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Transcript

Democracy in the Context of Regional Integration in West Africa: Status, Challenges and Perspectives

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Introduction:

Hon Chairman, Ambassador Bob Dewar, Former British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Permanent Representative to ECOWAS, and Chair for the Occasion; distinguished democracy and security analysts; respected Africanists; distinguished friends of Africa; friends, ladies and gentlemen.

I consider it a singular honour to have been invited today by Chatham House to address this august forum. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which I represent, is a regional organisation which has, over the years, gained your attention only for the unfortunate reasons of state implosion and instability caused by bad governance and marginalisation. I therefore welcome the opportunity to throw further light on its objectives, challenges, and achievements, which factors have effectively brought together fifteen West African states in the enterprise of improving upon the living standards of 230 million people as well as integrating them.

The term 'Chatham House Rule' is today an internationally-accepted cliché that this Institute has contributed to international diplomacy discourse, a reference norm in rigorous and policy-oriented exchanges on global peace and security. I therefore view your invitation to lead today's discourse about 'Democracy in the context of Regional Integration in West Africa' as an unique honour for me personally, and a recognition of ECOWAS as a leading brand in regional integration.

Ladies and gentlemen, the evolution of ECOWAS can only be properly understood against the backdrop of the fascinating history and circumstances of West Africa since establishing contact with the world beyond its borders. The fact that slavery, colonialism, as well as racial and economic marginalisation, had left an intrinsic yearning for freedom, unity and solidarity among peoples of African descent everywhere defines its wish to integrate its states and peoples.

It therefore came as no surprise that the first generation of leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, William Tubman, Leopold Senghor, and Modibo Keita, canvassed continental political unity and solidarity, perhaps unsurprisingly in the vision and oftentimes language of Pan-Africanists like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, George Padmore and other Diasporan leaders, who had led the intellectual rebellion against exploitation and marginalisation.

However, their political pressure in favour of continental unity, coupled with the uncanny resemblance of the Movement's language to that of scientific socialism, soon divided the front of West African leaders as to how the unity in Africa was to be achieved. The founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 thus provided the relief outlet for preserving peace, dialogue and unity, even if the call for immediate continental political union had to be relegated in the scheme of things.

At the same time, pervasive poverty, cold-war challenges and the parlousness of the international economy immediately after World War II, compelled the countries of West Africa to seek unity, security and strength through a less controversial process, i.e. by opting for the gradualists' the gradualists' economic development model. West Africa was soon to find even this approach also not altogether fulfilling under the OAU and had to begin the search thereafter for a more effective vehicle for pushing sub-regional development.

ECOWAS in the phase of integration without democracy:

ECOWAS was thus founded on 28 May 1975 by the Treaty of Lagos as a Regional Economic Community armed with a vision to create a single regional economic space in West Africa through integration and collective self-reliance; an economic space with a single market and single currency capable of generating accelerated socio-economic development and competing more meaningfully in the global market of large trade blocs and uneven patterns of trade.

However, the attempts at the time to address the issues of peace and security were limited and timid, as they were informed by the realities of Cold War politics and an international lack of political will. The first quarter of a century since independence was thus characterised by the experimentation of various forms of governance and ideology, with varying degrees of success. For example, Cote d'Ivoire was considered a bastion of western-style free market economy while some other States, such as Guinea, Ghana (under Nkrumah) and Benin, exhibited strong inclinations towards Marxism-Leninism.

Because political governance was left entirely to the designs of Member States, therefore, West Africa lacked the necessary political cohesiveness and environment that would allow ECOWAS to pursue its economic integration goals. In fact, ECOWAS matters were, at the time, handled by the

Ministries of Finance and Economic Planning of Member States specifically to ensure the non-politicisation of the economic agenda.

But, after a decade or so of its existence, there was the incremental realisation that the ECOWAS integration efforts had not made the desired impact on the lives of the populations as hoped for. The region, just like the rest of Africa, was characterised by military, dictatorial or autocratic regimes presiding over galloping inflation, a population bulge and underdevelopment, amidst disastrous experimentations with the Bretton-Woods institutions. Little wonder then that the 1970s and 1980s were appropriately described as the *Lost Decades*. The objective of creating a single market with a single currency became an elusive target. On the political front, all the governance experiments had come to grief by the end of the 1980s, due to endogenous as well as exogenous factors.

Perhaps, the only notable success for the region, that is after the founding of ECOWAS in 1975, was the adoption of the Protocol on Free Movement in 1976, by which the ECOWAS region became, and remains, the only region in Africa that guaranteed visa-free travel across national boundaries, and the right of settlement for citizens in any member state. That was the inauspicious beginning of the Economic Community of West African States.

Ladies and gentlemen, against this intriguing background of the emergence of ECOWAS, my intention today is to share with you my views and those of ECOWAS on the problematic of the democratisation process in West Africa, especially:

- Why ECOWAS, with economic integration as its core agenda, had to enact its Constitutional Convergence Principles by which all persons or groups seeking power in the region must present themselves to the electorate in an environment governed by constitutional and electoral instruments that guarantee internationally acceptable levels of transparency; fairness; credibility; freedom of association and speech; popular participation; and democratically-controlled security forces.
- Highlight the efforts by ECOWAS to encourage and enforce the application of these shared values, and to what effect.
- Share our challenges and perspectives on Democracy and Integration.

Injecting peace and security into the integration agenda:

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, as you are aware, the end of the Cold War, which was followed by negative global economic trends, coincided with increased resistance to dictatorship and bad governance. Military and autocratic governments in West Africa had become corrupt, dictatorial and bereft of new governance ideas, as some turned on themselves and their citizens. Internal pressures from populations increased, forcing the pace of democratization in a number of Member States, with contrasting outcomes. In countries with the most fragile institutions and characterised by extreme marginalisation, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau, debilitating civil wars broke out with dire spill-over consequences.

ECOWAS had to respond quickly and with urgency, often militarily, to halt the slide of the region into anarchy, and to salvage its own credibility. The experiences from its interventions, as well as mounting pressure from the populations, convinced the Organisation to go further, by adopting and applying normative and institutional frameworks to support the aspirations of the peoples based on new shared values of democracy, the rule of law, human rights and market economy.

First, the Authority of Heads of State and Government directed the transfer of responsibility for ECOWAS affairs to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Regional Integration. Secondly, they created a politico-military framework (the Standing Mediation Committee and the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group or ECOMOG) in 1990 to spearhead interventions to end the civil wars in the region. Next, it had to take a common stance on political governance. These three measures were instrumental in allowing the Organisation to assume the dynamic posture it projects today.

The choice of democracy as a necessary precondition for successful integration and economic development was also determined by our experiences as outlined above. Democracy was not a panacea, but a necessary choice for the transition to normalcy. After all, as Sir Winston Churchill said in 1947:

‘Many forms of government have been tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’

We made a conscious choice with the genuine belief that while even the most credible elections may not produce good leaders, at least they offer the electorate the opportunity to remove bad ones. ECOWAS, therefore, encouraged Member States to interrogate and refocus their style of governance.

Adoption of appropriate normative instruments:

Mr Chairperson, Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, as a first step in the move to revamp the Organisation's normative instruments, the Authority of ECOWAS issued the *Declaration on Political Principles in 1991* to reaffirm the Community's commitment to democracy and the free market, while in 1993, in a bid to achieve uniformity on their path to integration, they revised the *ECOWAS Treaty* to confer supranational status on the Organisation. In December 1999, the Authority enacted another instrument that was to guide the construction of its peace and security architecture - the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (or the Mechanism). Indeed, this inspired the adoption of a similar Mechanism by the African Union several years later. This was followed two years later by the adoption of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

Article 25 of the Mechanism clearly stipulates the conditions under which it could be applied, including: a) in the case of internal conflict that threatens to trigger a humanitarian disaster, or that poses a serious threat to peace and security in the region; b) in the event of serious and massive violation of human rights and the rule of law, or an overthrow or attempted overthrow of a democratically elected government; and c) any other situation as may be decided by the Mediation and Security Council.

On its part, the Supplementary Protocol sets minimum constitutional convergence criteria for ECOWAS membership based on shared values of democracy and free market, separation of powers, popular participation, the democratic control of the armed forces, guarantees of basic freedoms and, particularly, 'zero tolerance' for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means.

Since their adoption, the two key protocols have guided the actions and interactions of Member-States. ECOWAS has been able to progressively and incrementally pacify the region and promote democratic governance. By applying the policy of 'Zero Tolerance' to power obtained or maintained by

unconstitutional means, ECOWAS, put enormous pressure on wayward regimes to change their ways through a combination of sanctions and preventive diplomacy. In the past three years, under the new dispensation, ECOWAS has suspended the membership of three member states – Guinea, Niger and Cote d'Ivoire - for violating the Protocol. With the cooperation of the African Union and the United Nations, the Organisation has, by this means, succeeded in restoring constitutional order and legality in Guinea, Niger and Cote d'Ivoire. Similarly, the adherence to the constitutional convergence principles of ECOWAS with respect to democracy and good governance, yielded relatively peaceful, transparent and credible outcomes in the conduct of recent presidential elections in Guinea, Niger, Benin, and Nigeria. The aberration to this rule occurred in the post-electoral crisis witnessed in Cote d'Ivoire, which was eventually resolved thanks to the principled stance of the ECOWAS Authority and the concerted efforts of the international community.

We can be justifiably proud that today, due to our proactive preventive diplomacy, democratic culture is gradually taking root in the ECOWAS region, where all the current heads of state have either been democratically elected, or confirmed in their positions through elections, with various degrees of credibility. Significantly, incumbents have begun losing elections and accepting the results. It is a welcome start. Most importantly, perhaps, no active war is raging in our Community today. This benign situation is gradually translating into a more optimistic outlook, and West Africa is becoming a favoured destination for investors.

The impacts of democracy on the integration process:

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the ECOWAS region has begun to reap the benefits of our collective endeavours in terms of economic outlook and the consolidation of good governance and political stability. Time will not permit me to elaborate on all our achievements but it is worth, at this point, outlining some of them.

Despite the shocks of exogenous factors, including the on-going global financial, food and fuel crises, the economies of West Africa continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience, thanks to a combination of the relatively peaceful environment, prudent fiscal and macro-economic policies, and strong demand for the region's resources. In 2010, for example, the region achieved an estimated growth rate of 6.2 percent, and is projected to hit 6.5 percent this year. Even though these figures mask significant disparities between the states and remain below the minimum 7 percent economic

growth rate required for the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), they show an optimistic and upward trend.

The ECOWAS Community Program has continued to lay the foundations for the emergence of a veritable economic and financial Union. Progress continues to be made in the area of macro-economic convergence and the Road Map for the introduction of an ECOWAS Single Currency – the Eco – by 2020, is being followed meticulously.

Much has also been done in the domain of infrastructure development. The blueprints for the region's rail and road networks have been designed and funds are being mobilised, particularly from Asia, for their implementation. Today, it is possible to drive by road from the southern coastal city of Port Harcourt in Nigeria to Dakar (Senegal) in the extreme north-west of the region, although there are still a number of illegal roadblocks erected by corrupt law enforcement officials. Similar progress is visible in other areas, particularly in energy (the gas pipeline, electricity, renewable energy), and also in telecommunications, such as the roll-out of fibre-optic networks across the region.

Our Community is basically agrarian and rural. Consequently, the reduction of poverty and the development of the agricultural and rural sectors have become a non-negotiable priority area in the efforts to achieve an ECOWAS of peoples. In this regard, the adoption and implementation of the ECOWAS Common Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP) with sectoral programmes in 2009 and thereafter, constitutes a major milestone in the efforts to maximize the region's comparative advantage and ensuring food security.

Challenges and perspectives:

Despite the remarkable progress achieved in democratic governance, peace and security over the last two decades or so, the ECOWAS Commission itself is the first to admit that the security situation in the region continues to be characterized by fragility and unpredictability, and susceptible to reversals. Governance institutions also remain weak and greater efforts need to be applied, in collaboration with civil society and other partners, to deal with the structural factors of instability.

In this regard, efforts are in progress to scale up and to strengthen institutions, reform the security system to make it more responsive to democratic control and human rights; and ensure greater separation of powers, adherence to the rule of law and anti-corruption principles. The

mobilisation of civil society inputs into governance matters has also become even more unavoidable. Critical areas of intervention include the following:

An unacceptably high proportion of the region's population is illiterate and ignorant of democratic practices. While youth literacy rates (within the 15-24 age bracket) in the region is between 60 and 70 percent, the quantitative figures mask the quality deficiencies and gender/regional discrepancies in today's education. Adult illiteracy and innumeracy is even worse. Thus, many lack the skills to make informed choices in the democratic process and, therefore, vulnerable to manipulation.

Several West African States are still under the enormous influence of former colonial powers, whose global strategic agendas are foisted on member States, and who, at times, obstruct the democratic process by supporting undemocratic leaders against the choice of the populations.

The corrupting influences of money in politics, often encouraged and instigated, among others, by external partners, is becoming a worry. The slow growth of the economies in the region and the high level of unemployment even among graduates, have created a large pool of the disgruntled. Some undemocratic and corrupt leaders are also ready to use violence and intimidation to preserve their power. It has also been observed that poverty also makes the electorate susceptible to vote-buying.

The recent post-electoral crisis in Cote d'Ivoire illustrated a disturbing trend in the democratic transitions in Africa, whereby a particular generation of African leaders manipulate the constitutional and electoral instruments and organs to rig elections. Even after losing elections, they refuse to cede power and seek the support of the military or ideological partners to maintain themselves in power. Thus, even though voting may be free, the counting of votes become a determining factor. In the event, principles are sacrificed on the altar of blind solidarity and ideology. In the event, the African Union tradition of subsidiarity and comparative advantage is breached leading to crisis and, often, war.

While the increasing introduction of the electronic voting system in several countries is welcome, greater vigilance by the media, political parties, civil society and other watchdogs has become imperative; and long-term observation has become unavoidable. Consequently, concerted effort is called for to ensure transparent and equitable party financing, the independence and financial autonomy of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) and increased capacity for civil society.

Conclusion:

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. You will no doubt agree with me that despite the current global challenges, ECOWAS and the West Africa region have continued to make progress in several domains, not least in promoting democratic culture and creating the conditions for sustainable development and human security. Much more, nonetheless, remains to be done.

The already difficult challenges facing regions, such as West Africa, have been rendered even more daunting by the current global financial crisis, which has sharply reduced the quantum of assistance available to poor regions from the rich North. For example, ECOWAS is currently locked in protracted negotiations with the European Union over the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). The region refuses to cede ground with respect to critical areas, such as the attempts by our main trading partner to water down the developmental aspects of the draft EPA agreement, and the pressure from the EU side for ECOWAS to scrap its innovative Community Levy system, which contributes over 80 percent to the ECOWAS budget.

The hurdles ahead are daunting, but with commitment to good governance in politics and in the economy, coupled with determination, a strong sense of self-belief and self-reliance, we shall succeed. I thank you very much for your kind attention.

