



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The West African junta has rounded off the establishment of a bloc of disruptive states with the support of Russia



The 3 West African countries (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) have withdrawn from the ECOWAS regional economic community, thus rounding off their mini-alliance based on the military administrations of coup regimes.

In 1975, all 3 were founders of the ECOWAS bloc - an economic union of 15 West African states - which provided them with an open economic space, free trade, and visa-free travel.

Leaving the bloc they have been a part of since its establishment almost 50 years ago, has been the reaction of the juntas in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to the economic sanctions imposed on them by the remaining members of the bloc immediately after military coups in each of the 3 "renegade" states.

The military regimes in the 3 states joined a strong bloc in response to pressure from their neighbours to restore democratic order.

"From now on, we say, whether you're from Mali, Niger or Burkina, we have the same destiny. We're going in together. It is up to us to take control of our destiny", **said** Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, Burkina Faso PM, during one of his frequent meetings with his partners from Mali and Niger last December.

Expected decision

The withdrawal from the regional economic bloc is not an unexpected decision of the military juntas in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Each of them was subject to ECOWAS sanctions after military coups - Mali in 2020 and 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger last July.

The West African Economic Union, with a population of about 300 million, tried to restore democratic order in each of its member states through economic pressures.

Niger was also exposed to the military intervention of its neighbours in the region, who deployed forces on its borders.

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However, the 3 military juntas have been resisting pressure, abandoning regional partnerships and turning to each other. The collective withdrawal from ECOWAS was the last step in rounding off the political-security self-isolation of the 3 states under the leadership of the juntas.

They have been working on establishing a political and monetary union, leaving the 8-member West African Monetary Union, which uses the West African Franc, a currency pegged to the euro.

The basis of their cooperation is within the Alliance of Sahel States, as they call themselves, and their primary aim is defence against external attacks, on which they signed an agreement last September.

Submission to a friendly foreign power

The withdrawal from the regional economic alliance will affect the 3 renegade member countries the most. As landlocked countries they will face even greater issues for their otherwise weak economies outside the free trade zone.

However, their determination to free themselves from the **influence** of "foreign powers" prevailed, for which they criticised their former partners in ECOWAS.

All 3 junta-lead countries, which celebrated the departure of French troops, have completely surrendered to the strong influence of a foreign power friendly to them - Russia.

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Given the speed with which Russia has been filling the security, political and economic vacuum in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, there is little reason to doubt that its influence inspired military coups in those countries as well.

The systematic way in which the 3 West African countries have been working to strengthen mutual ties while at the same time tearing existing ones with other countries in the region indicated that the engineering for this complex process was imported.

There is enough symbolism in the fact that just 2 days before the announcement of the decision to leave ECOWAS, 25,000 tonnes of grain from Russia arrived in Burkina Faso. It is just one of the free deliveries with which Moscow helped its significant African partners when they were in trouble.

Russian "grain diplomacy" did not ask for money for grain deliveries in the three West African countries. Russia also delivered grain to the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, Somalia and Eritrea.

Russia invests mercenaries in West Africa

Security agreements and economic deals, primarily regarding the exploitation and processing of raw materials, are what Moscow offers (and receives) from the juntas in West Africa.

Niger is the last member of the 3 West African countries to sign a military cooperation agreement with Russia 2 weeks ago, which includes military instructors on the ground. Previously, Mali and Burkina Faso concluded similar agreements with Russia.

At the same time as Russia's military "assistance" to the juntas in West Africa, Russian economic operations in the region have been increasing, almost exclusively related to the exploitation of rare metals and energy projects.



Russian investment is not economic but exclusively security through the deployment of mercenaries from state-controlled paramilitary structures as combat support to the juntas

Last November, the military government of Mali concluded an **agreement** with Russia on the construction of a gold refinery with a capacity of 200 tonnes per year, and last October, the junta in Burkina Faso signed an agreement with Rosatom on the construction of a nuclear power plant.

With the withdrawal from ECOWAS, and the simultaneous entry of Russian paramilitaries and contracts on the exploitation of raw materials, Russia and 3 military juntas in West Africa have finished establishing a block of states, which became a new disruptive factor in the region.

This block will spread instability in the broader region, first because of internal instability and the suspension of democracy and then because of the conflicting relationship with the closest environment.

With its overall activities, Russia has been encouraging this development and the maintenance of the crisis regime as a new zone of confrontation with the West and its influence in Africa.

Its investment is not economic or developmental but exclusively security through the deployment of mercenaries from state-controlled paramilitary structures as combat support to the juntas, which it charges either with money or access to lucrative jobs.

One such contingent of about 100 **arrived last week** in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, as friendly support to the local military regime.