



DISCUSSION PAPER

# Unravelling African Dynamics: Coups, Sanctions, and the UN Nexus

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**PUBLISHER**

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

*November 2023*

**TRT WORLD İSTANBUL**

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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## Introduction

**N**iger and Gabon are the latest African countries to suffer a series of coups in recent years. On 26 July, the military overthrew the government of Niger, detaining the President Mohamed Bazoum (Yabi, 2023). Shortly afterwards, on 30 August, the armed forces ousted Gabon's President Ali Bongo and took control of the state (Obangome, 2023). Other African countries, including Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, have recently experienced similar situations where military leaders toppled governments, further undermining democracy on the continent.

These putsches drew immediate attention, triggering worldwide condemnation while regional and international organisations have imposed sanctions. In Africa, sanctions are among the preferred mechanisms of regional organisations against unconstitutional regime changes. The UN, on the other hand, predominantly imposes sanctions in Africa to get desired responses to conflicts. Exploring these African dynamics provides valuable insights into how to implement effective sanctions.

The UN and African regional organisations have a complementary relationship, under which the UN supports regional organisations in addressing

local conflicts before escalating the issue to the UN. Within this complementary relationship, in Africa, African regional organisations' sanctions usually precede the UN's sanctions (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1380). Moreover, African regional organisations usually impose more sanctions in Africa than the UN does. This dynamic increases sanctions effectiveness by enabling quick signalling, preventing sanctions evasion, drawing public attention, and overcoming the obstacle arising from the UN Security Council's veto system. Different objectives of sanctions across all organisations also increase sanctions effectiveness by allowing the problem to be addressed from different angles.

Nevertheless, within the complementary relationship, the requirement of the UN authorisation to impose sanctions should be carefully redesigned to prevent damaging sanctions' effectiveness. Accordingly, the UN can set clear rules allowing regional organisations to sanction without the UN's backing while requiring approval for the remaining sanctions regimes. Finally, to increase sanctions' effectiveness, a higher harmonisation is paramount for more effectual implementation rates, and coordination should be improved to overcome the institutional illegitimacy of the UN, ensure human rights protection, and tackle the regional power dynamics.

## A Complementary Relationship

The UN and African regional organisations have a complementary relationship with the goal of maintaining peace and security. The UN, recognising the role of regional organisations in reaching that goal (UN Charter art. 52, para. 1), endorses their role in solving local problems before referring them to the UN (UN Charter art. 53, para. 3). The UN also recognises that regional organisations may take enforcement actions with the authorisation of the UN (UN Charter art. 53). However, the UN stresses the importance of being fully informed about all activities regarding maintenance of international peace and security (UN Charter art. 54).

Such a complementary relationship, which gives the regional organisations room for manoeuvre to act, is beneficial. The UN and the African regional organisations have weak spots, and their flaws must be compensated when dealing with certain issues. African regional organisations compensate for the UN's slow processes and the veto power of permanent members that might prevent the UN from acting swiftly. The UN, on the other

hand, compensates for African regional organisations' implementation struggle. To that end, the UN provides its institutional capacity, such as peacebuilding missions, to benefit African regional organisations.

The complementary relationship is important in addressing coups and conflicts in Africa. Coups and conflicts affect the African continent. Thus, the UN and African regional organisations make efforts to address them. Since 1950, Africa has experienced more than a hundred successful coups (Powell & Clayton, 2011), giving the continent an ill-famed lead compared to other continents. Additionally, the continent is the scene of numerous protracted conflicts, exemplified by situations in Sudan, Mali, and the Central African Republic. In addressing these crises, sanctions have emerged as a primary tool of choice. The complementary relationship led African regional organisations to impose sanctions sometimes before the UN, more than the UN, in coordination with the UN, and even without the UN. This varied course of action has a major impact on the effectiveness of sanctions.



African Summit. (State House of Kenya - Anadolu Agency)

## Sanctions' Effectiveness

African regional organisations, notably ECOWAS and the African Union, are usually the first to impose sanctions quickly on an African state in case of a coup or conflict. The UN sanctions, if imposed, follow these organisations' lead. According to the data collected by the UN Targeted Sanctions Consortium (TSC), 29 of the 43 African sanctions episodes occurred in a context with a prior regional sanction regime in place (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1380). Regional organisations' decision-making process for implementing sanctions is quicker and easier than the UN's. To impose sanctions, the UN needs a decision by the UN Security Council which can only be passed in the absence of a veto from any of its permanent members. Conversely, the process is automatic for the African Union (AU). The AU suspends swiftly any member governments that come to power via unconstitutional means (African Union, 2000, art. 30).

Taking a more proactive approach, regional organisations impose sanctions first and impose them on a greater number of African countries than the UN. For instance, only 4 out of 15 African Union sanctions have been accompanied by the UN sanctions (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1376, Table 2). Similarly, only 3 out of 8 ECOWAS sanctions have been accompanied by UN sanctions (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1376, Table 3). This is because, as the UN Security Council also acknowledges, regional organisations, with their knowledge of the region, are well placed to understand the root causes of issues (UN Security Council, 2021). Moreover, they are more focused on solving regional problems.

The swiftness of sanctions by African regional organisations compensates for the UN's ineffectual processes. Sanctions are most effective in signalling and constraining and less effective when it comes to coercion.<sup>1</sup> The measurement of sanctions' success using the TSC data suggests that the effectiveness of sanctions is 10% when the purpose is to coerce and 27% each when the purpose is to constrain or signal (Brzoska, 2013). However, even though the sanctions' overall success rate is low, many determinants increase their effectiveness. The swift imposition of sanctions by regional organisations is one of them. This is because swift imposition is an assertive act that demonstrates unequivocally that certain acts are not tolerated. Moreover, acting swiftly also prevents the target state from evading the measures.

Moreover, the rapid imposition of sanctions before the UN can act and the involvement of regional organisations draw immediate public attention, fostering a heightened collective response against the targeted nation. In the case of Guinea-Bissau, for instance, ECOWAS was heavily involved in the negotiations of resolutions that resulted in the approval of the UN sanctions (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1342). Drawing attention and mobilising collective response increases the likelihood of sanctions implementation and, thus, the effectiveness of sanctions. For example, local arms manufacturers are probably less likely to support a national arms embargo than a UN arms embargo that forbids rivals from supplying weapons to the sanctioned state (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1341). The data suggests that the average effectiveness rates across all three dimensions for the 56 episodes with integrated sanction regimes are slightly higher than the average rates for the entire TSC dataset (Brzoska, 2015). There are even higher success rates for coercion and signalling in the eleven instances of UN sanctions where ECOWAS sanctions were also implemented (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1348). In these cases, however, it is difficult to isolate the impact of other factors, such as military intervention or peacebuilding tasks, in determining effectiveness (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1348).

Finally, imposing sanctions more than the UN or, in cases when the UN cannot impose sanctions due to a permanent member's veto, increases the sanctions' effectiveness. This is because such an alternative sanctions regime to the UN ensures that there is at least a sanctions regime in effect. In addition, regional organisation sanctions ensure that, if needed, there is a broader range of sanctions than that of the UN. Usually, the UN sanctions are the minimum set of provisions that key members of the UN Security Council can agree on (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1343). Even though both ECOWAS and the AU barely impose additional sanctions (Brozoska, 2015, p. 1348), having such discretion by regional organisations gives leverage that can be beneficial for increasing sanctions' effectiveness if needed.

<sup>1</sup> Signalling is to show discontent towards a target's certain policies, and a sender's willingness to act further. Constraining is to prevent a target state from accessing the resources necessary for engaging in certain activities. Finally, coercing is to change a target's behaviour.

## Different but Reinforcing Objectives

In Africa, sanctions have three main objectives: addressing conflicts, promoting human rights, and responding to unconstitutional government change. The UN primarily focuses on maintaining international peace and security and, therefore, addressing African conflicts. To that end, the UN applies sanctions and supports them with peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and peace-making operations. On the other hand, African regional organisations have predominantly imposed sanctions in response to the unconstitutional toppling of governments (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1381).

These seemingly distinct but mutually reinforcing objectives help to approach the problems from different angles, thereby increasing the effectiveness of sanctions. While on paper, the UN's and African regional organisations' objectives may seem distinct, it is a fact that unconstitutional regime changes often result in heightened violence, posing a substantial threat to peace and security. As a result, sanctions by African regional organisations targeting unconstitutional regime changes contribute to addressing the root cause of conflicts in support of the sanctions of the UN-imposed for ceasing conflicts. That contribution is worth attention. Due to the AU's firm no-coups policy, for almost twenty years, coups have become rarer in Africa ("The African Union is Less Effective", 2022). Africa had 2.2 coups on average between

1960 and 1989, and that number fell to 1.6 in the 1990s and 0.8 between 2000 and 2019 (Atta-Asamoah, 2022). Such a decrease in coups would inevitably decrease the conflicts in the continent. Moreover, within the complementary relationship with the UN, regional organisations played a significant role in showing the UN such a correlation (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1385) and led the UN to act in favour of this correlation, increasing effectiveness. The UN sanctions on Guinea derive from such efforts (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1381).

Regional organisations' sanctions targeting unconstitutional changes also increase sanctions' effectiveness by filling the gap left by the UN sanctions. The UN is usually reluctant to formulate the objectives of sanctions in a way that could be perceived as prioritising democracy over any form of governance. Consequently, the UN sanctions on African countries exceptionally set democratisation as the primary objective. The result is a weak focus on other root causes of regional conflict. As they address democratisation, regional organisations take the role of upholding democratic governance. Doing so increases the chances of overall sanction implementation by addressing an important issue that fuels conflicts. Moreover, they prevent the UN from facing a backlash for prioritising one form of governance over another.



Gabonese soldiers announce they have seized power. (Gabon National Television - Anadolu Agency)

## UN Authorisation: Pros and Cons

Sanctions are enforcement actions. Therefore, theoretically, regional organisations need authorisation from the UN. In practice, most of the time, regional organisations do not secure authorisation. For example, ECOWAS often failed to secure the UN's authorisation, and still, the UN Security Council did not condemn it for that (Szasz, 1998, p. 458). This signals the UN's acceptance of unauthorised sanctions in cases in which members of regional organisations agree to be sanctioned if they act against the organisation's constitution.

However, the absence of such authorisation has risks that may determine the sanctions' effectiveness. The lack of an international endorsement by the UN can decrease the legitimacy of a regional organisation's sanctions in the eyes of the non-members of such regional organisations. Moreover, UN authorisation may help coordinate sanctions, and the lack of such an endorsement may harm coordination and, therefore, sanctions' effectiveness. The UN's authorisation may also increase the support for sanctions, positively contributing to sanctions' effectiveness.

However, getting the UN's authorisation may be challenging because permanent members hold veto power. That is why strictly seeking the UN's authorisation

would risk imposing or sustaining sanctions and would lower sanctions' effectiveness. In fact, in the case of Africa, the permanent members' veto power does not seem like a particular issue of concern. Because even during the Cold War, when the UN Security Council was unable to function, the only sanctions regimes imposed by the UN were against countries on the African continent (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1369). Nevertheless, the cost of not imposing sanctions is greater in terms of effectiveness than imposing sanctions without the UN authorisation in cases where a member of a regional organisation has previously agreed to be sanctioned under certain circumstances. This is because the former is an obstacle before having a sanction regime, whereas the latter ensures that there is at least a sanctions regime.

The solution is for the UN to have a clear set of rules specifying the conditions under which sanctioning without authorisation is permitted. The UN may have a traffic light system for sanctions and authorisation. Under this system, it can give the green light to sanction a regional organisation's member without the UN authorisation while requiring pre or post-facto authorisation for the remaining sanctions. In this way, the UN can ensure effectiveness while not unnecessarily blocking, imposing, or sustaining sanctions.



(TUR Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar - Anadolu Agency)

## Harmonisation and Coordination

There is a certain level of harmonisation and coordination between the UN and African regional organisations, but increasing this would further enhance the effectiveness of sanctions. First, harmonisation between the sanctions of the UN and the African regional organisations can increase implementation rates. African regional organisations like ECOWAS have low sanctions implementation rates (Wenzel & Faltas, 2019). This is an example of the persistent implementation issue throughout the continent. Harmonisation can increase implementation by using the UN's institutional capacity and the regional organisations' regional capacity. Carisch and Rickard-Martin (2011) state that harmonisation between the UN and AU sanctions is likely to increase sanctions compliance in some cases, positively contributing to sanctions' effectiveness.

Second, coordination helps to deal with the institutional illegitimacy of the UN, further contributing to sanctions' effectiveness. Some states consider it unfair and even illegitimate that, despite their non-participation in UN sanctions decision-making processes, they are the most affected by these decisions. Such states may, therefore, be less likely to take part in the imposition of sanctions (UN Sanctions, 2013, p. 16). Coordinating with the regional organisations, therefore taking regional members', or such states', support and involving them in the decision-making process, will likely increase implementation and sanctions' effectiveness. The UN, being aware of that, cited the measures applied by the ECOWAS while imposing an arms embargo, a petroleum ban, and a travel ban against the coup leaders in Sierra Leone (Charron & Portela, 2015, p. 1383).

Coordination also helps with ensuring human rights protection. Sanctions strongly impact economic, social, and cultural rights (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 1997, para. 3). They usually lead to disruptions in food, pharmaceuticals, and healthcare supplies. Thus, over time, the UN has improved its sanction regimes and established some mechanisms, such as humanitarian exemptions, to ensure that sanctions do not violate people's rights. However, such measures still have limited capacity to protect people's rights. For example, humanitarian exemptions are usually ambiguous and applied arbitrarily and inconsistently (UN General Assembly, 1996, para. 128), and the review procedures are usually cumbersome (UN General Assembly, 1996). Nevertheless, the UN's oversight mechanism over its targeted sanctions, which has improved over time, provides a certain degree of protection.

African regional organisations differ in their sanction regimes and the impact of their regimes on human rights. While the African Union first suspends a member for six months (African Union, 2022) and then imposes limited and targeted sanctions, ECOWAS has a broader sanctions regime. As a response to the recent coup in Niger, for instance, ECOWAS suspended financial and commercial transactions with Niger (Bilquin & Pichon, 2023). Such blanket imposition of sanctions risks marginalising the authoritarian governments in the country, causing a high cost for civilians. In Mali, sanctions had a greater impact on the population than the coup (Maluleke & Bennett, 2022). African regional organisations' practice lacks the institutional willingness and capacity to address such an impact on civilians. To deal with such an impact, regional organisations can benefit from the UN's institutional know-how on sanctions oversight and targeted sanctions regime. In this way, they can increase sanctions' effectiveness by ensuring that the cost of sanctions does not exceed their benefit.

Finally, the coordination with the UN may help tackle the power dynamics of regional organisations that harm sanctions' effectiveness. In Africa, fragile democracies with strong military involvement form regional organisations (Maluleke & Bennett, 2022). Within these organisations, undemocratic leaders find themselves in decision-making positions. Moreover, as African regional organisations lack resources to tackle the continent's chronic military power grab and conflict-prone environment, they usually find themselves in positions of compromise to maintain the needed resources. Chad is a prominent example in that sense. When the late dictator of Chad, Idriss Déby's son, took over after his father passed away last year, AU decided not to suspend Chad. This is because Chad's former foreign minister, Moussa Faki, had an important role in the AU's Commission, and Chad's army has a prominent role in the fight against terrorists in the Sahel ("The African Union is less effective", 2022). That shows that African regional organisations do not always take positions which increase sanctions effectiveness through consistent practices or strong implementation rates. Coordination with the UN can help overcome such inconsistencies to the benefit of sanctions' effectiveness.

## Conclusion

Coups and conflicts are an African reality, as do imposing sanctions to address them. The UN and the African regional organisations are the key players in the continent to impose sanctions. Their sanctions are partially effective at an individual level, especially for signalling and constraining targets. However, in most cases, sanctions are imposed collectively, and the particularities of the complementary relationship between the UN and the African regional organisations determine the sanctions' effectiveness. This is mostly because such a relationship helps to compensate for each organisation's weaknesses, including the UN's decision-making and African regional organisations' implementation struggle.

As a result of the complementary relationship between the UN and African regional organisations, the African regional organisations usually impose sanctions before the UN and more than the UN. Imposing sanctions before the UN positively contributes to sanctions' effectiveness by sending a quick signal, preventing sanctions evasion, and drawing immediate public attention. Imposing sanctions more than the UN also increases sanctions effectiveness by compensating for the UN's vetoed sanctions. Similarly, different objectives of sanctions positively contribute to sanctions effectiveness by approaching the problems from different angles and endorsing each objective.

Lack of authorisation from the UN is a double-edged sword, which should be carefully regulated to prevent negatively impacting sanctions' effectiveness. In theory, regional organisations' sanctions require authorisation of the UN, but in practice, the UN does not seek authorisation. On the one hand, the lack of authorisation from the UN can decrease the legitimacy of a regional organisation's sanction. On the other hand, getting the UN's authorisation can be challenging due to the veto power. To tackle that, the UN can allow regional organisation sanctions without authorisation and may require pre or post-facto authorisation for the remaining sanctions.

Finally, harmonisation and coordination are necessary to increase sanctions' effectiveness, as the African case proves. Harmonisation can increase implementation rates, whereas coordination can help deal with the institutional illegitimacy of the UN, ensuring human rights protection and tackling the power dynamics of regional organisations, all positively contributing to sanctions' effectiveness.



Trade between Niger and Benin is diverted down the river due to sanctions. (Balima Boureima - Anadolu Agency)

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