



# Electoral Credibility and Regional Security Legitimacy: Nigeria, ECOWAS, and Democratic Order in West Africa

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Abstract Original Research Article

Nigeria’s claim to regional leadership in West Africa has historically derived not only from its demographic size, military reach, and economic weight, but also from its perceived capacity to embody constitutional authority within the regional order. This domestic source of legitimacy has enabled Abuja to act as a principal security guarantor, diplomatic broker, and defender of democratic governance within ECOWAS, even where its own democratic record has remained imperfect. This article argues that the credibility crisis surrounding Nigeria’s 2023 general election has weakened this legitimizing foundation at a moment when ECOWAS is confronting profound institutional rupture, democratic recession, and security fragmentation following the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Anchored in regional security complex theory and security sector governance scholarship, the article advances the concept of democratic security legitimacy to capture the relationship between domestic electoral integrity and regional security authority. It shows how electoral credibility deficits constrain Nigeria’s regional leadership through three interrelated mechanisms: the loss of normative leverage in democratic enforcement, the weakening of security sector credibility, and the expansion of alternative regional alignments that dilute ECOWAS authority. The article concludes that Nigeria’s 2027 election is therefore more than a domestic contest for political power. It is a regional test of whether West Africa can still rely on Nigeria as a credible democratic anchor for constitutional security order.

**Keywords:** electoral credibility; democratic security legitimacy; Nigeria; ECOWAS; regional order; West Africa.

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## Introduction

Electoral credibility and regional security legitimacy are linked in ways that scholarship on West African order has not fully explained. In regional systems where security leadership is exercised through the language of constitutional rule, the domestic political credibility of the leading state becomes part of the basis of its regional authority. This article argues that Nigeria’s capacity to anchor democratic order in

West Africa depends not only on material power, military reach, or diplomatic centrality, but also on the perceived credibility of its own electoral and constitutional practices. As ECOWAS confronts its deepest crisis following the departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the erosion of electoral credibility in Nigeria since 2023 raises a broader regional question: can a state whose domestic democratic legitimacy is under strain still function as



a persuasive guarantor of constitutional security order beyond its borders?

West Africa's current crisis is usually narrated through coups, insurgency, and institutional fragmentation. That account is necessary, but incomplete. It draws attention to moments of overt rupture while obscuring the quieter erosion of the legitimacy on which regional order also depends. No state is more central to that problem than Nigeria. For three decades, Nigeria's regional role has rested on a dual foundation: material preponderance in population, military capacity, and diplomatic reach, and a more fragile claim to legitimacy grounded in the language of constitutional rule.

This conjunction produces the article's central puzzle. How does the domestic electoral credibility of a regional power affect its capacity to lead a regional security order organized around formal commitments to constitutional rule? Existing scholarship addresses this question only indirectly. One body of work examines Nigeria through the lens of regional hegemony, intervention, and burden sharing. Another focuses on ECOWAS norm development, especially the organization's democratic protocols and its uneven record in responding to unconstitutional seizures of power. A third literature explores electoral legitimacy, democratic erosion, and security sector politicization within Nigeria itself. What remains insufficiently theorized is how these domains interact.<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that Nigeria's regional security leadership depends not only on material capability but also on what I call democratic security legitimacy: the capacity of a regional power to exercise security leadership credibly because its own domestic political order remains sufficiently constitutional, electoral, and rule-bound to legitimate regional norm enforcement. This legitimacy has never been absolute, and Nigeria's democratic record has long been uneven. Yet the regional order built through ECOMOG, later ECOWAS security

mechanisms, and the language of democratic restoration has relied on the assumption that the leading state could plausibly defend rules it at least claimed to observe at home.

This article makes two related contributions. Empirically, it reinterprets Nigeria's post-2023 electoral difficulties as a regional, not merely domestic, problem by showing how they weaken ECOWAS order at a moment of institutional fragmentation. Conceptually, it specifies a domestic-to-regional mechanism through which electoral credibility conditions the regional acceptability of security leadership in a normatively constitutional order. This is the analytical value of democratic security legitimacy. It explains why domestic legitimacy deficits do not remain internally contained, but travel outward into weaker moral suasion, more contested security leadership, and a thinner regional order.

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, it shows that Nigeria's historical regional role was sustained by an unstable but effective bargain between material capability and normative credibility. Second, it argues that the regional crisis triggered by the Sahelian coup wave and the subsequent ECOWAS rupture has made the credibility of remaining democratic anchors more consequential than before. Third, it shows that the erosion of electoral credibility in Nigeria after 2023 weakens regional leadership through three mechanisms: the thinning of normative leverage in democratic enforcement, declining security sector credibility, and the widening space for regional fragmentation and external balancing.

The article is based on a layered evidentiary strategy that combines historical scholarship on ECOMOG and Nigerian regional power, ECOWAS and African Union legal instruments and summit communiqués, election observation reports on Nigeria's 2023 polls, and contemporary reporting on the ECOWAS rupture and the Sahelian withdrawals. This

<sup>1</sup> See Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003); Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press,

Cambridge, 1997); Daniel Branch and Nic Cheeseman, 'Democratization, sequencing, and state failure in Africa: Lessons from Kenya', *African Affairs* 108, 430 (2009), pp. 1–26.

combination is important because the argument concerns neither domestic electoral integrity alone nor regional security order in the abstract. It concerns the interaction between them. The task is therefore to trace how shifts in electoral credibility alter the political conditions under which Nigeria's regional leadership is interpreted, accepted, and contested.

The article does not claim that Nigeria's regional position will collapse automatically if the 2027 election is contested, nor does it suggest that earlier elections conferred unambiguous democratic authority. The claim is narrower and more analytically useful. In a regional order that increasingly turns on the defence of constitutional rule, the democratic credibility of the leading state is not an optional moral asset. It is part of the political infrastructure of security leadership itself. As ECOWAS struggles to retain coherence after the departure of three Sahelian members, Nigeria's next electoral cycle has become a regional test of whether constitutional security order in West Africa still possesses a credible anchor.

### Conceptual Framework

Regional order, security interdependence, and Nigeria's place in West Africa

The starting point of the argument is that West Africa should be understood not as a simple geographic grouping of adjacent states, but as a regional security space marked by dense patterns of political and military interdependence. Regional security complex theory is useful here because it directs attention to the ways insecurity travels across borders and binds neighbouring states into shared patterns of threat perception and political response. In West Africa, insurgency, coups, refugee flows, transnational armed networks, constitutional crises, and regime instability rarely remain domestically contained. They generate pressures that are simultaneously national and regional.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.

<sup>3</sup> Economic Community of West African States, Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peace-Keeping and Security

Within such a complex, the role of a dominant state cannot be measured only by size or coercive capacity. Material predominance matters, but its political meaning depends on the normative and institutional context in which it is exercised. Nigeria's regional role since the 1990s illustrates this clearly. Its leadership in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and later its centrality in ECOWAS crisis management, rested on the ability to convert national capacity into regionally intelligible authority. That authority was frequently contested and never free from accusations of selectivity, self-interest, or strategic overreach. Even so, Nigerian activism was not experienced solely as brute power. It was mediated through regional institutions and justified through arguments about peace, order, and, increasingly, constitutional rule.

This is why a purely materialist account of regional hegemony is insufficient. A state may possess military preponderance and still fail to organize a legitimate regional order if its leadership cannot be narrated as politically or institutionally defensible. In West Africa, this problem became more pronounced as ECOWAS moved from ad hoc peace enforcement toward a more explicit normative architecture centred on democracy and good governance. The 1999 Mechanism and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol linked regional order more directly to constitutionalism, electoral integrity, and the rejection of unconstitutional access to power. Once that shift occurred, the internal political character of leading states became more consequential to the credibility of the regional order they sought to defend.<sup>3</sup>

### Democratic Security Legitimacy

To capture this dynamic, the article introduces the concept of democratic security legitimacy. The term refers to the capacity of a regional power to lead security action credibly because its domestic political order remains sufficiently aligned with constitutional and electoral norms to validate

(ECOWAS, Lomé, 1999); Economic Community of West African States, Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance (ECOWAS, Dakar, 2001).

regional norm enforcement. The concept is not equivalent to democratic consolidation, nor is it reducible to soft power in a generic sense. A state need not be a model democracy to possess democratic security legitimacy. What matters is whether its domestic institutional conduct remains credible enough to support the regional performance of constitutional authority.

This formulation also clarifies the article's relationship to hegemonic stability arguments. Materialist accounts are useful in explaining why Nigeria is difficult to bypass in West African security affairs, but they are less effective in explaining why the same state is sometimes followed, sometimes tolerated, and at other moments treated as normatively compromised. Democratic security legitimacy directs attention to that variation. It asks how far domestic political credibility shapes the conversion of capability into accepted regional leadership once the regional order itself is organized around constitutional commitments.

The analytical value of the concept lies in specifying the mechanism through which domestic electoral credibility conditions the regional acceptability of security leadership in a normatively constitutional order. It therefore adds something distinct to existing accounts of regional power. Material capability may explain why a state can act. Democratic security legitimacy helps explain when and how that action can be accepted as regionally authoritative rather than merely coercive. This is particularly important in West Africa, where democratic enforcement depends not only on sanctions, mediation, or the threat of force, but also on the ability of leading states to speak credibly in the language of constitutional rule.

### **The Concept Rests on Three Propositions:**

First, regional democratic enforcement is partly performative. It depends not only on coercive instruments but on the ability of those wielding them to invoke constitutional norms persuasively. A state whose own electoral process is widely viewed as opaque, manipulated, or institutionally compromised will find it harder to exercise moral suasion over coup regimes or backsliding incumbents.

Second, democratic security legitimacy depends on the character of the security sector. If electoral competition at home increasingly relies on coercive intimidation, partisan intelligence, or the politicization of security institutions, the regional leader's ability to present its military and intelligence apparatus as professional guardians of constitutional order is weakened. This matters in West Africa because Nigeria's regional role has always depended not merely on possessing the largest coercive apparatus in the subregion, but on the claim that this apparatus can be mobilized in defence of a wider order rather than for regime-partisan ends alone.

Third, the erosion of democratic security legitimacy creates opportunity structures for regional fragmentation. Where the leading democratic state loses credibility, rival alignments become easier to justify, anti-ECOWAS narratives become easier to circulate, and external actors offering security cooperation without constitutional conditionality gain greater room for manoeuvre. The result is not necessarily immediate realignment, but a thinner and more brittle regional order.

### **From ECOMOG to ECOWAS Crisis**

This framework also allows the article to periodize Nigeria's regional role more precisely. The ECOMOG era was defined by exceptional intervention under conditions of civil war, weak institutionalization, and contested legality. Later ECOWAS security governance involved a more formalized normative order in which intervention, mediation, and sanctions were increasingly justified through the language of democracy and constitutionalism. In the earlier phase, Nigeria's legitimacy deficit could be partly offset by the urgency of conflict management and the weakness of alternative regional providers. In the later phase, however, the regional order itself became more explicitly rule-bound. As a result, the gap between Nigeria's domestic practice and its regional claims became more politically consequential.

This is the context in which the aftermath of the 2023 Nigerian election and the approach to 2027 must be understood. The issue is not whether Nigeria remains materially central to West Africa. It does. The issue

is whether material centrality still translates into legitimate regional leadership under conditions of democratic recession, ECOWAS fragmentation, and intensifying contestation over constitutional order. The argument advanced here is that this translation is becoming more difficult, and that electoral credibility has become one of the most important variables in explaining why.

### **I. Nigeria's regional leadership from ECOMOG to ECOWAS**

Nigeria's regional security leadership in West Africa emerged neither as an accident of geography nor as a simple function of size. It was constructed through repeated episodes in which material preponderance was converted into regional authority. The conversion was never automatic. Nigeria's demographic weight, economic centrality, and military reach mattered, but these capabilities acquired political meaning only when they were embedded in regional institutions and justified in the language of collective order. The history of ECOMOG and its afterlives is therefore not only a story of intervention. It is also a story about how Nigeria became legible as the principal security anchor of West Africa.

The formative moment was the creation and operationalization of ECOMOG during the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts of the 1990s. Nigeria bore a disproportionate share of the political, financial, and military costs of those operations. That asymmetry established a durable regional fact: when West African disorder reached a threshold at which collective action became unavoidable, Nigeria was the state most capable of moving from diplomatic concern to coercive response. Adekeye Adebajo's account of ECOMOG remains especially important on this point because it shows that Nigerian leadership was forged not in a settled hegemonic order, but in the uneasy space between intervention, burden sharing, institutional improvisation, and contested legitimacy. The significance of that role was therefore not simply operational. It created a regional expectation that Nigeria would act, absorb

risk, and underwrite security provision when institutional paralysis or state collapse threatened wider instability.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the ECOMOG era also exposed the limits of a purely material conception of leadership. Nigeria's interventions were often criticized as selective, self-interested, or normatively inconsistent. The country's own domestic political order during parts of that period was far from democratically exemplary. Even so, Nigeria's activism was not understood solely as unilateral imposition. It was mediated through ECOWAS structures and defended through arguments about regional peace, state restoration, and collective security. This matters for the present article because it shows that from the outset Nigeria's authority was mixed in composition. It rested on power, but it also depended on a vocabulary of legitimacy that rendered intervention regionally intelligible.

The institutional turn of the late 1990s and early 2000s deepened this dynamic. The 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security formalized ECOWAS's security architecture and gave the regional organization a more durable framework for collective action. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance then moved the normative centre of gravity further, explicitly linking regional order to constitutional rule, electoral integrity, the rule of law, and the rejection of unconstitutional access to power. In other words, West African security governance became more overtly tied to democratic norms. Once that shift occurred, the domestic political character of the states claiming leadership in the regional order became more consequential than before. A regional power could no longer rely on force projection alone. It increasingly needed at least a minimally credible relationship to the constitutional principles it invoked.

Nigeria's post-1999 civilian governments inherited this regional role along with its ambiguities. Civilian rule did not dissolve the memory of earlier interventionary activism, but it altered the terms on which such activism could be defended. Democratic

<sup>4</sup> Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa*.

transition gave Nigerian leaders a stronger basis for presenting regional security action as compatible with constitutional order rather than merely strategic influence. At the same time, the domestic persistence of electoral malpractice, coercive politics, and uneven accountability meant that this legitimacy remained conditional rather than settled. Regional leadership after 1999 was therefore best understood as politically usable but never fully secure.

Nigeria was uniquely positioned to occupy that role. No other ECOWAS member combined its population size, military capabilities, diplomatic visibility, and financial centrality. But leadership in this later period differed from the older ECOMOG moment in one important respect. The issue was no longer only whether Nigeria could supply regional security goods. It was whether it could do so while speaking credibly for a regional order that now claimed to defend democratic governance as well as interstate stability. This is the historical origin of the legitimacy problem at the centre of the present article. Nigeria's regional leadership came to depend on an unstable bargain between hard power and democratic credibility. Its authority did not require democratic perfection, but it did require enough domestic constitutional standing to make regional norm enforcement politically plausible.

This helps explain why Nigeria's regional role after the return to civilian rule in 1999 acquired a distinct kind of normative value. The country's domestic democratic transitions, however uneven, mattered beyond its borders because they reduced the contradiction between internal regime form and external regional claims. Nigeria could act through ECOWAS not merely as the largest state in the subregion, but as a state that had at least re-entered the language and institutions of electoral constitutionalism. That shift did not eliminate doubts about elite domination, electoral malpractice, or state violence. But it did furnish Abuja with enough normative cover to sustain leadership in a regional order where unconstitutional seizures of power were increasingly delegitimized.

The point is not that Nigeria's authority was ever uncontested or morally coherent. It is that West African order functioned for a time on the assumption that Nigerian leadership, however imperfect, could still be reconciled with the region's formal democratic commitments. That assumption has now weakened. To understand why, the article must turn from the historical making of Nigeria's regional role to the current crisis of the order in which that role operates.

## II. ECOWAS after the Sahel Exits

The regional setting in which Nigerian leadership now operates is qualitatively different from that of the 2000s or even the mid-2010s. ECOWAS has certainly confronted coups, civil wars, and constitutional crises before. What distinguishes the current moment is that the crisis is no longer episodic. It has become systemic. Since 2020, West Africa has experienced repeated military seizures of power in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, each of which has tested the credibility of ECOWAS as an enforcer of constitutional order. The result has been not merely a sequence of disruptions but a cumulative weakening of the bloc's authority, especially in the central Sahel.<sup>5</sup>

The debate over a possible ECOWAS military response to the July 2023 coup in Niger illustrated the dilemma sharply. Nigeria's centrality to any serious enforcement option was evident, yet the political controversy surrounding coercive action also showed that leadership under contemporary conditions requires more than capacity and formal office. It requires a degree of domestic and regional legitimacy sufficient to persuade publics, legislatures, and neighbouring states that enforcement is being undertaken in defence of a shared order rather than at the discretion of a dominant state. The Niger crisis thus exposed the practical dependence of ECOWAS enforcement on the credibility of Nigerian leadership itself.

The formal departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS on 29 January 2025 marked

<sup>5</sup> Reuters, 'Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso quit ECOWAS, testing regional unity', 28 January 2024; Reuters, 'West Africa

bloc announces formal exit of three junta-led states', 29 January 2025.

the clearest institutional expression of that weakening. Their withdrawal transformed what might once have been read as temporary noncompliance into open regional disarticulation. ECOWAS did not disappear, and it continued to recognize certain practical arrangements while leaving the door open to future engagement. But the significance of the break was unmistakable. Three junta-led states, all under pressure to return to constitutional rule, chose instead to exit the regional organization that had claimed authority to police such transitions. That moment did not simply reduce ECOWAS numerically. It called into question the reach and credibility of the organization's democratic security architecture itself.

This institutional rupture has at least three consequences for the argument of the article. First, it raises the political value of the states still able to embody ECOWAS's normative commitments. In an order under strain, democratic anchors matter more, not less. If the bloc is to continue claiming authority in defence of constitutional rule, that claim must be carried by member states whose own domestic political orders remain at least minimally credible. The African Union Peace and Security Council underscored this point in May 2024 when it encouraged renewed dialogue between ECOWAS and Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and called for an expeditious return to constitutional order. Second, the exit of the three Sahelian juntas sharpens the distinction between material centrality and normative leadership. Nigeria remains indispensable to regional security calculations by virtue of size and capability. But indispensability is not the same as legitimacy. The more fractured ECOWAS becomes, the more visible the gap between coercive capacity and political credibility. Third, the exits widen the strategic space for rival alignments, especially where anti-ECOWAS rhetoric can be fused with narratives of sovereignty, anti-Westernism, and security diversification.<sup>6</sup>

The June 2025 Abuja summit communiqué reinforced this emphasis on institutional repair by

urging member states to intensify anti-terror cooperation, maintain constitutional governance commitments, and preserve channels of engagement with withdrawing states. Read together, the AU and ECOWAS texts suggest that the regional crisis is being managed not only as a security emergency but also as a crisis of normative authority. That distinction matters for Nigeria because it means that leadership can no longer be exercised through capability alone. It must also be exercised through credible constitutional standing.<sup>7</sup>

It is therefore a mistake to view the current ECOWAS crisis solely through the lens of sanctions policy or institutional design. The deeper issue concerns the social basis of regional authority. ECOWAS can issue communiqués, impose suspensions, and invoke its protocols. But those instruments are effective only when backed by politically credible leadership. This is where Nigeria's domestic trajectory becomes central. If Abuja's own democratic credentials are weakened, the organization's capacity to distinguish itself from the regimes it condemns also weakens. A bloc led by a state whose own elections are widely viewed as opaque or institutionally compromised will find it harder to sustain moral suasion, mobilize regional followership, or justify coercive pressure on military regimes.

The regional landscape is not, however, uniformly authoritarian. That is an important analytical caution. Senegal's 2024 election, despite the preceding constitutional crisis and the attempted postponement by outgoing President Macky Sall, ended in a peaceful transfer of power that many observers treated as a democratic reaffirmation in a coup-prone region. Ghana's December 2024 election also produced a peaceful alternation of power after Vice President Mahamudu Bawumia conceded defeat to John Mahama. These cases matter because they show that West African democratic order has not collapsed into a single regional pattern of backsliding. Rather, the region is now marked by sharper divergence between resilient constitutional polities, vulnerable

2024).

<sup>7</sup> ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, 'Final communiqué of the Sixty-seventh Ordinary Session', Abuja, 22 June 2025.

<sup>6</sup> African Union Peace and Security Council, 'Communiqué of the 1212th meeting of the PSC held on 20 May 2024 on the updated briefing on the political transition in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali and Niger' (AU PSC, Addis Ababa,

hybrid systems, and openly military regimes. That divergence increases the importance of Nigeria. A credible Nigeria could still serve as the pivotal democratic security anchor in a fragmented regional field. A less credible Nigeria would deepen fragmentation by weakening the centre of normative coordination.<sup>8</sup>

This is the setting in which the aftermath of Nigeria's 2023 election and the approach to 2027 must be interpreted. The issue is not simply whether Nigeria remains powerful. It does. The issue is whether it can still convert power into legitimate regional leadership at a moment when ECOWAS's democratic order is under its heaviest strain since the creation of the 2001 protocol. The next section therefore turns inward, to the erosion of electoral credibility in Nigeria after 2023 and the implications of that erosion for regional security legitimacy.

### III. Nigeria after 2023: Electoral Credibility, Institutional Trust, and the Regional Implications of Democratic Doubt

The regional significance of this episode is easy to miss if the analysis remains confined to Nigeria's internal legal process. Across West Africa, the Nigerian election was watched not simply because of Nigeria's size but because it provided a signal about the health of electoral constitutionalism in the state most closely associated with ECOWAS leadership. Where a leading democratic state cannot reassure its own electorate that promised transparency will be delivered at the decisive moment of competition, its capacity to reassure the region about the normative seriousness of democratic enforcement is correspondingly reduced. The legitimacy problem is therefore communicative as well as institutional.

If Nigeria's regional authority depends partly on democratic security legitimacy, then the 2023 general election becomes more than a domestic episode of administrative controversy and partisan dispute. It becomes a test of whether Nigeria can still present itself, with sufficient credibility, as a regional

defender of constitutional order. This does not require an unrealistically pristine benchmark. No serious account of Nigerian elections would suggest that earlier cycles supplied unambiguous democratic authority. The issue is not perfection. It is whether the electoral process retains enough transparency, institutional coherence, and public legitimacy to support Nigeria's claim to normative leadership in a region where democracy itself has become an object of intensifying contestation.

The 2023 elections began with unusually high expectations. The Electoral Act 2022 provided a stronger legal basis for the use of technology in voter accreditation and results management, while the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System and the Results Viewing Portal were widely understood as instruments that would enhance transparency and reduce opportunities for opaque manipulation. The significance of these reforms was not only technical. They became political guarantees in the public imagination. For many voters, they symbolized the possibility that electoral administration in Nigeria might finally move closer to visible procedural integrity. It is precisely because these expectations were so high that the failures surrounding implementation proved so damaging.<sup>9</sup>

Observation reports make clear that the core problem was not simply that the election produced winners and losers, but that the process exposed a damaging gap between promised transparency and actual delivery. The European Union Election Observation Mission identified serious operational failures that undermined confidence in the electoral process. The NDI and IRI joint mission went further, reporting that its parallel vote tabulation revealed vulnerabilities in the integrity of INEC officials and oversight mechanisms, as well as marked disparities in election quality and access across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Domestic observer groups reached comparable conclusions, stressing that the management of the process generated mistrust well beyond ordinary partisan dissatisfaction. These findings matter not because they establish a single

<sup>8</sup> Reuters, 'Senegal election welcome boost for democracy in coup-prone West Africa', 25 March 2024; Reuters, 'Ghana's ex-president Mahama wins presidential election', 9 December

2024.

<sup>9</sup> Independent National Electoral Commission, Report of the 2023 General Election (INEC, Abuja, 2024).

conclusive narrative of fraud, but because they reveal a cumulative credibility deficit. In contemporary electoral politics, procedural opacity can be politically as consequential as demonstrable manipulation, especially where public confidence in institutions is already fragile.<sup>10</sup>

The most consequential controversy surrounded the management and public visibility of results. The technological and legal complexities of results transmission were real, but the political meaning of the failure was straightforward. A large portion of the electorate believed it had been encouraged to trust a more transparent process only to find that the most symbolically important feature of that promise did not operate as expected at the critical moment. The problem, therefore, was not merely technical malfunction. It was the collapse of an institutional reassurance mechanism. Once that occurred, distrust expanded from the immediate issue of results management to the broader question of whether electoral reform in Nigeria remains reversible when elite competition becomes most intense.<sup>11</sup>

The judicial aftermath did not fully repair this damage. Election petitions are a normal feature of Nigerian democracy, and recourse to adjudication does not in itself indicate democratic breakdown. Yet in the 2023 cycle, judicial resolution unfolded in an atmosphere already shaped by administrative controversy, violence in parts of the country, and widespread accusations of selective transparency. Under these conditions, legal closure did not translate into restored political confidence. This distinction is central to the present argument. A state may secure constitutional continuity through formal adjudication while still suffering reputational losses that weaken its capacity to invoke democratic norms credibly beyond its borders. From a regional perspective, the important question is not only

whether institutions processed the dispute, but whether the broader political field continued to treat the outcome as grounded in a transparent and trusted process. The evidence suggests that confidence remained strained.<sup>12</sup>

This matters for the regional argument because ECOWAS enforcement has always relied on a distinction between contested electoral politics and openly unconstitutional power seizure. When the electoral process of the bloc's leading state itself becomes associated with opacity, the line between imperfect democracy and normatively persuasive democracy narrows. Nigeria still differs fundamentally from junta regimes, but the regional usefulness of that difference depends on whether other states and publics continue to regard Nigerian electoral procedures as credible enough to sustain a meaningful hierarchy of constitutional claims.<sup>13</sup>

This matters because Nigeria's elections have long carried significance beyond Nigeria itself. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has not merely been another electoral polity in West Africa. It has been the state whose democratic continuity most visibly underwrites ECOWAS's claim to stand for constitutional rule. When Nigerian elections are flawed but broadly accepted, regional consequences remain manageable. When they generate deeper doubts about transparency, neutrality, and institutional reliability, the implications extend beyond domestic grievance. Abuja's ability to present itself as a persuasive enforcer of democratic norms in the subregion is weakened. Electoral doubt at home narrows moral leverage abroad.

The relationship between electoral credibility and security sector governance intensifies this problem. Nigerian elections are not simply administrative events. They are high-stakes political contests in which policing, intelligence, military posture, and

<sup>10</sup> European Union Election Observation Mission, Nigeria 2023 Final Report: General Elections 25 February and 18 March (EU EOM, Brussels, 2023); Joint International Election Observation Mission of the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, Nigeria 2023 General Elections Final Report (NDI/IRI, Washington, DC, 2023); Centre for Democracy and Development, Understanding the 2023 Nigerian Presidential and National Assembly Elections (CDD West Africa, Abuja, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> EU Election Observation Mission, Nigeria 2023 Final Report; Yiaga Africa, Mid-day Situational Statement: 2023 Presidential Election (Yiaga Africa, Abuja, 25 February 2023).

<sup>12</sup> EU Election Observation Mission, Nigeria 2023 Final Report.

<sup>13</sup> See also NDI/IRI, Nigeria 2023 General Elections Final Report, on disparities in election quality and the resulting erosion of confidence across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

control over public order become central. Observation and civil society reporting from 2023 documented violence, intimidation, localized irregularities, and uneven security performance. Such patterns do more than diminish the quality of the vote. They shape public understanding of the coercive institutions of the state. Where electoral competition appears to unfold within an environment of coercive asymmetry, confidence in the neutrality of the security apparatus declines. This is consequential domestically, but it also affects regional perceptions. A state whose own coercive institutions are viewed as politically entangled at home will find it harder to present those same institutions as credible instruments of constitutional guardianship in regional crises.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of 2023 therefore lies not only in the immediate erosion of domestic institutional trust, but in the specific regional pathways through which that erosion is translated into weaker Nigerian leadership. The issue is not whether Nigeria remains indispensable to West African security. It plainly does. The issue is whether its political authority remains sufficiently credible to sustain a regional order increasingly organized around constitutional claims. This is what makes the approach to 2027 so important. It is not merely the next electoral contest. It is the next major test of whether Nigeria can still convert centrality into legitimate regional leadership.

#### IV. Three Mechanisms of Regional Legitimacy Erosion

The erosion of electoral credibility in Nigeria does not remain domestically contained. It travels outward through identifiable political mechanisms that weaken Nigeria's ability to anchor democratic order in West Africa. This does not mean that regional leadership disappears as soon as elections become contested. Regional hierarchy is more durable than that, and Nigeria's material centrality remains substantial. The stronger claim is that in a regional order explicitly organized around constitutional rule, material capability no longer suffices to secure

effective leadership on its own. Once ECOWAS moved from ad hoc crisis management toward a rule-based architecture through the 1999 Mechanism and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol, the domestic political credibility of leading states became part of the structure of regional authority itself.

Three mechanisms are especially important. The first concerns normative authority and the limits of democratic enforcement. The second concerns security sector credibility and the political foundations of regional leadership. The third concerns regional fragmentation and the widening space for alternative alignments. Taken together, these mechanisms show how domestic electoral doubt can reduce regional authority even in the absence of any dramatic decline in Nigeria's material power.

#### Normative Authority and the Limits of Democratic Enforcement

Regional democratic enforcement depends partly on sanctions, mediation, and the threat of coercion. But it also depends on the ability of leading states to act as credible interpreters of constitutional norms. ECOWAS's democratic order is sustained not only by formal instruments, but by the claim that unconstitutional access to power, prolonged military transition, and electoral malpractice violate a shared regional standard. The 2001 Supplementary Protocol makes that logic explicit by affirming constitutional principles, electoral integrity, and the independence of democratic institutions. Democratic enforcement in West Africa is therefore not only legal or institutional. It is also persuasive. States seeking to discipline coup regimes or backsliding incumbents must be able to speak credibly in the language of the rules they claim to defend.

This is where Nigeria's electoral credibility becomes regionally consequential. If its own electoral process is widely viewed as opaque, compromised, or administratively partial, its authority to pressure unconstitutional regimes is weakened. The point is not that military juntas require a morally pure

<sup>14</sup> Centre for Democracy and Development, Votes, Violence and Validity: Our Understanding of Nigeria's 2023 Sub-

national Elections (CDD West Africa, Abuja, 2023); Yiaga Africa, Mid-day Situational Statement.

enforcer before they can be criticized. It is that accusations of selectivity and hypocrisy become easier to mobilize and harder to rebut when the leading advocate of constitutional order is itself exposed on the terrain of electoral credibility. The post-2023 legitimacy deficit therefore narrows Nigeria's persuasive reach within ECOWAS diplomacy. It does not remove Nigeria from the field. But it reduces the force with which Nigeria can embody the norms it invokes.

The formal exit of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger sharpened this problem. Once those three states completed their departure from ECOWAS, the organization's democratic authority became more dependent on the political credibility of the states that remained central to it. In such a context, Nigeria's domestic electoral standing matters more, not less. If Abuja's democratic credentials are weakened, ECOWAS loses part of the political basis on which democratic enforcement can be justified, coordinated, and followed. This is why legitimacy erosion in Nigeria is not simply reputational damage. It directly affects the persuasive infrastructure of regional order.

### **Security Sector Credibility and the Politics of Regional Leadership**

The second mechanism works through the security sector. Nigeria's regional leadership has always depended on more than the possession of armed force. It has also depended on the claim that force can be deployed in defence of a wider regional order rather than merely in service of regime preservation. That distinction is vital in West Africa, where military intervention, intelligence cooperation, and peace support activity are politically intelligible only when the coercive apparatus of the leading state appears at least minimally professional, disciplined, and constitutionally bounded.

Electoral credibility matters here because elections are the moments at which the neutrality of coercive institutions is most visibly tested. The 2023 election cycle exposed not only weaknesses in electoral administration but also the persistent salience of coercive asymmetries, violence, intimidation, and public doubt regarding security impartiality. These

patterns are important not simply because they blemish domestic democratic quality. They shape how Nigeria's military, police, and intelligence institutions are perceived as instruments of regional order. A state whose own coercive institutions appear politically entangled at home will find it harder to present those institutions as regionally legitimate guardians of constitutional stability.

This point is especially important from the perspective of security sector governance. Democratic security legitimacy presumes that the security sector can be narrated as serving constitutional order rather than partisan incumbency. Where elections are widely seen as vulnerable to partisan coercion or institutional manipulation, that narration weakens. Nigeria's coercive capacity remains substantial, but the political credibility of its deployment becomes more contestable. Regional leadership under such conditions grows more brittle because it rests on resources whose legitimacy is no longer fully separable from domestic dispute.

This does not mean that regional actors simply defect from ECOWAS whenever Nigerian legitimacy weakens. More often, they recalibrate. They keep formal commitments in place while widening their diplomatic room for manoeuvre, engaging alternative partners, or lowering the political costs of selective non-compliance with regional norms. That is why fragmentation in the current West African context should be understood less as a single moment of institutional exit than as a gradual loosening of normative coordination. The weaker the credibility of the regional anchor, the easier it becomes for such recalibration to spread without requiring open rupture.

There is also a temporal dimension to this mechanism. The issue is not only the legacy of the 2023 elections. It is that the lessons of 2023 are already shaping expectations about 2027: expectations about INEC, about the reliability of technological guarantees, and about the likely role of security institutions in a high-stakes electoral cycle. If those expectations continue to deteriorate, Nigeria's regional authority may weaken even before the next election occurs. In that sense, the politics of legitimacy are anticipatory. Regional actors respond

not only to completed events but to the credibility of the trajectory ahead.

### **Regional Fragmentation, External Balancing, and the Thinning of ECOWAS Order**

The third mechanism concerns the wider regional environment. When the leading democratic state loses credibility, the consequences do not end with diminished moral suasion or weaker security sector authority. They also alter the strategic calculations of other states. In a cohesive regional order, ECOWAS norms can function as the central reference point even when enforcement is uneven. In a more fractured order, states begin to weigh those norms against alternative diplomatic, security, and regime-survival options.

The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has already widened this space. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States signals more than institutional disagreement with ECOWAS. It signals the existence of an alternative regional political project that seeks security cooperation and political coordination outside the ECOWAS democratic framework. In such a context, the credibility of the remaining democratic core becomes especially important. If Nigeria can no longer function as a persuasive anchor, incentives for hedging increase across the subregion. Regional order does not collapse uniformly, but it becomes thinner, more negotiable, and more vulnerable to rival alignments.<sup>15</sup>

External actors matter within this environment not because West Africa is simply being absorbed into a single new patronage order, but because legitimacy deficits within ECOWAS widen the room for security diversification. Regimes under pressure can seek support from partners less concerned with constitutional legitimacy. States not under military rule may also hedge more actively when regional democratic leadership appears politically compromised. Under such conditions, ECOWAS loses coherence not only because some regimes

defect, but because it ceases to function as the uncontested centre of regional coordination.

This point should be stated carefully. The region is not moving in a single direction. Ghana's recent peaceful alternation of power and Senegal's democratic recovery after acute constitutional tension show that democratic resilience remains possible. The significance of Nigeria lies elsewhere. It concerns coordination. In a region increasingly marked by divergence between military regimes, resilient constitutional polities, and vulnerable hybrid systems, the absence of a credible Nigerian anchor makes collective democratic stabilization harder. What weakens is not only Nigeria's image, but the capacity of ECOWAS to serve as a coherent democratic security order.<sup>16</sup>

Taken together, these mechanisms show that electoral credibility affects regional leadership through more than symbolic reputation. It shapes the persuasive force of democratic enforcement, the credibility of the security institutions through which leadership is exercised, and the strategic calculations of states operating in a fragmented regional environment. The cumulative result is a thinning of democratic security legitimacy at the moment ECOWAS most needs a credible centre.

For that reason, the Nigerian case should be read as more than a national democratic stress episode. It is a test of whether regional constitutional order in West Africa can still be anchored by a state whose internal electoral credibility remains sufficiently intact to support claims to external democratic leadership. If that anchor erodes further, the likely result is not immediate regional collapse but a more permissive environment for authoritarian normalization, selective norm enforcement, and security pluralization. The regional stakes of Nigeria's electoral trajectory are therefore cumulative, not theatrical, and precisely for that reason they deserve closer scholarly attention.

<sup>15</sup> Reuters, 'West Africa bloc announces formal exit of three junta-led states', 29 January 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Reuters, 'Senegal election welcome boost for democracy in

coup-prone West Africa', 25 March 2024; Reuters, 'Ghana's ex-president Mahama wins presidential election', 9 December 2024.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that Nigeria's regional security leadership in West Africa depends on more than demographic scale, military capacity, or diplomatic reach. It also depends on a form of political legitimacy rooted in the credibility of Nigeria's own constitutional and electoral order. That legitimacy has never been complete, and Nigeria's post-1999 democratic trajectory has remained uneven. Yet for much of the period since the consolidation of ECOWAS's democratic and security architecture, Nigeria could still plausibly act as a state sufficiently aligned with constitutional rule to underwrite regional norm enforcement. The current regional conjuncture has made that claim far more difficult to sustain.

The formal departure of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS in January 2025 did not simply reduce the organization's membership. It exposed the fragility of a regional order whose authority depends increasingly on the credibility of the states still able to defend it. In that context, Nigeria's domestic electoral standing has acquired heightened regional significance. The controversies surrounding the 2023 general election, particularly the gap between promised transparency and public experience of the process, weakened institutional trust in ways that matter beyond Nigeria's borders. The consequence is not that Nigeria ceases to matter regionally. The consequence is that its political centrality becomes harder to translate into legitimate regional leadership.

The article identified three mechanisms through which this occurs. First, credibility erosion reduces Nigeria's normative leverage in democratic enforcement by making regional claims to constitutional guardianship easier to dismiss as selective or hypocritical. Second, it weakens the political credibility of the security sector by making it harder to distinguish regional leadership from domestic perceptions of partisan coercion and institutional partiality. Third, it contributes to a thinner and more fragmented regional order in which alternative alignments become easier to pursue, and ECOWAS loses coherence as the primary centre of democratic coordination.

The significance of the 2027 electoral horizon follows from this diagnosis. The argument is not that Nigeria's next election will single-handedly determine the future of West Africa, nor that a contested outcome would automatically end Nigerian leadership. The claim is narrower and more analytically useful. In a region facing democratic recession, military entrenchment, and institutional fragmentation, the domestic credibility of the leading state becomes part of the political infrastructure of regional order. The approach to 2027 is therefore not merely a domestic electoral sequence. It is a test of whether Nigeria can still plausibly anchor a regional security order organized, at least formally, around constitutional rule.

The broader implication of the article is that electoral credibility should not be treated as a purely domestic attribute of democratic life. In a regional order formally organized around constitutional rule, it is also part of the political infrastructure of security leadership. This is the domestic-to-regional mechanism at the centre of the argument: when electoral credibility erodes in the leading state, the regional legitimacy of democratic enforcement erodes with it. The significance of Nigeria's 2027 electoral horizon therefore lies not only in the future of Nigerian democracy, but also in the future of ECOWAS as a credible constitutional security order. What is ultimately at stake is whether West Africa can still sustain a regional centre capable of converting material power into legitimate democratic authority.

## Notes

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  18. For the wider conceptual stakes, see Branch and Cheeseman, “Democratization, sequencing, and state failure in Africa”.