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Challenges of deepening political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration and the future of ECOWAS

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ABSTRACT

Regional cooperation and integration are increasing globally with regional blocs working towards economic and political stability. In this paper, the nonsituational concept of political commitment and the pathway of normative legitimacy are employed to explore the model for deepening political integration in West Africa. The focus is on identifying key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy in the West African integration. The article addresses this issue by employing a qualitative technique. Results show that ECOWAS policymakers must embrace the awareness that political integration is embedded in the 1993 Revised Treaty; voiding selective implementation of policies is critical for regional development; prioritize harmonization of preferences and compatibility of regional vs national interests; religious intolerance deepens the dilemma concerning religion and politics in West Africa; and an enabling environment for ECOWAS people is needed to make human rights respecting choices against the backdrop of freedom to choose terrorism or kidnapping for ransom as a means of livelihood. The paper shows that ECOWAS cannot be fighting politically and cooperates economically and should work to ensure a robust political union through a consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy to achieve meaningful economic integration, peace and prosperity and the ECOWAS of peoples.

IMPACT STATEMENT

- ECOWAS policy makers believe that political integration is a long-term vision because there is no express mention of the concept in the Treaty. This ought to erase the legitimacy of the bloc to intervene in political affairs of member states, such as the Alliance of Sahel States controversy.
- Selective policy implementation is observed as ECOWAS best practices in regional policy implementation. The leaders urge members to pay their taxes and fees, and to comply with their directives, yet ignore or distort policies that requires respecting the people's rights.
- Religion and politics are inseparable in West Africa. Efforts targeted at religious tolerance are efforts in the direction to deepen regional political commitment and long-term legitimacy.
- Freedom of choice to become a bandit or terrorist as means of livelihood is contra social justice. ECOWAS must ensure that the people have the enabling environment to make right choices.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global landscape, political stability and legitimacy serve as essential pillars for promoting peace, security, and prosperity among nations and those that demonstrate strong political commitment to democratic principles, rule of law, and respect for human rights are better positioned to address pressing global challenges such as economic inequality and terrorism (ASEAN, 2021; Moreland, 2019; UNSC, 2017). Moreover, the prospect of upholding long-term legitimacy through transparent and accountable governance structures enhances trust and confidence among

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citizens and the international community, laying the foundation for enduring partnerships and collaborative efforts to tackle shared issues on a global scale.

Africa's diverse array of cultures, histories, and socio-economic contexts necessitate tailored approaches to governance and integration efforts. Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) play a crucial role in promoting political commitment and legitimacy by fostering dialogue, cooperation, and consensus-building among African nations (AU, 2023). In strengthening intra-African partnerships and institutions, African countries can collectively address common challenges such as conflict resolution, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development, while also asserting their agency and sovereignty on the global stage (Martinelli & Pirozzi, 2015). Thus, deepening political commitment and legitimacy within Africa contribute to building a more cohesive, resilient, and prosperous continent, capable of shaping its destiny and contributing meaningfully to the global community.

In recent years, West Africa has seen increased regional cooperation and integration, with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) working towards economic and political stability. However, the subregion is the most varied sub-region in size of countries, degree of economic development, language and economic, internal and external link in Africa; and presents the most formidable and complex challenge to the theory and practice of regional integration, posing several challenges to pooling the sufficient number of countries needed to participate evenly in deepening regional integration and sustainable regional development in the region (Abangwu, 1974; Aryeetey, 2001; ECA, 1965). While the ECOWAS heads of government have repeatedly committed themselves to the pursuits of deepening regional integration, progress has been slow.

For example, ECOWAS Vision 2020 was set to transit the bloc from ECOWAS of States to ECOWAS of people. It, however, achieved little success because the success of an 'ECOWAS of people' demands consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy which was lacking. Recently, ECOWAS Vision 2050 was established to achieve ECOWAS of people, peace and prosperity. The same problem persists. Achieving 'ECOWAS of people' demands consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy. Thus, the problem is what are the key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy to facilitate an integrated community of peoples, living in a peaceful and prosperous region striving for inclusive and sustainable development? The study aims to examine key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration. To achieve this aim, the work adopted a qualitative approach which involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting non-numeric data utilizing primary data from interviews and ECOWAS documentary evidence. Further, the paper utilizes the case study of ECOWAS to investigate the challenges of deepening political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration. The sub-regional blocs in West Africa include the West African Monetary and Economic Union (WAEMU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The WAEMU is made up of seven Member States which mostly are French-speaking countries and former territories of French West Africa. On the other hand, the ECOWAS is made up of fifteen Member States including the WAEMU members. Therefore, the choice of ECOWAS as a case study enables generalization of findings. The study population comprises ECOWAS policymakers, academics and African regional integration experts. Using key informant interviews, the purposive sampling technique was used to select the sampled participants and the thematic content analysis technique was employed for the data analysis.

The work is structured in the following ways: Section 2 provides a conceptualization of political commitment and identifies two forms of commitments including how ECOWAS practices integration by convenience. The section also explicates the concept of legitimacy, identifies descriptive and normative forms of legitimacy, as well as adopts the normative approach. Section 2 further presents a brief overview of regional political commitment and political legitimacy globally. The section ends by providing a brief overview of integration theories and identifies a theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the political commitment and long-term legitimacy of West African political integration. The section explores in detail the ECOWAS concept of political integration, ECOWAS political principles, ECOWAS achievements in political integration, hindrances to ECOWAS commitment to political integration and long-term legitimacy, and the prospects of enhancing regional political integration in West Africa. Section 4 highlights the key policy areas to deepen consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West Africa, including conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

2. Review of relevant literature

Wyatt and Gal (1990) undertook an examination of legitimacy and commitment within the military, with a particular emphasis on contemporary international relations. Their work critically analyzes current fault lines and forecasts future trends in this domain. According to Wyatt and Gal (eds.) (1990), the wars that ensued post-World War II diverged significantly from their predecessors. They argue that nontraditional conflicts in regions such as Algeria, Vietnam, Pakistan, Lebanon, the Falkland Islands, and Grenada, among others, are characterized by nuanced dynamics including issues of national consensus and domestic support, political discourse, moral arguments and counterarguments, public demonstrations, and societal alienation. In these conflict scenarios, Wyatt and Gal (eds.) (1990) argued that the conventional considerations of weapons systems, training, and tactics take a backseat to questions of legitimacy and commitment.

White and Ypi (2016**)** define political commitment as the will to act and continue acting, respecting treaties, covenants, agreements, and political principles, and actively seeking to promote them. However, within many regional blocs, member states often fall short in this regard, including ECOWAS. The capacity of states to uphold their commitments is a crucial aspect of the international landscape, encompassing a spectrum from formal defence treaties to informal assurances exchanged among diplomats (Gaubatz, 1996). Varying interpretations of commitments among integrating partners have contributed to the weakening cohesion of alliances and exacerbated key international challenges (Weinstein, 1969).

Weinstein (1969) delineates two important concepts of commitments, namely situational and nonsituational commitments. The situational concept of commitments is context-dependent. Verbalizing these commitments is considered less important, and their fulfilment depends on whether they continue to serve national interests in the given context. A government with a situational perspective on its commitments may assist an ally not necessarily because it's obligated to do so, but because it aligns with its interests in that situation. Recognizing that an ally's response can vary from non-support to full military backing, any government with a situational perspective views commitment as transient, shaped by the international dynamics of the moment (Weinstein, 1969). In contrast, nonsituational commitments are driven by a conviction that all commitments should be honoured and place significant emphasis on the issuance of a verbal commitment including persistence for its fulfilment. This type of commitment tends to take on a life of its own, symbolizing a country's dedication to broader principles, security interests, or other considerations beyond the immediate context. Essentially, while a situational commitment is seen as a reflection of a country's current interests, a nonsituational commitment is viewed as a binding and enduring pledge. The concept of West African integration exemplifies the situational approach to commitment, characterized by integration driven by convenience. This work insists that a transition towards a deeper political commitment akin to Weinstein's (1969) nonsituational concept, highlighting the pivotal role of political will and commitment in realizing new systems such as regional blocs is essential for West Africa.

On the other hand, Hurd (2023), Barker (2012) and Peter (2023) define political legitimacy as the acceptance that a governing rule, institution, or leader possesses the authority to govern and reflects the assessment of the justifiability of the hierarchy between the leadership and those subject to it, as well as the obligations of the subjects toward the leadership rule or ruler. When widely held within a region, legitimacy yields notable collective impacts within the society (Peter, 2023).

Peter (2023) identified descriptive and normative concepts of political legitimacy arguing that descriptively, legitimacy refers to people's beliefs about political authority and, sometimes, political obligations. For example, Weber (1964) stated that the foundation of any authority, alongside the accompanying willingness to comply, lies in a belief held by individuals granting respect to those in positions of authority. Weber emphasizes the significance of legitimacy as a pivotal concept in social science, as trust in a specific social framework engenders more enduring social patterns compared to those arising solely from self-interest or habitual adherence to rules. On the other hand, the normative concept of political legitimacy refers to some benchmark of acceptability or justification of political power or authority and – possibly – obligation. For example, according to John Rawls (1993) and Arthur Ripstein (2004), legitimacy primarily pertains to the validation of coercive political authority. The legitimacy of a political entity, such

as a state, and the corresponding political duties of its citizens hinges on whether the exercise of coercive political power by the state is justified.

According to Steffek (2007), international relations scholars do not agree on what precisely legitimacy should mean regarding international politics, so there is still a great need for conceptual clarification and debate. One conceptual issue has received scant attention in discussions. Traditionally, the disciplines of international studies have conceived legitimacy as being an issue among states. This conventional perspective sharply differs from a significant portion of the more contemporary literature, especially the normative aspect. Since the 1990s, a substantial portion of discussions on legitimacy have primarily centred around the interaction between citizens and international or supranational organizations (Steffek, 2007). Thus, deepening political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration ought to take a normative pathway to the practice of political integration in line with the ECOWAS Treaty Preamble.

In this paper, the nonsituational concept of political commitment and normative legitimacy pathways are adopted to explore the model for deepening political integration in West Africa. The specific focus is on identifying key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration.

2.1. Regional political commitment and political legitimacy globally

In Europe, the term, 'Europeanisation' refers to a widening and often disputed series of steps taken to politically and culturally integrate (Borneman and Fowler, 1997; Schmitter, 2001). European countries together with their elites and nationals form the agency of the European integration process. The decision to be part of Europe and the extent of integration are often decided through political referenda in respective countries (Hug & Sciarini, 2000). These referenda have, over the years, included matters like the ratification of treaties, acceptance into the European Monetary Union, and the endorsement of a European Constitution. Additionally, every five years, citizens of the European Union (EU) participate in elections to choose representatives for the European Parliament. Moreover, the EU offers its member countries a catalogue of choices as directions for national visions and, by extension, the vision for the entire European continent. 'With respect to European integration, popular sovereignty often determines the limits and dimensions of national sovereignty and structural change' (Berezin & Díez-Medrano, 2008, p. 3).

Many literatures on regional integration are filled with contents that valuate and rank regional institutions based on defined standards. Various studies have evaluated the extent of institutionalization or economic interdependence, using the EU as an underlying benchmark (De Lombaerde et al., 2010, p. 742; Hameiri, 2013, p. 319). However, using the EU integration model as a yardstick for the evaluation of regional integration in other regions of the world has been criticized as erroneous due to regional variations in politics and cultures (Breslin et al., 2002, p. 13), and the EU does not exist without weaknesses.

The breaking away of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU has brought to the fore the challenges of aligning the state democratic processes with regional political groups. Neo-institutionalist stocktaking of Brexit depicts a technocracy that has increasingly grown apart from the European citizens, engendering Euro-scepticism and once again agitation for nationalistic ideals and identities (Matthijs, 2017; Parker & Pye, 2018). Such stocktaking portrays Brexit as the result of the failure of regional technocrats to secure the legitimacy of the European Union with the European citizens. The splitting of the European Union came at a time when the push for regional creation of regional integration had gained momentum in the Global South. For instance, the amalgamation of the Andean Community and Mercosur into the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community, and the African Union's effort to create the African Economic Community by 2034, all pointing to how regional integration is significant to the countries and regional actors. Furthermore, economic integration has been associated with the expectations that these regional bodies will promote democracy, human rights, and constitutionalism. In some cases, these assertations conflict with the strategies deployed by state governments to crackdown on opposition and preserve the sitting government regimes (Gerard & Mickler, 2021. p. 404).

Lately, global bodies, for instance, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, among others, have been criticized for falling short of democratic legitimacy. As the number of regional institutions has increased, criticisms and attacks on them have also increased (Hurrelmann & DeBardeleben, 2009). Mercosur has frequently been criticized for holding confidential and colloquial decision-making meetings with high-ranking political representatives that culminate into unaccountability, void of transparency, and noninvolvement of non-state actors (Domínguez & de Oliveira, 2004; Malamud, 2005). In Africa and the Caribbean, regional institutions like the African Union, the Economic Community of Western African States and the Caribbean Community have received a fair share of criticisms for not seriously involving civil society in decision-making (Bah, 2013, p. 107; Lotze, 2013; van Rozendahl, 2007). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has also been castigated for having authoritarian tendencies which go against expectations of democracy (Ambrosio, 2008, p. 1322).

Even the European Union which has been treated as a yardstick of regional integration, has not been devoid of criticisms. European Union has been accused of undermining the national parliaments of its member countries, accused of being too confidential and complex and has substantially affected the capacity of member states to pass policies that align with the interests of their citizens. Brexit reflected the repellant sentiment against the European Union, as well as various Euro-sceptic political parties in several member countries. These are evidence of a lack of democratic legitimacy by the EU regional body (Duina & Lenz, 2017, p. 399; Follesdal & Hix, 2006; Weiler et al., 1995).

In Asia-Pacific, in the aftermath of the cold war, the region of Asia-Pacific went through economic and political insecurities and turmoil. As a result, the countries of Asia-Pacific formed novel institutional structures – the Association of Southern Asian Nations (ASEAN) – to handle conflict and economic matters among the regional states (Narine, 2004, p. 424). ASEAN took steps to buttress its institutional structures and increase its membership (Acharya, 1995; Chalmers, 1997; Leifer, 1996; Narine, 1997, as cited in Narine, 2004). Asian countries upgraded the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) platform to steer the economic integration of the Asian-Pacific region (Hellman & Pyle, 1997; MacIntyre, 1997). Unfortunately, the 1997–1999 economic crisis in Asia, led to the wavering of these regional institutions. Additionally, despite other successive regional institutions, the regional countries have failed to agree on the structures of the regional institutions and how to ensure their effectiveness (Bessho, 1999). It is argued that the lack of assurance about the country-level political legitimacy in many nations of the Asia-Pacific region is the principal explanation for these countries' hesitance to form formidable regional organisations. The worries about individual states' political legitimacy underlie the region's resolve to preserve the conventional Westphalian philosophies of state sovereignty (Narine, 2004, p. 424). Virtually, all Asian countries object to the notion that building regional institutions necessitates the relinquishing of state sovereignty. On the contrary, Asian states think that regional institutions should foster, rather than challenge the sovereignty of their subscribing member countries (Higgott, 1997, p. 177).

Furthermore, in the Asia-Pacific region, there is an existential argument that the novel transnational organisations undermine the conventional role of the state and the original idea of sovereignty (Beeson, 2003; Moon & Chun, 2003). On the other hand, paying so much attention to sovereignty has an underlying layer which causes worry in the building of regional institutions. Asia-Pacific countries are concentrating on ongoing state-building activities, that is, establishing national identities from a plethora of 'ethnic, religious and linguistic communities'. In so far as countries get consumed with the idea of nation-building and national identity, it is an indication that they lack the will, and are probably unable – to establish solid and resilient regional institutional structures (Narine, 2004, p. 424). In an unpredictable global environment, Asia-Pacific countries may best front their ideals by getting involved in regional institutions that provide the platform to coalesce their political and economic resources. Globalization can potentially exert pressures on Asia-Pacific countries to which they lack the capacity to respond. The effectiveness in responding to global pressures may rely on the synergy built in the regional institutions (Narine, 2004, p. 424).

It is important to point out the major difference between the regional organisations in the Global South and their counterparts in the Global North. Historical and material differences pose the challenges of external legitimacy differently to regional institutions in the Global South, compared to similar institutions in the Global North that are richer and exert more influence. Regional organisations in the Global North possess more material capacity and normative power that facilitate their management of

'economic, security and legitimacy resources' (Ba, 2013, p. 141, cited in Gerard & Mickler, 2021, p. 406). Regional institutions in the Global North are normally interested in making their institutional legitimacy claims, in which the challenge experienced usually revolves around marrying regional institutional customs with national claims of legitimacy (Ba, 2013, p. 140; Wood, 2021). On the other hand, regional bodies in the Global South worry about both domestic and outside legitimacy at the same magnitude, having joined a system of governance in the position of the one who takes the rule, instead of the one who makes the rules (Ba, 2013), with outside criticisms subsequently possessing a higher superior material importance and authority to respond. External legitimacy is therefore a cause for serious worry for policymakers of regional bodies in the Global South (Chodor, 2021; Gerard & Mickler, 2021, p. 406).

These varying trends intrigue critical and urgent questions concerning the legitimization of regional integration, both to the governments that make up the membership of the regional institutions and to the nationals of those regional countries. They intrigue the need to analyse the structure of regional institutions, and the political regimes through which regional policymaking takes place. Research have mainly focused on the complications around the construction of legitimacy that conflicts with domestic political institutions, and the analytical challenges of investigating this effort, and recommend additional research on the phenomena of legitimacy and legitimation of regional governance (Bexell, 2014; Brassett & Tsingou, 2011). Whereas extensive literature exists on the legitimacy European Union, other regions are understudied (Gerard & Mickler, 2021, p. 405). This research, therefore, focusing on the regional institution in the Global South, aims to examine key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration.

2.2. Regional integration theories

Regional integration is a multidimensional process, whereby independent states establish common political, legal, economic, and social institutions to collectively work together to achieve peace, stability and wealth (EU Learning, 2022; Hix, 2001). Schimmelfennig and Zurich (2018) examined the main theories that explain the development of regional blocs globally. These include neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and postfunctionalism. Neofunctionalism emphasizes how and why integrations happened and offers a coherent explanation of the evolution of regional integration, especially, in the EU (Niemann, 2017; Schmitter & Lefkofridi, 2016). Among the central arguments is the progression of integration where for example, economic integration most often leads to an increase in interaction between actors in the integrating region and subsequently, political cooperation and an increase in interest groups. Also, the supranational institutional body designated to oversee integration starts to pursue strategies to deepen integration in other sectors through the campaigns for the benefit of further integration, building and supporting domestic as well as regional interest groups, leading to further integration. However, neofunctionalism is often the most rejected theory of regional integration (Schmitter, 2004) but it proved justified in the first stage of European integration (Godowska, 2012) and was a leading theoretical approach for explaining the EU from 1958 through the late 1980s (Moravcsik, 2005). As a result, Moravcsik argues that whenever integration encountered stagnation, scholars would critique neofunctionalism; whenever integration advanced, they would rediscover it.

Intergovernmentalism on the other hand, emerged in the 1960s as a criticism of neofunctionalism which failed in its predictions and logic. It dismisses and argues that Member States of a regional bloc have negotiating power and can resist efforts from organized interests both at the domestic and external levels. Different forms of intergovernmentalism include the liberal and traditional forms respectively. The former generates no analytic leverage over decision-making in the contemporary EU, unlike the latter which is based on treaty negotiation (Garrett & Tsebelis, 1996). Kleine and Pollack (2018) show how traditional and liberal analyses continue to be relevant in intergovernmentalim discourse today.

In addition, postfunctionalism is a recent theory of regional integration developed by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2019). The theory gained its name from the postfunctionalist logic of allocation of efficiency within a system of multilevel governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). It argues that regional integration has become firmly rooted in the democratic mass politics of states and that traditional theories of regional integration are narrow towards the multidimensional domestic foundations of the politics of integration (Leuffen et al., 2022). Rooted in theories of democratic and comparative politics, it builds on

multi-level or transnational governance systems, public opinion, democratic mass politics, party politics, democratic institutions and processes. According to Leuffen et al. (2022), postfunctionalism emphasizes the politicization of regional integration processes. Politicization involves moving an issue into the sphere of politics where it becomes subject to public deliberation and authoritative decision-making. This is corroborated by Schneider's (2017) discussion of regional integration as a consequence of the decision-making calculus of political leaders and substantiates Sesay and Omotosho (2011) argument that if regional integration in West Africa is done right, regional integration can be instrumental to overcoming regional vulnerabilities and challenges.

Therefore, the theoretical framework for the study is the postfunctionalism theory. Over the years, regional integration in West Africa has been examined under the tenets of intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism. Lavergne (1996) and Aryeetey (2001) established that the existing regional integration schemes in West Africa function in an intergovernmental mode. Though the elements of intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism are entrenched in the bloc to date, the postfunctionalism theory is the study's guiding framework. ECOWAS has changed tact over the years and has become more accommodating of alternative approaches to integration, hence, the need to examine the system from a new perspective. Postfunctionalism theory begins with the assumption that regional integration has become firmly rooted in the democratic mass politics of states, and successful regional integration demands consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy.

3. Political commitment and long-term legitimacy in West African integration

Within the scope of deepening political commitment and long-term legitimacy in the West African integration, this section explores the ECOWAS concept of political integration, ECOWAS political principles, ECOWAS achievements in political integration, hindrances to ECOWAS commitment to political integration, and prospects of regional political integration in West Africa.

3.1. ECOWAS concept of political integration

Founded in 1975, ECOWAS makes up over 418,978,800 people in West Africa within 15 countries. West Africa is a region on the western part of the African continent, known for its rich history, diverse cultures, and significant contributions to the African heritage. It comprises 15 countries, including Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Benin, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Niger, Mali, and Togo. In recent years, these countries have seen increased regional cooperation and integration, with ECOWAS working towards sustainable economic and political stability. However, meaningful economic cooperation has remained elusive because of the lack of required 'collective political will' demanded by the ECOWAS Revised Treaty's Preamble. The Preamble articulates that the integration of the ECOWAS Member States into a sustainable regional Community may necessitate the partial and gradual 'pooling' of national sovereignties into the Community, guided by a collective political will (1993 Revised Treaty). The idea of pooling national sovereignties to the bloc indicates the call for political integration to achieve regional economic goals. Political integration is the process of organizing, unifying, or uniting the components within a political system and its processes by which social, economic, and political systems become integrated with economic, social, and other human systems. Different from political integration, economic integration is the unification of economic policies between different states, through the partial or full abolition of tariff and non-tariff restrictions on trade. However, for economic integration to thrive, the political aspect has to create an enabling environment (Badie et al., 2011; Balassa, 1961; Erasmus & Hartzenberg, 2014; Hailu, 2015; Hanreider, 2022; Nikola, 2015).

According to Offuya (2022), a member of the ECOWAS Parliament, political integration is not expressly mentioned in the ECOWAS Treaty and would be a long-term vision to seek to promote it, and would prove challenging to define the ECOWAS concept of political integration. This submission was reinforced by Sendarin (2022) and Zanaku (2022) of the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, political integration is not expressly mentioned in the ECOWAS Treaty and any idea of political integration in West Africa is concluded as a long-term vision. The concept of 'a long-term vision' is explained to mean that it is almost impossible to achieve regional political integration in West Africa; first, based on prevailing issues such

as corruption, terrorism, poverty, poor political leadership, among others, and secondly because, political integration is not expressly mentioned in the ECOWAS Treaty. The first reason is general knowledge; however, the issue of no express mentions of political integration in the ECOWAS Treaty is technical and deserves more attention.

Practically, the concept of 'political integration' did not appear anywhere in the entire ECOWAS 1993 Revised Treaty and was confirmed through a thorough scan of the Treaty. This could mean that political integration is not so much of importance to the bloc, or it is known by a different concept, or that the region is not interested in furthering political integration. According to Okolo (1985), differences in political orientation often generate political tensions within the ECOWAS community leading to the bloc members' political apathy. Thus, Unya (2022) opines that ECOWAS needs serious reforms. However, in 2016, Momodou Bamba Saho (Saho, 2016, Director General of ECOWAS Monetary Agency submitted that regional integration is not just driven by economic considerations; political reasons can be just as important, if not more so. This is a demonstration that the region is interested in furthering political integration but the model has proven challenging.

However, a couple of mentions of concepts and expressions relating to interest in political integration appeared in different places in the Treaty. Article 18(2) on the appointment of the ECOWAS Executive Secretary established that the executive secretary shall be a person of proven competence and integrity with a global vision of political and economic problems and regional integration; Article 22(1f), the Technical Commission of political, judicial and legal affairs was established; Articles 56–59 further provide for cooperation in political, judicial and legal affairs, regional security and immigration; and Article 56(1) states that in pursuit of the integration objectives of the Community, the Member States undertake to cooperate on political matters to ensure actual use of the provisions of the Treaty. The model for political cooperation as appeared in Article 56(1) was obscured in the text. The issue of which model to achieve political unity divided the African nationalists at the founding of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) into the Monrovian and Casablanca groups respectively. It is possible for the issue of which model to achieve political unity to generate political tensions within the ECOWAS community (Okolo, 1985). Thus, the pursuit of sustainable political integration in West Africa is challenging. More challenging is the idea of political commitment and long-term legitimacy which is a far cry in the West African political leadership.

Furthermore, Article 58(3) of the Treaty states that 'The detailed provisions governing political co-operation, regional peace and stability shall be defined in the relevant Protocols'. Some of the relevant protocols include the ECOWAS Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform and Governance (ECOWAS, 2016); Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (1999); the Convention on Small Arms and Light Weapons, their Ammunition and other related materials (2006); the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), the ECOWAS Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2013); the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (2008), and the Declaration of Political Principles of the Economic Community of West African States (Declaration A/Dcl1/7/91 Of Political Principles Of The Economic Community Of West African States 1 (ECOWAS, 1991)), among others. However, what seems like a bold step towards the ideal of political integration for ECOWAS is established in the Treaty's Preamble. It states that 'within the context of a collective political will', ECOWAS integration demands 'the partial and gradual pooling of national sovereignties of Member States to the Community' (The Preamble). Thus, posits a defining characteristic of political integration in West African.

What is the collective political will? According to Derrick Brinkerhoff (2010), 'political will' is delineated as the dedication of stakeholders to implement measures aimed at accomplishing specific objectives, mitigating corruption, and enduring the associated costs over an extended period. Therefore, a 'collective political will' is the commitment of Member States to undertake actions to achieve ECOWAS objectives, reduce corruption, and sustain the costs of those actions over time. The commitment involves fulfilling the requirements for political integration which includes (a) establishing a unified law frame (ECOWAS Treaty), (b) creating common institutions (ECOWAS Institutions), (c) developing a decision-making centre (Authority of Heads of States and Government) and (d) projecting a unified identity (as identified in the Treaty). In addition, the ECOWAS's conviction to foster a collective political institution demanding the pooling of national sovereignties demonstrates a political commitment to the integration scheme. However, the leadership of ECOWAS may have lacked the boldness to expressly state it as a demand for

political commitment and legitimacy to a robust political integration. The implication is that presently ECOWAS practices a window-dressed political integration system and aims to achieve political stability to enable meaningful economic and monetary union. Over the years, the effects of such contradictions include poor economic policies (Ozili, 2021), perennial human wrongs instead of human rights (Helander, 2008; Human Rights House, 2017) and weak leadership leading to what Drezner (2020) described as 'the toddler-in-chief'.

The concept of 'toddler-in-chief' is a metaphor for political leaders who have 'experienced little emotional or psychological development' since young ages. This seems to vividly capture ECOWAS political leadership approach to regional integration and sustainable development which must change to reflect robust political commitment to good governance, justice and human rights, and long-term political legitimacy. Thus, in principle, the ECOWAS concept of regional political integration is the process of partial and gradual pooling of national sovereignties of member states to the Community for a collective political will to achieve wealth, peace, security and stability within the sub-region, which espouses multilevel governance system, an aspect of postfunctionalism theory. In practice however, the ECOWAS concept of regional political integration is the process of window-dressed pooling of national sovereignties of member states to the Community for a collective political will to achieve wealth, peace, security and stability. A recent implication of the toddler-in-chief approach is the emergence of the 2023 Sahel defence charter by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso inspired by the speculations that ECOWAS would use force to restore democracy in the Niger Republic after the coup d'états in those three Member States. This development dealt a major blow to the future of ECOWAS and demanded the urgent pooling of the political commitment of member states to drive the collective political will of the bloc. Otherwise, ECOWAS risks collapse as other member states may follow suit. To deepen the process, Article 6(1) of the Revised Treaty established institutions such as the ECOWAS Commission, ECOWAS Parliament and Community Court of Justice among others, perhaps, with respect to the principles of separation of power, a doctrine of constitutional law, a system of checks and balances herald in Article 1(1) of the ECOWAS Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary and the Declaration A/DL.1/7/91 of Political Principles of ECOWAS.

Furthermore, it seems there was a deliberate avoidance towards direct mention of political integration in the ECOWAS protocols and strategic frameworks. Thus, the bloc often prefers expressions such as 'political cohesion' instead of 'political integration'. At other times, the bloc uses the two concepts to mean the same thing as in the case of the Community Strategic Framework (CSF) (ECOWAS, 2016, pp. 45–46). However, while political cohesion is based on the development of strong and subjective identities that are central in the construction of a socio-political membership, political integration on the other hand demands that Member States be persuaded to shift their political activities, loyalties and expectations towards a new centre and delegate a certain amount of their sovereignty and autonomy of the new political community (Cuzzani, 2019; Huddy, 2013; Nikola, 2015). Thus, when the Preamble of the Revised Treaty advocated for the gradual consolidation of national sovereignties into the Community under the guidance of a collective political resolve, it aimed at advocating for political integration rather than mere political cohesion. As a result, political integration in West Africa would only be a long-term vision because of the practice of the toddler-in-chief approach to regional political commitment and the issue of legitimacy by the actors.

3.2. ECOWAS political principles

The *definiens* of political principles often include democracy, peaceful coexistence, good governance, constitutional principles, and the rule of law. This *definiens* is instrumental to a robust political commitment and legitimacy for any people. Hence, there is a need to examine the ECOWAS political principles and to what extent they reflect political commitments and legitimacy in the region.

Yunungo (2022) submitted that there are sufficient instruments to enable ECOWAS political integration that are not implemented. This follows a popular assumption that Africa has great policies and plans, but the problem is implementation (Nanjakululu, 2016). However, Abah (2017) faulted the assumption arguing that it is a donor-by-donor fallacy, that the problem is inadequate policy planning rather than implementation. While both sides of the coin deserve their merits, ECOWAS actors believe that their problem

is the political will to drive policy implementation. This position is corroborated by documentary evidence. The ECOWAS-specific rules governing political cooperation, regional peace, and stability are outlined in the applicable Protocols, according to Article 58(3) of the Revised Treaty. The Declaration A/DCL.1/7/91 on Political Principles of ECOWAS is one of the protocols. In the Preamble of the Declaration of Political Principles, the bloc stated its intention to coordinate efforts to promote democracy in the sub-region based on political pluralism – akin to party politics – an element of postfunctionalism theory. According to Skerrett (2005), pluralism is a practical intervention in the politics of antagonism in liberal democracies, practices of agonistic engagement among political rivals. Does ECOWAS acknowledge members as political rivals and the practice of political antagonism among its actors? Perhaps, this reinforced Unya's (2022) opinion that ECOWAS needs serious reforms.

The Declaration A/DCL.1/7/91 instrument endorsed eight political principles of ECOWAS. They are as follows: promoting increasingly better relations among ourselves, strengthening good neighbourliness and ensuring conditions in which our peoples can live in freedom under the law and in true and lasting peace, free from any threat to or against their security; abstain from any form of coercion or aggression, whether direct or indirect, against the territorial integrity or political sovereignty of any Member State; and resolve all disputes among ourselves through peaceful means, ensuring that such resolutions do not jeopardize the peace, security, and stability of our sub-region. Others include respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms in all their plentitude including in particular freedom of thought, conscience, association, religion or belief for all our peoples without distinction as to race, sex, language or creed; promoting and encouraging the full enjoyment by all our peoples of their fundamental human rights, especially their political, economic, social, cultural and other rights inherent in the dignity of the human person and essential to his free and progressive development; and encourage and promote in each country, political pluralism. Others include resisting any attempt by forces outside our sub-region to undermine the expression of our collective will and determination; rededicating ourselves and reaffirming our collective determination to take all necessary measures to ensure the speedy and effective realization of the aims and objectives enshrined in the ECOWAS Treaty and related instruments and to fulfil in good faith all our obligations under them.

Protocol A/SP1/12/01 (ECOWAS, 2001) on Democracy and Good Governance also aims to strengthen the bloc's political obligations and better the system for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping, and security. Promotes people's participation in decision-making, rigorous commitment to democratic norms, and decentralization of power at all levels of governance, including zero tolerance for unconstitutional means of obtaining power (Article 1, c-d). People's participation emphasized in this protocol has underlying core conditions of postfunctinoalism, that is democratic mass politics and public opinions. However, within the last five years, more than three coup d'états have occurred in West Africa demonstrating the failure of these protocols to achieve their aim because there is no political commitment and long-term political legitimacy in the region. Offuya (2022), Sendarin (2022) and Zanaku (2022) established that indirectly, it was based on these protocols and other relevant protocols that ECOWAS suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and recently Niger for breaking the rules of democracy and good governance. Confirming Yunungo (2022), there are sufficient instruments to enable ECOWAS political integration that are not implemented because there is a lack of political commitment over the assumption that the ECOWAS Treaty makes no express mention of political integration which could have been an oversight of the actors.

3.3. ECOWAS achievements in political integration

The 1993 Revised Treaty broadened the ECOWAS' scope from solely economic to include peace and security, as well as political and social stability. The Directorate of Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), is the entity tasked with furthering the region's political and social stability. Several frameworks have been developed to direct PAPS processes of realizing economic and political unity. The Community Strategic Framework 2016–2020 is one of the frameworks. The CSF 2016–2020 was developed by the ECOWAS Strategic Planning Coordinating Committee (SPCC) through the collaborative effort of stakeholders and technical supervision of the SPCC. The first CSF was in 2014 following a meeting to prepare a successor plan to the Regional Strategic Plan (RSP) 2011–2015. The six strategic goals of the CSF

2016–2020 are as follows, Goal 1: Deepening the process of socio-economic development; Goal 2: Forging and consolidating regional economic and monetary integration; Goal 3: Deepening the process of political cohesion and participation; Goal 4: Mobilizing and sustaining societal and institutional support; and Goal 5: Expanding and improving infrastructural facilities. Relevant to the study is the third strategic goal.

Deepening the process of political cohesion and participation was identified as strategic goal 3. This goal was built on the identified political challenges which guided the formulation of the ECOWAS Vision 2020 (ECOWAS CEDEOA, 2010, p. 7). The challenges include fragile political fusions across the sub-region; lack of political commitment to deepen regional integration; absence of deep regional integration; intra-regional challenges (massive migration, drug trafficking, wide proliferation of small arms and light weapons); adverse external factors (brain drain, caused mainly by such endogenous factors as lack of personal or political security, inadequate employment opportunities, remuneration and conditions of service). The basic assumption of goal 3 includes ensuring that various protocols and policy frameworks for conflict prevention, mitigation and management are domesticated, complied with and implemented. The expected outcome was a harmonious, well-secure and peaceful West Africa with entrenched democracy and good governance practices. Goal 3 was further subdivided into three themes namely peace and security; democracy and good governance; and human rights (ECOWAS, 2016, p. 46). Though the expected outcomes are far from reach, substantive progress has been made in each of the themes.

In terms of peace and security, Kessiana (2022) argued that the ECOWAS intervention in the coup d'états that occurred in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, and the insistence of the bloc on the rule of law, democratic government and transition, is a noteworthy achievement to maintain peace and security. ECOWAS has achieved notable success in upholding peace, security, and stability in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau. It has significantly influenced the political landscape of civil conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone by deploying a substantial West African force in 1990. Additionally, ECOWAS played pivotal roles in facilitating peace efforts in Liberia in 1997 and intervening in Guinea-Bissau during the armed uprising in 1998–99 and following the coup in 2012 (Ayambire, 2019). However, challenging this success is the spate of terrorism and jihadists such as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), Boko Haram, and Al Qaeda in the region, often with a religious undertone. The Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance expressed concern 'about the increasing incidence of conflicts caused by religious intolerance, political marginalization and non-transparent elections' (Preamble, Protocol A/SP1/12/01). The implication is that this achievement is riddled with religious intolerance. Religion and politics are inseparable in West Africa (religious intolerance is equivalent to political intolerance), and political violence is directly related to religious intolerance. In other words, the pursuit of political stability without religious tolerance is like using baskets to fetch water. This makes different scholars and actors describe establishing a bloc-based political integration mechanism as very dicey because their political ideology differs from Member State to Member State (Offuya, 2022; Sendarin, 2022; Zanaku, 2022).

The second theme is on democracy and good governance and focuses on the independent judiciary; free, fair and credible elections; and capable, accountable and transparent institutions. One of the key roles of PAPS is to facilitate electoral assistance to the Member States through capacity building for electoral management bodies (EMB), observation and monitoring of elections to promote democracy and good governance. The submission of Zanaku (2022) is that the ECOWAS election observers have been doing an excellent job supporting member countries to conduct free and fair elections. Between 2018 and 2023 the election observers have provided reports on their activities in Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, and Senegal. They have made significant contributions to promoting free and fair elections, and the practice of democratic principles and good governance enhanced. However, ECOWAS lacks internal democracy.

The third theme is human rights. In this area, the ECOWAS Community Court of Justice has delivered landmark judgments concerning the protection of human rights; however, the court judgments are not often implemented by the Member States (Offuya, 2022; Sendarin, 2022; Yunungo, 2022). Nigeria and the Benin Republic are strategic examples. For Nigeria, a judgment was delivered by the Community Court for the release of the National Security Adviser to President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan who was arbitrarily detained for political reasons by President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. However, it took the Nigerian government four years to release the detainee from detention against the court order. The detainee was not released because the Court's judgment was implemented; rather because the

government of Nigeria felt it was time to let the detainee go. Such actions weaken the fight against human rights violations, and perennially elevate human wrongs against human rights (Helander, 2008; Human Rights House, 2017).

Furthermore, the ECOWAS institutional framework, the 1993 Revised Treaty, offers to deepen regional integration and sustainable development by providing for the free movement of persons, goods, and establishment; trade, commerce, and investment; monetary union; peace and security (Igwe et al., 2021; Piccolino & Minou, 2014). However, in terms of monetary union, the former Liberian President Tubman Williams proposed the establishment of a monetary union for West Africa after the other of the Francophone West Africa that uses CFA as a single currency. In 1975, the proposal resulted in the establishment of ECOWAS. More than 47 years later, the monetary union has not been established. As of December 2022, while ECOWAS was making efforts to achieve the feat of monetary union, there have been calls from different Economists that ECOWAS monetary union attempts should be suspended to enable Member States' central banks to manage inflation and stabilise their economies (Sendarin, 2022). The implication is that monetary union remains a commitment of ECOWAS in principle.

In all the ECOWAS activities and achievements towards deepening political integration and sustainable development, there is one thing constant which is the excessive concentration on economic integration with little or no concerns for the issues of political commitment and the long-term legitimacy of actors and practices. This is corroborated by Adedeji (2002) that there is an excessive economic approach to integration in Africa which is a major reason Africa's integration schemes fail and that the absence of political integration makes economic cooperation difficult.

3.4. Hindrances to ECOWAS commitment to political integration

Several issues impact ECOWAS' commitment to regional political integration. Some of these issues the affecting commitment and legitimacy of member states include internal democratic deficit; the nexus of religion, politics and insecurity; the information and awareness gap; and the existence of treaty/protocol-based institutional weaknesses (Table 1).

3.4.1. Democratic deficit stemming from treaty provisions

The concept of democratic deficit refers to a perceived inadequacy in the functioning of a specific political system compared to the theoretical benchmark, indicating a broad, yet complex dissatisfaction with the operational dynamics of democracy (Rittberger, 2023). ECOWAS institutions suffer a treaty-based democratic deficit. For example, the authority of the Heads of State and Government, comprising all the Heads of State within the bloc, frequently circumvents Parliament by utilizing the Council of Ministers to enact laws in crucial domains. These areas should rightfully fall under the jurisdiction of Parliament, but the authority granted by the Treaty empowers this organ to exercise such powers (Sendarin, 2022).

Table 1. ECOWAS CSF framework.

Member states	Community strategic framework (CSF)	Current positions of the member state political unity
Benin	Fully supported	No changes
Burkina Faso	Fully supported	On the path of voluntary exit*
Cabo Verde	Fully supported	No changes
Côte d'Ivoire	Fully supported	No changes
The Gambia	Fully supported	No changes
Ghana	Fully supported	No changes
Guinea	Fully supported	No changes
Guinea Bissau	Fully supported	No changes
Liberia	Fully supported	No changes
Mali	Fully supported	On the path of voluntary exit*
Niger	Fully supported	On the path of voluntary exit*
Nigeria	Fully supported	No changes
Senegal	Fully supported	No changes
Sierra Leone	Fully supported	No changes
Togo	Fully supported	No changes

*As of January 2024, the countries on the path of voluntary exit have officially announced their withdrawal of membership from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES/ASS). Some of the issues alluded to as reasons for the formation of AES and exit from ECOWAS are discussed in this paper.

Article 7(1) of the 1993 Revised Treaty established the Authority of Heads of State and Government as 'the supreme institution of the Community'. The description 'supreme institution' is not just a matter of nomenclature but consistent with the character of the organ. Logically, it implies the establishment of a nondemocratic system. ECOWAS legal experts and lawmakers may make efforts to defend the description to mean that the institution is the apex of the bloc's organogram (Sendarin, 2022). However, semantically and syntactically, the idea of a 'supreme institution' in the Community Text conveys a meaning consistent with the actions of the members of the organ.

For example, a certain position was due to be filled by a Member State. Prominent roles like the Commission President, and Community Court President, among others, are held rotationally. It was the turn of a particular Member State to fill the position, resulting in all applicants hailing from the same country. The ECOWAS Parliament conducted interviews and evaluations, in the end selecting one candidate as the most qualified. However, on the day of the inauguration, the country's president, who is a member of the Authority of Heads of State and Government, obstructed the process and insisted on his preferred candidate for the role. Despite a transparent and democratic selection process, which had already led to the drafting of an appointment contract for the chosen candidate, the president imposed his candidate during the inauguration ceremony. This unilateral decision by the president superseded the decisions of the Parliament, Community Court, and Commission, highlighting a case of illegitimate leadership within the West African integration bloc. In addition, it underscores an inherent democratic deficit within the Treaty framework, posing significant challenges to political commitment to integration and raising concerns about the long-term legitimacy within ECOWAS. The unilateral usurping of the transparent and democratic decision-making process of selecting a regional candidate by the president contravenes and undermines the principles of democratic mass politics such as a fair court hearing and the power of the people invested in the institution of parliament with representatives from different political parties. This in turn waters down the political legitimacy of such a regional institution, as citizens can view the regional institution and its decision-making process and leadership as imposed and do not represent the will of the masses as highlighted in the theory of postfunctionalism.

3.4.2. The nexus of religion, politics and insecurity

The intertwining of religion and politics is evident in West Africa, with political violence often stemming directly from religious affiliations. Further, religious allegiance frequently shapes support for political causes and determines the perceived legitimacy of individuals ascending to power, including within regional integration mechanisms. According to Bulaç (2022), the Prophet is the absolute ruler of the Muslim social group and this is an attitude consistent with the basic Islamic assumption of not separating religious practice from law or other activities. During The Middle Ages, a period around 1400–1450, the clergy held significant political power. Religious institutions wielded uncanny powers in national and political affairs. Centuries later, this structure persists in West African political institutions, albeit with a heightened level of religious intolerance. ECOWAS Protocol on democracy and good governance supplementary to the protocol relating to the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security shows serious concern 'about the increasing incidence of conflicts caused by religious intolerance…' (Preamble, Protocol A/SP1/12/01). The theory of postfunctionalism promotes democratic processes such as public opinion, democratic mass politics, party politics, democratic institutions and similar processes. However, religious intolerance and placing religion above the law and the democratically elected leaders undermine these theoretical principles, which in turn weaken the functioning and legitimacy of institutions at national and regional levels such as in ECOWAS.

Thus, Offuya (2022), Sendarin (2022) and Zanaku (2022) contend that in West Africa, religion, politics, and insecurity are deeply related, with religious intolerance exacerbating political instability and insecurity, while religious tolerance promotes political stability and reducing insecurity. Political instability is directly linked to religious intolerance, contributing to heightened insecurity. In September 2022, the ECOWAS Parliament recognized the nexus of religion, politics, and insecurity as a significant challenge during its Community Institution localization meeting in Cape Verde. The meeting underscored the importance of religious tolerance and harmony as crucial elements for development, peace, and stability in the ECOWAS region (ECOWAS Parliament, 2022). Thus, the complex relationship between politics, religion, and insecurity in West Africa presents a formidable obstacle to regional political commitment and legitimacy.

3.4.3. Treaty/protocol-based institutional weaknesses

Tsai (2022) argues that strong institutions are not synonymous with concentration of power, but rather require inclusion, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law. Songwe (2015) demonstrates the transition from strong men to strong institutions in Africa towards more political contestability. However, in West Africa, the transition has proven elusive because of weak institutions. The primary weakness lies in the Revised Treaty itself, which disproportionately empowers certain organs while weakening others (Yunungo, 2022). For example, the authority of Heads of State and Government is 'the supreme institution of the Community', 'snail act by decisions', and decisions are made by 'unanimity consensus' (Treaty, Art. 7, Par. 1; Art. 9, Par.1, 2). The Parliament's role and powers are largely advisory 'upon consultation' (Protocol AIP2/8/94 relating to the Community Parliament). The Community Court primarily offers advisory opinions and serves a second-order role in dispute resolution after failed bilateral attempts (Protocol A/P.1/7/91 on the Community Court of Justice Art. 9–10). Investing more power in a few Heads of State (executive), while disempowering parliament (legislature) and court (judiciary), goes against the assumptions of postfunctionalism and creates a power imbalance, promotes misuse of power, as previously demonstrated that the president of a country overruled the transparent parliamentary and judicial process of selection a representative to ECOWAS. Such an imposed leader appears illegitimate to the masses.

Regarding integration, the Protocols established that 'social, economic and monetary integration is the key competence of the Parliament' (Protocol AIP2/8/94 relating to the Community Parliament Art.6, par. 2k), while the Court primarily focuses on human rights issues. Consequently, the issue of political integration falls outside the powers of the Parliament and the Court which makes these institutions remain treaty and protocol-based debilitated institutions in this regard. In response, on 17 December 2016, the Fifteenth Ordinary Session of the Authority of Heads of States and Government enacted a Supplementary Act A/SA.1/12/16 aimed at the enhancement of the powers of the ECOWAS Parliament. Article 7 (1–8), Article 8 (1–3) and Article 11–13 of the Supplementary Act established that the Parliament's decision-making power includes simple opinion, mandatory assent in the case of new appointments and co-legislative and co-decision with Council of Ministers while the Authority of Heads of States and Government maintains its supreme status. Although the Parliament's powers are theoretically enhanced, the institution(s) remain structurally weakened.

3.5. Prospects of regional political integration in West Africa

The future of ECOWAS with a stronger political commitment of member states and long-term legitimacy includes the creation of an enabling environment for substantive advancements in the direction of the African Union Agenda 2063. A West Africa-wide peace and security that is sustainable through evidence-based commitment to religious tolerance is possible. Also, it will create an enabling environment for the ECOWAS Vision 2050 to thrive.

3.5.1. Creation of an enabling environment for advancements in the African Union Agenda 2063

The African Union 2063 agenda was designed to be implemented at national, regional economic communities (RECs) and continental levels. ECOWAS is one of the AU's RECs with relevant institutions to make substantive advancements in agenda 2063. Political commitment and legitimacy will create the enabling environment for those institutions to work optimally and make meaningful advancements towards the agenda of 2063 (Sendarin, 2022; Zanaku, 2022). Programs will run at the right time and right places (Kessiana, 2022). Improve market efficiency and economic cooperation, share the costs of public goods or large infrastructure projects, decide policy cooperatively and have an anchor to reform, and it enables the building block for becoming a key global player, and reaping other non-economic benefits, such as peace and security (World Bank, 2020). Because it is politics that drives the economy; political integration will enable the people to be economically empowered (Yunungo, 2022). Empowering the people and enabling institutions to work well positions the bloc to make substantive advancements in the AU 2063 agenda.

3.5.2. Promotion of West Africa-wide peace and security that is sustainable

A West Africa-wide peace and security that is sustainable through evidence-based commitment to religious tolerance is possible. ECOWAS is committed to sub-region-wide peace and security. However, one of the challenges of the commitment is religious intolerance which exacerbates political instability and threatens the security of lives and property (Offuya, 2022). Consequently, a strong political commitment to political integration and legitimacy will positively influence religious tolerance and reduce insecurity on one hand, and on the other hand, enhance sub-regional strategic security architecture. This is corroborated by the September 2022 ECOWAS Parliament noting religion, politics and insecurity nexus as a major challenge during its community institution localization meeting in Cape Verde. The promotion of religious tolerance and harmony are essential factors for development, peace and stability in the ECOWAS region. Thus, sustainable region-wide hegemonic peace is achievable through strengthened political commitment. Møller (2009) corroborates that a measure of shared values and norms, and regional hegemon are necessary for an effective regional sustainable peace in Africa.

3.5.3. Creation of an enabling environment for the ECOWAS Vision 2050

Deepening political commitment to regional integration and long-term legitimacy are instrumental to achieving the ECOWAS of people, peace and prosperity because it is politics that drives the economic aspect of regional blocs (Yunungo, 2022). The Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform (2021) established that regional integration gives an additional impetus and positively affects the achievement of the SDG indicators by the Member States. Regional integration gives a goal-oriented approach to sustainable regional development (Nijkamp et al., 1991). Thus, political commitment and legitimacy are crucial for the ECOWAS Vision 2050. Kessiana (2022) argued that the prospect is very good towards the ECOWAS 2050 vision; however, it requires the bloc to sell the integration project better for more people to accept it. This will enable better implementation of policies, and finances will go to the right places, and objectives set will be met. Further, institutions and program would run effortlessly at the right time and right places, including allowing the people to be empowered (Offuya, 2022; Sendarin, 2022; Zanaku, 2022).

4. Key policy areas to deepen political commitment and long-term legitimacy

Through deepening political commitment and long-term legitimacy, policymakers in developing countries must prioritize the integration of social, environmental, and economic objectives (Falcone, 2023). However, political integration, rule of law and due process, compatibility of regional vs national interests, religious tolerance, and social justice are key policy areas to deepen political commitment and long-term legitimacy.

4.1. Political integration

ECOWAS policymakers must embrace the awareness that political integration is embedded in the 1993 Revised Treaty. This awareness will enhance political commitment to the Community Texts and provide legitimacy for intervention in political rancour within member states. Otherwise, as long as ECOWAS policymakers hold the submission that political integration is a long-term vision and that there is no express mention of the concept in the Treaty, political commitment of member states will remain cold, include erasing the legitimacy of the bloc to intervene in political crises of member states, such as the Alliance of Sahel States controversy comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger which announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS (Ochieng, 2024). Thus, when the Preamble of the 1993 Revised Treaty advocated for the gradual consolidation of national sovereignties into the Community under the guidance of a collective political resolve, it aimed at advocating for political integration rather than mere political cohesion. The idea of pooling national sovereignties to the bloc indicates the call for political integration to achieve regional economic goals. Thus, while Yansane (1977) argue that ECOWAS is not the answer for West African economic integration, we insist that through strong political commitment and long-term legitimacy to political integration, ECOWAS could be a viable answer for economic integration in West Africa.

4.2. Rule of law and due process

Selective policy implementation was observed as the ECOWAS's best practice in terms of integration policy implementation, rule of law and due process. ECOWAS member states selectively implement policies and the judgments of the Community Court that suit them. The implication is the erosion of the practice of the rule of law and democratic processes. Any due process can be terminated by any organ of the bloc with little or no consequence. Selective implementation is deeply rooted in ECOWAS processes and practices. Political leaders conscientiously enforce unpopular policies while refusing to carry out other measures that the Community welcomes (O'Brien & Li, 1999). They make extra efforts to urge community members to pay their taxes and fees, and to comply with their directives, yet ignore or distort policies that ban unauthorized appropriation and the required respect for the people's rights and interests. For example, Obiezu (2024) argued that the Alliance of Sahel States accused ECOWAS of abandoning its founding ideals and pandering to foreign powers, including ECOWAS imposing illegitimate, inhumane, and premature sanctions against them after their armed forces seized power. This corroborates Sendarin's (2022) submission regarding the whereabouts of ECOWAS when the Malian leadership was involved in the abuse of the nation's constitutions which led to the coup. After the coup, suddenly ECOWAS woke up from slumber. The bloc selectively implemented policies, rule of law and due process.

4.3. Compatibility of regional vs national interests

Driving regional integration is the assumption that the benefits of integration are worth the cost which includes economic growth, increased trade, greater visibility and weight internationally, better ability to compete internationally, maximizing the benefits of globalization, and stimulating development in least-developed countries. This necessitates sovereignty bargains in which integrating members voluntarily accept certain limitations in exchange for benefits (Mattli, 2000). However, Kayizzi-Mugerwa et al. (2014) argued that, while African governments have repeatedly committed themselves to the pursuit of regional economic integration, national priorities regularly trump regional ones, as a result, progress in implementing some of the commitments has often been challenging, if not outright impossible. In other words, the promotion of regional integration benefits instead of national interest-driven actions against the spirit of integration is a key policy area which increases the preference compatibility of member states. Preference incompatibility poses the threat of difficulty in the harmonization of preferences to garner the required commitments. Hence, Zanaku (2022) opine that establishing a bloc-based political integration mechanism is dicey because political ideologies differ from Member State to Member State. Therefore, the compatibility of regional vs national interests must be a priority.

4.4. Elimination of religious intolerance

Religious tolerance is the ability to appreciate and accept religious values, beliefs, and practices that are different from one's own. This is supported by instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948; the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 November 1981 through Resolution No. 36/55; among others. Thus, religious intolerance is a serious deviation from the legitimate exercise of the human right to religious freedom, and it has served as nourishment for other forms of prejudice, discrimination, persecution, and even armed war (Hogemann & Tavares, 2021). Religion and politics are inseparable in West Africa, and political violence in the region is directly related to religious affiliation (Offuya, 2022; Sendarin, 2022; Zanaku, 2022). Over the years, religious intolerance has exacerbated political instability and intensified insecurity. Political instability is directly connected to religious intolerance and engenders insecurity. Political stability in member states affects their political commitment to the bloc including the demand for legitimacy. However, religious tolerance enhances political stability reduces insecurity and promotes regional stability. Therefore, efforts targeted at religious tolerance are efforts in the right direction to deepen regional political commitment and long-term legitimacy.

4.5. Social justice

The concept of social justice is concerned with not just the freedom to decide who to be, what to do and to live (Rawls, 1971). Everyone should have equal access to opportunities, rights, and responsibilities, regardless of their differences in beliefs, behaviour, or physical traits. However, prevalent in West Africa is the belief in the freedom to choose to become a terrorist or kidnapper as a means of livelihood. Boreham (2022) opined that kidnapping for example, is used not only as a political means or to finance illegal activities, but increasingly also for monetary gain, hence the emergence of the 'kidnapping for business' concept where hostages are recognized for their market value. Crenshaw (1981), Pilat (2009) and Elu and Gregory (2015) associate the causes of terrorism, especially in West Africa with poverty, persecution, lack of human rights, oppression, occupation, and ideologies, such as secular beliefs, and religious and ethnic discrimination, among others. Thus, ECOWAS must ensure that the people have the enabling environment to make the right choices.

The key policy areas to deepen political commitment to long-term legitimacy have been suggested in this section. These include the idea of pooling national sovereignties and relinquishing part of the national power to the regional body; embracing of rule of law and due processes; elimination of religious intolerance and cooperating with the elected leaders from other religions; and promotion of social justice - the freedom to decide who to be, what to do and to live (Rawls, 1971) and equal access to opportunities, rights, and responsibilities, regardless of their differences in beliefs, behaviour, or physical traits. These policy options rhyme with the elements of postfunctionalism in creating a legitimate regional organization, such as public opinion and the will of the people, democratic mass politics and respect for democratic institutions and processes.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

In recent years, West Africa has seen increased regional cooperation and integration, with ECOWAS working towards economic and political stability. This study aimed to address the persistent integration problem to achieving 'ECOWAS of people' which demands consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy. The study argued that the key policy areas to enable consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy to facilitate an integrated community of people, living in a peaceful and prosperous region must be guided by the nonsituational concept of political commitment as well as take a normative legitimacy pathway to the practice of political integration in line with the ECOWAS Treaty Preamble. This argument is also congruent with the theory of neofunctionalism especially the aspect of democratic mass politics. The ideal political integration for ECOWAS is established in the Treaty's Preamble which states that ECOWAS integration demands a partial and gradual pooling of national sovereignties of Member States to the Community. However, the key hindrance to the ideal political integration for ECOWAS is the absence of consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy evidenced through internal democratic deficit; religion, politics and insecurity nexus; information and awareness gap; and the existence of treaty/protocol-based institutional weaknesses.

The key policy areas to deepen political commitment and long-term legitimacy in the West African integration include the promotion of political integration, rule of law and due process, compatibility of regional vs national interests, religious tolerance, and social justice. ECOWAS policymakers must embrace the awareness that political integration is embedded in the 1993 Revised Treaty. Also, voiding selective implementation of policies which has emerged in ECOWAS is critical because political leaders conscientiously enforce unpopular policies while refusing to carry out other measures that the Community welcomes. Since preference incompatibility poses a threat of difficulty in the harmonization of preferences, the compatibility of regional vs national interests must be a priority, promotion of regional integration instead of national interest-driven actions will strengthen the commitments of member states. Further, religion and politics are inseparable in West Africa, and political violence is directly related to religious affiliation. Thus, efforts aimed to achieve religious tolerance in West Africa are efforts in the right direction. And, promoting social justice, ECOWAS must ensure that the people have the enabling environment to make the right choices. Therefore, ECOWAS cannot be fighting politically and cooperates economically and must therefore work to ensure a robust sub-regional political union to achieve

meaningful economic integration, peace and prosperity through consistent political commitment and long-term legitimacy. However, the quantitative approach to examine the impact of selective implementation of policies *vis-a-vis* political commitment and long-term legitimacy in Africa is an area for further studies.

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