

REGIONAL COOPERATION ON DEMOCRATIZATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA

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While the African Union (AU) is leading overarching efforts to establish continent-wide norms for acceptable political conduct, regional institutions are also contributing substantially to democratization and peacebuilding in their neighborhoods. Bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been actively managing conflicts and preventing movement toward authoritarianism. However, country-level commitment to democratic governance remains uneven and inconsistent. Addressing the region's security and governance challenges calls for further integration and cooperation, which will require significant resources and new notions of sovereignty with responsibility.

Regional Initiatives

- The AU wields considerable normative power in advocating constitutionalism, democracy, and the rule of law. Its involvement has provided legitimacy to successful efforts to reverse unconstitutional changes in government in various states.
- Yet most interventions aimed at resolving conflicts and/or restoring democracy are led by regional economic communities (RECs), which can muster greater resources and draw upon local expertise.
- Among the RECs, ECOWAS has been the most effective, with Nigeria serving as a strong anchor and advocate for democratization and peacekeeping. ECOWAS has intervened against, sanctioned, or condemned actions taken by most of its member states over the past two decades. It has organized peaceful resolutions and restored constitutional governments in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Gambia, among others.
- Although other bodies, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the East African Community (EAC), have also organized collective stabilization efforts and sought to advance democratic governance, they have been less successful.

Continued Obstacles

- Apart from ECOWAS, regional bodies often lack strong champions for democratic norms. Both SADC and EAC tolerate authoritarian members and have witnessed the erosion of democracy in potential anchor states like South Africa and Kenya.
- Regional institutions are unable to fulfill their core mandates largely because they are underfunded by global standards and tend to lack common identities or shared values.
- Little cooperation among the RECs occurs. Several of them, such as the Arab Maghreb Union and the Economic Community of Central African States, show minimal interest in democratization or peacebuilding.
- In most African regions where states face long-running conflicts and politicians are fearful of relinquishing sovereignty, progress toward integration and multilateralism remains limited.
- Enduring solutions to Africa's security and political problems will require placing regional institutions at the center of stabilization efforts. But they cannot play a leading role without further buy-in from individual states and renewed international engagement.
- In addition to infrastructure development, trade facilitation, and peacekeeping, external actors need to invest in ideas, activities, and programs that foster linkages among African states.

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