

## **Can ECOWAS Re-invent the Nationalist Dream in West Africa? Reflections on the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance**

### **ABSTRACT**

**Amadu Sesay\***

Like other regions in Africa, the flush of independence in West Africa gave rise to both euphoria. There was euphoria, because independence was expected to usher in peace stability, economic growth and development and significant improvement in the living conditions of the citizens and play a constructive role in African and global affairs. Thus, flag independence was celebrated with pomp and pageantry everywhere in the sub-region. However, these expectations turned out to be overly optimistic as the reality of dependent independence soon dawned both on the nationalists and the citizens of the sub-region, as the successor elites proved increasingly and hopelessly incapable of holding the liquor of political freedom. The sign posts were many and significant: inability to conduct violence free and fair elections; creeping and outright dictatorships in many countries, one party systems both *de jure* and *de facto*, ethnically centred regimes, unbridled corruption, economic down turn and/or outright collapse, breakdown of fragile social infrastructure, coups, civil wars, mass displacements of people and unprecedented refugee outflows, and finally state collapse. While the Cold War lasted, some of these fissures were papered over only to come to the fore with ferocious intensity with the collapse of bipolarity in global politics and the withdrawal of the Super Powers from peripheries such as Africa. The termination of the Cold War opened a political Pandora's box as competition between elites for power and political control of the state assumed persistently violent and destabilizing dimensions. In West Africa, this was manifested in two brutal civil wars and state collapse in the decade after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union.

It could be argued that West African leaders had anticipated some of these developments, when they created the Economic Community of West African States ECOWAS, as a veritable strategy for confidence building and for promoting the nationalist dream. ECOWAS did make significant inputs in attempts at halting the collapse and chaos that characterized West African politics in the 1990s, as witnessed by its unprecedented involvement in conflict management, peacekeeping and peace enforcement in Liberia and Sierra Leone. For without peace and stability economic and social development cannot take place and the nationalist dream of creating prosperity for the citizens would not be realized. It was in this context that ECOWAS also brought together a group of eminent scholars in Dakar in October 2000 to draw up a Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance with the aim of promoting not only convergence in the domestic politics of member states, but also to create a conducive atmosphere that would re-create the nationalist dreams and aspirations. The document sought to address issues such as political marginalization and exclusion, free and fair elections, bad governance, corruption, and economic deprivation, gender and development, youth unemployment, etc, that are the center of the unprecedented violence and state collapse that bedeviled the sub-region in recent times<sup>1</sup>. The paper critically examines the potentials and limitations

of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance against the background of the hopes and expectations of both the founding fathers and the citizens of the West African sub-region, in the light of developments in member states and the sub-region since the 1990s. It tries to answer the central question: can ECOWAS re-invent the nationalist dream in West Africa? What are the possibilities, limitations and challenges in that regard? What went wrong in some member states that made the sub-region one of the most unstable and notorious since the end of the Cold War? Answers to these and other important questions will constitute the problematique of the paper.

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<sup>1</sup> I was the Chairperson of the group of experts that drew up the Protocol, which was overwhelmingly endorsed by ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in December 2000.

\*Amadu Sesay,  
Department of International Relations,  
Obafemi Awolowo University,  
Ile-Ife, Nigeria.  
Email: [sesayamadu@yahoo.com](mailto:sesayamadu@yahoo.com) and [assay@oauife.edu.ng](mailto:assay@oauife.edu.ng)  
Tel. (Mobile) 0803-717-0044