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THE PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR ECOWAS INTERVENTION IN MALI

ADAM SANDOR

SUMMARY

- As of late 2012, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) supports a policy of military intervention in northern Mali, where rebel groups continue to implement various forms of governance.
- While there is a legal basis for an ECOWAS intervention in the north, on a practical level any military action must emanate from a legitimate national government in the south, which currently does not exist.
- Any intervention in Mali should first focus on ECOWAS' policy strengths and stated objectives, including restoring civil-military relations in Bamako and supporting efforts to combat drug trafficking.

INTRODUCTION

Following the start of a January 2012 rebellion in northern Mali and a March coup d'état in the country's southern capital, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has pursued a policy of intervention in one of its most troubled member states. As of late 2012, ECOWAS supports a policy of military intervention in northern Mali — where various Islamist groups are vying for control — and a post-coup political transition in the south. As the process of forming a government of national unity inches forward in Bamako, however, rebel groups continue to implement forms of governance that will have lasting effects on populations in the north.

Notably, this includes a flow of northerners trying to escape the region by heading south, or across Malian borders into neighboring states. Those who remain in the north face a stringent form of Islamic governance that punishes religious infractions, but does offer a degree of social order (Nossiter, 2012; Tinti, 2012). With Mali in such complicated political terrain, however, it is unclear whether ECOWAS alone is able to conduct the military operations it supports.

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LEGAL BASIS FOR AN INTERVENTION

As outlined in the revised *ECOWAS Treaty* (1993) and the *Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security* (1999), the political and security situation in Mali fits well within in the mandate of an ECOWAS intervention. The Mechanism's preamble states that illicit transnational flows (such as the type that have beset Mali's security for the last 20 years) and cross-border criminality "contribute to the development of insecurity and instability and jeopardize the economic and social development of the sub-region" (ECOWAS, 1999).

Additionally, Article 25 states that intervention is required under circumstances of civil conflict that threaten to induce a humanitarian emergency or pose a significant threat to regional peace and security (ECOWAS, 1999.). Moreover, the article legitimizes military action following the overthrow of a member state's elected government and/or widespread human rights violations — both of which have taken place in Mali in 2012.

PRACTICAL BASIS OF AN INTERVENTION

Todd Moss, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Global Development, recently outlined the challenges that an ECOWAS intervention force could encounter. He argues that, even with material and logistical support from France and the United States (see RFI, 2012a), ECOWAS would lack the military capacity to engage in sustained counterinsurgency combat in both urban areas and desert terrain (Moss 2012). Moreover, any new government formed in Bamako will lack the political credibility to implement a power-sharing agreement with National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) rebels, or with the Islamists currently controlling the north of the country.

In his analysis, however, Moss neglects to include the contempt that many in Mali's south hold against ECOWAS. Shortly after Captain Amadou Sanogo's coup d'état, for example, a regional delegation was barred from landing at the Bamako Airport due to a political demonstration against ECOWAS interference, which included a small peacekeeping force on standby and economic and monetary sanctions (BBC, 2012).

Such sentiments remain with civil society organizations, media outlets and political observers questioning the regional body's support for peace

and security in Mali. Tensions toward ECOWAS are also present within the Malian military. An interlocutor explained that it took several weeks for ECOWAS to hold open conversations about morale within the Malian Armed Forces, their capacity for operations in the north, and the military's alleged role in the arrests and torture of political dissidents (Interview with author; June 2012).

WHAT TYPE OF ECOWAS INTERVENTION?

Due to the opposition of important sectors of the Malian population, ECOWAS has adopted a prudent intervention strategy that hinges on a formal request from a Malian government of national unity. If such a request is extended to ECOWAS, the organization should focus on its strengths, which include: assisting in programs that restore civil-military relations and professionalize the Malian Armed Forces, and strengthening security services that deal with regional threats to stability (notably those who combat drug trafficking).

As scholars Paul Williams and Jurgen Haacke (2008) argue, the ECOWAS *Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance* sets out clear principles for constitutional law and appropriate civil-military relations. Some member states have a better track record than others in this regard, but in general, ECOWAS promotes a regional security culture informed by regular patterns of instability within its member states and regular involvement of its regional armed forces in politics.

This institutional context provides ECOWAS with a unique opportunity to exert a beneficial influence on its member states. Political repression of political dissidents by Sanogo supporters in the army, however, requires more immediate action than diving headlong into Mali's north. The continued involvement of the armed forces in politics hinders efforts in the south to consolidate Bamako's political class and prepare for an eventual campaign to oust Islamist radicals in the north. In this way, ECOWAS can be a significant agent in favour of democratic political change in the region.

In addition, power relations in Mali are built out of structures of opportunity that are global in scope, particularly with regard to drug trafficking. Successful short distance hauls of cocaine offer profitable gains almost anywhere in the country, and throughout the region. Interfacing with other international organizations, ECOWAS has participated in successful operations to curtail

these drug flows (Quandzie, 2012). An ECOWAS intervention force in Mali, comprised primarily of national territorial police (*polices des frontières*) and paramilitary police (*Gendarmeries Nationales*), could therefore remove major impediments to security by targeting higher-level trafficking networks and providing security along roads between major cities.

CONCLUSION

Once security is provided along these two policy lines (assisting in programs restoring civil-military relations and strengthening the Malian security services) tackling the problem of the north can be discussed. ECOWAS would play to its strengths by supporting a return to civilian rule and promoting the rule of law and security in the south. These objectives have been previously adopted by the regional body, and Mali provides a perfect testing ground for such resolve.

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