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Sahel

# Sahel: a military coup

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**Victims of ECOWAS economic sanctions, the three Sahelian countries [1]** are leaving this economic union, criticising its harmful role for their populations.

The staging was perfect. At the same time on Sunday 28 January, the military juntas of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso read an identical statement on their national television announcing their departure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

## Sanctions and threats

ECOWAS was founded in 1975 with the initial aim of creating a single market in the region. Its prerogatives have gradually been extended to the political and legal spheres. Among the 15 member countries, the French-speaking countries, with the exception of Guinea, are also members of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), to which Guinea-Bissau (a former Portuguese colony) has been added. This structure groups together countries whose currency is the CFA franc.

Nationals of ECOWAS countries can move and settle freely, and goods are not subject to customs duties.

During the coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, ECOWAS adopted particularly severe economic sanctions, notably against Niger. In the case of Niger, ECOWAS even raised the possibility of military intervention to re-establish constitutional order.

## A discredited structure

To justify their departure from ECOWAS, the juntas criticised the lack of solidarity and aid to their country in the face of serious terrorist attacks. They also criticised ECOWAS for trampling on their nation's sovereignty by acting on behalf of foreign powers, and for abandoning the pan-Africanism espoused by its founding fathers. There is no doubt that the economic sanctions have been very badly received by the populations who are the first victims. All the more so as the ECOWAS heads of state who have taken these decisions are, for the most part, either elected through massive electoral fraud or through constitutional manipulations enabling them to run for a third term. In Togo, for example, the Gnassingbé dynasty has reigned for over fifty years. Ouattara in Côte d'Ivoire came to power with the help of armed intervention by France, and has held on by changing the constitution. As for Senegal, Macky Sall has eliminated his two main rivals from the presidential election race and has just postponed the presidential election until December, arousing the anger of the population. ECOWAS leaders are far from being paragons of democracy.

Obviously, Emmanuel Macron's open support for a possible armed ECOWAS operation against Niger only confirms what a large part of public opinion in the Sahel thinks, namely that this structure is manipulated by France.

## Towards an exit from the CFA franc

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Although the departure from ECOWAS is announced with immediate effect, article 91 of the organisation allows for a one-year delay. The leaders have said they are open to negotiations with the three countries that formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) a few months ago. The three countries are landlocked, and access to the sea remains an imperative. While for Mali, Guinea, which is also under ECOWAS sanctions for a coup d'état, is an option, for Burkina and Niger access to the sea via Togo or Benin is compromised.

With the departure of ECOWAS, free movement will still be guaranteed within the WAEMU area. But it is not certain that the ESA countries will stop there. Indeed, the question of leaving the CFA franc is also being raised in favour of a common currency for the three countries.

These decisions can be seen as salutary, symbolising the conquest of sovereignty. This would have been acceptable if the populations had been consulted and therefore involved in the decision. This is clearly not the case, given the repeated attacks on democratic freedoms in these three Sahelian countries.

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).*

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[1] Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, although the biogeographical Sahel region is broader <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahel>.