS is, therefore, actively engaged in dialogue with Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, with three heads of state appointed to lead discussions.

**How should ECOWAS manage the threat of withdrawal?**

With withdrawals pending, ECOWAS retains a duty to continue assisting the transitions of these countries. It must step up these efforts, ensuring that transition schedules are meticulously drawn up and implemented. In this, the AU should support ECOWAS in line with the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity, without restraint or questioning.

However, the reality is quite different, as the AU does not seem to share ECOWAS’s interpretation of these principles nor are both bodies able to find a basis for collaboration during crises. Given the urgency generated by the imminent withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the AU should support ECOWAS in any actions aimed at convincing these states to remain on board.
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The Peace and Security Council Report analyses developments and decisions at the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC). The monthly publication is the only one of its kind dedicated to providing current analysis of the PSC’s work. It is written by a team of ISS analysts in Addis Ababa.

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