

## **Nigeria should set good example for West Africa in democracy and not become a self-appointed warrior-in-chief!**

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On 26 July 2023, news of the ousting of the President of Niger—Mohamed Bazoum—filtered across West Africa and the world adding yet again to the crescendo of military take-overs in West Africa. Almost in a knee-jerk and scripted reaction, the ECOWAS Heads of States roundly condemned the putschists giving them an ultimatum to return Niger to civilian rule or face the consequence of a military intervention. Soon, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso who are also countries under military rulership unsurprisingly came to the defense of Niger, issuing a joint statement that an attack on Niger would be considered an attack on all of them. Before long, the coup in Niger attracted an outsized global geopolitical significance with the US and France, both having military bases in Niger against jihadist insurgency in the wider Sahel region, demanding a return to civilian rule. Russia while not overtly pledging support for the coupists, warned that military action would lead to a “protracted confrontation” and destabilise the region. In a sudden volte face, Fani Kayode (like Nasir El-Rufai) a former aviation minister of Nigeria and a popular social media commentator who previously extolled the might of the Nigerian army to lead the ECOWAS combat in Niger later condemned the poise of ECOWAS for military action instead of peaceful or diplomatic action.

ECOWAS, unprepared to resile from its belligerent position summoned an urgent meeting of Heads of States of ECOWAS to discuss the military action. Paradoxically, the current chairman of the ECOWAS is the pronounced “president-elect” of Nigeria following Nigeria’s controversial elections in February this year. On the said election, the EU Observer Mission reported a very low voter-turnout and “a lack of transparency and operational failures [which] reduced trust in the process and challenged the right to vote”. Mr. Ahmed Bola Tinubu’s election is currently being challenged before Nigeria’s Election Petition Tribunal by his two main contenders—Mr. Atiku Abubakar and Mr. Peter Obi—on allegations of multiple irregularities in the results declared by Nigeria’s electoral commission (INEC). Mr. Obi formed a new political party less than a year to the 2023 presidential elections capitalizing on his massive youthful and social media followership dubbed Obidients. Aside his controversial election, Mr. Tinubu is embroiled in a myriad of controversies questioning his very identity, academic qualifications, and acquisition of his fantastically enormous wealth. Renowned, award-winning journalist, David Hundeyin, has consistently led a whistleblowing campaign on Tinubu’s alleged former connections with a narcotic trade or business in the US. But quintessentially, Mr. Tinubu whose election has been certified by credible international and national observers as everything but free, fair and transparent, is ironically leading the democracy evangelism of ECOWAS.

In a striking similarity, Sierra Leone went to the polls on June 24 2023, with the incumbent President Julius Maada Bio, declared winner on first ballot (supposedly securing above 55% of the valid votes cast). His election, just like the numbers declared by Sierra Leone’s Chief Electoral Commissioner, is perhaps the most controversial

since the dawn of multiparty elections in Sierra Leone in 1996. The opposition party—All People's Congress (APC)—did not contest the outcome of the polls in the Supreme Court of Sierra Leone citing interference in the judiciary and sagging if not decimated trust in the machinery of justice. They also resolved not to participate in any form of the governance of the state including not taking up the seats they “won” in parliament. Almost two months after the last general elections, Sierra Leone's democracy has become a unitary composition by circumstances while the Electoral Commission continues to defy calls and legal demands to publish disaggregated data to support their published results.

Evidently West Africa has a democracy crisis with electoral irregularities appearing to be in a tight race with the growing weaponized route to power. The recent reported coup in Gabon following a deeply disputed elections marks about the tenth unelected military takeover or attempted coup in West and Central Africa in three years. With the region's reputation as a “coup belt” comes a new badge of “constitutional-unconstitutional leadership” given by those countries whose civilian leaderships appear to be fidgeting with their nation's constitutions and electoral numbers just like how soldiers now wield their guns to power.

Nigeria, like Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Togo and Senegal have their democracies gasping for breath. So, what West Africa needs from Nigeria (and I dare say urgently) is a revival of democracy and not a warrior-lordship. Nigeria being the big brother in West Africa has a bounden duty to not only provide troops for interventions in the event of an illegitimate grasp of power but more importantly, to show good examples of democratic values and good governance to the other West African nations. When other West African nations hear of allegations of Nigeria's intelligentsia fiddling with the people's will during an election, they become emboldened to engage in all genres of unconstitutional means of attaining or retaining power. Nigeria needs to deeply look inward and fight against his own enemies of democracy before attempting to assemble boots on the grounds of Niger because anything short of that would only ridicule its militaristic efforts in Niger and would only place a band-aid on a cancer wound on the region's torso.

Coups, whether by the barrel of a gun or the manipulation of election results, is detestably indefensible. While ECOWAS obsession of quick-temper is with the military-styled coups, it pays little or no attention to manipulated ‘constitutional’ means of subverting the will of the people. Coups of all varieties, whether done by men in combat or civilians previously elected into office, should be resisted by ECOWAS with all their might. I believe that democracy, however imperfect is the best form of a system of government. What the people of ECOWAS want and deserve is not a Nigerian Warrior-lord but a big brother/sister in good governance and democracy. This would to a great degree stem the rising tide of both military, para-military and electoral coups across West Africa.

Democracy cannot be rescued by the barrel of a gun in the same way that electoral irregularities, whether deliberate or inadvertent, cannot inspire any growth in democracy.