TRANSCRIPT
Into Africa
“Breaking Up with ECOWAS”

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FEATURING
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Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I’m a Senior Fellow and the Director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything Africa, politics, economics, security and culture. Welcome.

On the 28th of January, the countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger released a joint statement announcing their exit from the Economic Community of West African States also known as ECOWAS. The statement alleged the West African bloc of being influenced by foreign powers, which is against the principles of its founding fathers, and their failure in tackling insurgency and insecurity in the region. On the other hand, ECOWAS states that it had not received any official information to that effect and is also monitoring current events.

ECOWAS is a regional political and economic union established on May 28, 1975. The bloc consists of 15 countries, among which, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger are founding members that first signed the treaty in 1975. Its main objective is to promote economic cooperation and development among member states in order to raise living standards.

According to Article 91 of the bloc’s revised treaty in regard to exiting, any member state that wishes to withdraw from the community must provide one year’s written notice to the executive secretary who will then inform the other member states. Also during the period, the member state shall continue to comply with the provisions and be bound by the obligations entrenched in the treaty.

Prior to the joint statement, the bloc had imposed sanction on the three countries due to military coups that occurred in Burkina Faso on September 30th, 2022, in Mali on May 24, 2021 and in Niger on July 26, 2023. The states have described the sanctions as illegal, illegitimate, inhumane and irresponsible. This development is shaking the region because it sends a message. It’s not clear what all the dimensions of that message are.

Joining me to discuss this development is General Saleh Bala who’s retired from the Nigerian military. He is currently a senior associate, non-resident with CSIS. He is the chief executive officer of White Ink Consult, a private defense and security research, strategic communication and training consultancy firm based in Abuja, Nigeria, and the founder of the White Ink Institute for Strategy Education and Research, also known as WISER in Abuja, Nigeria, an institute focusing on capacity building at executive and middle cadre levels on security governance, strategy and national security.
Retired general, Brigadier General Saleh Bala is a graduate of the International Peace Studies Program at the University for Peace in San Jose, Costa Rica and the National Defense University at the National War College in Washington, DC. He is a distinguished honor graduate of the US Special Forces Detachment Officers Qualification Course from the John F. Kennedy Center, United States Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. General Bala, welcome to Into Africa.

General Saleh Bala: Thank you very much indeed, Professor Mvemba. That was quite a very, very generous introduction. Thank you.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You know, anytime a man from the Special Forces shows up on this program, we got to give them their due. (Laughing) You know, we got to- got to give them due. So General, this development has caught people not so much by surprise because I think all of us who follow the region had seen a lot of the discontent that the countries of Burkina Faso, even starting with Guinea when the sanctions were first imposed on Guinea by ECOWAS, and then, we saw this in Mali. This also happened with Burkina Faso, but with Niger, it was particularly acrimonious. Why and how did we get to this point?

General Saleh Bala: That’s quite a- a huge bundle. However, I will make an attempt to take it from the perspective of my own understanding. I will like to speak to democracy and liberal democracy itself and how its nature and principles play out to the emerging democracies of Africa, particularly those of us that have had- that have had quite a quantum of history of military governance that if you meet an average African at this age up to 80, I want to assure you definitely that we are grown through a system that is military and we are adopted to a military- to a military culture. Yes, indeed, democracy is attractive and, in- in fact, is juicy and offers all the kinds of attraction there- that there would be. But the truth is with democracy, you need very, very focused visionary and committed leaders who will really lead for the benefit and for the sake of the people.

For most of these nations where we've had resumptions or emergence of military leaders, it is mostly for as much as more advanced democracies hardly can understand the context and the- and the social and political motivations of our very, very youthful communities, which include the coupists themselves are very, very youthful and, uh, they look forward to very progressive qualities like they see advanced in the Western liberal democracies.

So essentially, these are mostly the- the motivation and it is always common as a default- as a default, uh, position to kind of assume that these coups, uh, are- are not popular, that it is only when governments
are introduced through the ballot box, be it either through abuse or hijack, that a government is- is democratic. And we tend to think that the euphoria by which citizens come out to welcome the coupists is not a popular and indeed a very germane response to otherwise the failure of the civilian- uh, of the- of the civilian regimes.

So the response is always, uh, has been to ostracize and sanction these nations, and when you don’t engage, when you don’t engage for anybody fundamentally who has an opinion, the response is- is belligerence, the response is radical. The response is always hard- hard nosed and suddenly, this is the approach by the supra- uh, by the regional, supra re- regional and the global communities that have engaged otherwise these coupists and, uh, made- made them absolutely as belligerent as the- as they’ve become.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: So does this mean then that what has happened today is due to the friction between, on one level, the internal dynamics, you had the failure of democracy? So if I heard you right, democracy is juicy, is attractive, which it requires a certain type of leadership.

General Saleh Bala: Absolutely.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You describe it as visionary. So these are the people who say this is what we’ve agreed, this is the social contract, going to make sure that it happens and this is how we’re going to do it. Short of that, then you have public discontent on the part of the populations and so on, create tension in the country. This created space for the generals, the colonels or the captains to come in and do this. And then you said then there is a- a very radical response from the rest of the world. Is this what’s happening in the- in the Sahel and is that your assessment that this is where these countries have taken this course because exactly of that?

General Saleh Bala: Yeah, you’ve encapsulated all that I have said so far. There is the mantra to not to accept any kind of change of government that is considered in the Western liberal democratic philosophy as unconstitutional. Agreed. Yet we also speak in some terms that governance should be people responsive and should be- and should really be appointed by the people and respond to the people. And so whenever we have seen in contemporary history so far over the past few years where we’ve had coups, the response of the regional leaders, the sub-regional and the supra-regional leaders is to not to engage these new leaders in a very organized and very considerate diplomatic approach in order for them to be able to mediate and ensure and give an understanding to the motivations of why they took over. But as a general assumption that the military always wants to come back to power and that because the
military is subservient to civil authority, that these gentlemen who are actually citizens of their own nations can be treated like little boys and addressed as such.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:

So what is the role... In this case, countries signed the treaty to be members, in this case, the three countries, actually founding members, whether from nine- in 1975 when ECOWAS was launched. ECOWAS has a charter. What are the responsibility of leaders of different member state vis a vis that charter? And what in your view are the responsibility of the regional body, ECOWAS vis a vis those cou... 'Cause those countries have said in so many words, ECOWAS, you didn't help us when we're fighting the insurgency. You didn't help us when we're fighting these terrorists. You didn't help us with fighting security. Why are you harassing us? That's my interpretation of this. What is ECOWAS' response and where do you see this going?

General Saleh Bala:

Let us all remember the AU charter and the provisions that there is- that there is- uh, that there is in. Unless when there is conflict or there is a takeover of government, that is when you see the response of the heads of government. But one would ask how has the Early Warning mechanism been activated and operationalized? How has it been proven that- that there is a response by the heads of governments to Early Warning Advisory or even from bilateral- other bilateral or trilateral or whatever levels of other kinds of interaction has been where you see misgovernance by civil administrations? How many times have we had that the Council of the Wise, I repeat that the Council of the Wise which is empowered to intervene even in civil democracies to call to order civilian governments who are going astray and against the principles of democracy in their states? How many times has ECOWAS actually made statements and called to violations in election matters?

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:

How often has it happened at all?

General Saleh Bala:

Uh, severally, severally, this has- severally, these are- there are contestations, even today in Nigeria, there are- there were contestations over- over- over three presidential elections and several governorship elections, but since-

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:

Has EC- has ECOWAS intervened? Have they- the wi- the council of the wise-

General Saleh Bala:

Never.
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: And this, uh, protest?

General Saleh Bala: Never. Tenure elong- tenor e- elongations in a number of states, in Côte d'Ivoire, in...

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Uh, in Guinea.

General Saleh Bala: In Guinea. You never hear the Council of Wise convoking, convoking a conference and inviting the principal to say no. There is a constitution of your- of your nation that is recognized by this sub-regional organization or the supranational organization which is, uh, African Union and that they must be respect to it. But what we simply see is that the nations assembly is conveniently driven to approve on this- on these third terms and there are visions and- and there are most of the time for the number of- for the number of situations, the coupists always refer to electoral abuses or clear tenure extensions, which are not constitutional.

To pass a bill, to pass a bill that will enable people who have more freedom of expression in any country, look at the case like in Nigeria, I am dealing with advocacy for the social media regulation bill. We've been in- on this argument for the past four years. And let it be that the president of Nigeria who has a North influence wants to do tenure elongation, although the first one of General Obasonjo failed. It did not even get to parliament because he had a very strong vice president that is politically influential. Otherwise, in Nigeria, we also would have established a- a- a- a three-year tenure.

We see how heads of states will suddenly get on aircrafts and fly into countries in order to stomp the noses of otherwise young boys like they call them who are military leaders and we do the highfalutin subservience of the military to civilian rule. But these are young people just like we have youthful people like in Nigeria, we all know about the End SARS demonstration which shook the fiber of democratic rule in Nigeria. If you look at the constituents of- of the coupists, they are young people also who are from-

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Young people, your- your young people in uniform with guns.

General Saleh Bala: Young people with- uh, uh, with uniform and guns, young mobs with petrol bombs, cutlasses, and on- on dru- and on drugs.
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: If I understand you, here's an issue, I don't know if it's exactly an issue of generational differences 'cause a lot of the elders that you've described, what is the Council of the Wise, uh, at ECOWAS, whether it is this president in places like Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, Alpha Conde, Alassane Ouattara, these are people with certain generation of a certain age. And then on the other hand, we have the general- the generals and the colonels who are often on the younger side of the spectrum. And then, we have the End SARS and the other youth movement, Balai Citoyen, places like Senegal and places like Burkina Faso, Y'en a Marre. And what I hear you say is that ECOWAS when this crisis have risen, ECOWAS has not intervened. But I know that there's an entire unit of ECOWAS that is actually called Early Warning.

General Saleh Bala: Absolutely.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: It's fully staffed is in Abuja.

General Saleh Bala: Yes.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: What do they do? And again, I want to go back to you. I think you described this and how we got here in so many ways. This is a... It's a- it's a si- a strong signal that is going to shake ECOWAS 'cause all of us are following this. What does this mean moving forward? Is this a crisis that ECOWAS can pull back from? And if so, what will it take? And then... Or is ECOWAS also lost its credibility with the citizens? Is that also something you also try to say?

General Saleh Bala: No, absolutely, if you go to any- any basic country, you know, I had- I had some work to do with some governments and they would ask me what is the visibility of country X in Nigeria, and I as an elite understand that country X and its development agency is doing well, is doing to some extent the kind of work it is doing, but I also know country Y and Z, for every project that they do, they signpost it and also you see this... their citizens actually interacting with the people. Go down to the level of our communities, and you ask them what ECOWAS is, it is a distant, removed elite organization. ECOWAS doesn't have a- doesn't have an humanitarian- humanitarian face, neither does it have scholarships where it goes into our universities and we clearly see them work, or ECOWAS goes to village X and digs a well.

So ECOWAS is just a club for privileged diplomats and their heads of governments. So ECOWAS does not have any human face to the common people of the subregion as well as the African Union. At least
for the United Nations, they are able to see bags of rice, (laughs) they are able to see hospitals, they are able to see UNDP doing stuff. But ECOWAS lacks this human quantity. and I am laying this as a foundation on how ECOWAS has completely lost it. ECOWAS is only a noise maker. It has even lost ECOMOG, which people in Liberia and Sierra Leone can really identify with. Because the regional brigade standby force framework has not been able to help anyone, even countries in conflicts. For God’s sake, it was ashamed to meet here, that my neighbor here, Republic of Benin that is a member of the MNJTF will rather invite Rwanda to help it in the- in the laws.

**Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:** What is the MJTF?

**General Saleh Bala:** The Multinational Joint Task Force, uh, of the Lake Chad Basin Development Commission.

**Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:** So Benin is not at war, but, uh, is not- in general, is a democracy. Why did they have called- called on Rwanda and not on- uh, on their own regional, uh, organization?

**General Saleh Bala:** Because Rwanda has proven recently to have a potent force that can be a multiplier for stability like we have seen in Mozambique if I’m right. So Republic of Benin has a huge banditry challenge in its north, but Republic of Benin is going outside the- the subregion to Rwanda to request for military support so but essentially, not to-

**Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:** Just like- just like- just like Mozambique went out of SADC to go to Rwanda as well.

**General Saleh Bala:** Well, the argument is clear and present, (laughs) you know. But what it shows is that proper leadership that is able to build institutions, strong credible inst- institutions that you can apply. But going back to the issue of credibility for ECOWAS, these young generals and younger officers have seen it that where one of the heads of state want to get at another tenure, he gets in, manipulates the election and once he is declared president, he or she, he is declared president and so- so shall he be. And whatever op- opposition says does not count. And there is so much abuse of the d- democratic system all through the three arms of government, the executive, the judiciary and the- and- and the behemoth, which is the legislature. The legislature cannot even call to question the head of state because most of the members of our legislatures are proxies, are appointees actually that are elected through the abused system who do no oversight whatsoever.
So in this case, these young people when you send delegations to them, you, in fact, send at the most those who are really abusive of the democratic processes and the bu- democratic principles who have no moral value to question a military takeover that has a- that has popular support by the people who are out massively on the streets. We are observing the rise of nationalism in Niger. Nobody wants to talk about that. Typical of the mentality, particularly of- of some of us and Nigerians when stadia are filled up with people, when rallies are filled with people, we always would assume that it is just like in Nigeria, that peo- these people are mobilized and paid to... they are rented crowd. But no, we have good relationship with people of Niger and we do understand that there's a popular uprising and there is a sense and a spirit of nationalism especially around the eviction of colonial masters like we have seen in the eviction of France and any other nation that the people have identified as being inimical to the wellbeing of the Nigerien states.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: You mean the Nigerien people see the government as being inimical to them, not representing them?

General Saleh Bala: No, no, no, no. The people of Niger actually, the people of Ni- uh, Niger can tell you that because I have several contacts as the typical Northern Nigeria across the elite society, across the- maybe the intel-intelligentsia, the academia, the military for which some of my students are generals in Niger at present. Okay? And people in commerce and industry, but we don’t make press on this and we do not acc- uh, want to accept because we don’t want it to happen in our own countries. So when you go to negotiate with them, remember the revered Sultan of Sokoto was not, and even the respected Abdulsalami Abubakar was as well snubbed.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: This is the former- former president of Nigeria who was there to negotiate.

General Saleh Bala: For- former president of Nigeria, yes. Why? Because these coupists was talked down to and earlier in the process of the- of- of... in the s- in- in the- uh, in the bilateral relationship, the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and Niger, there were so many issues like this that were dealt with even at the personal leadership level that has not gotten to even the- the institutional diplomatic level, but, uh, we really have lost it. We have lost our respect. You would have read the- the- the press by both ECOWAS and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Nigeria, which suddenly is very re- reconciliatory, very considerate, very respectful. The words are well chosen. It wasn’t like at the beginning which was very, very condescending, commanding and very, very
belligerent. You either in two weeks, in 15 days release Bazoum and resume democratic government or we are going to invade you.

No. You don't address people in power as such. Then you get them more entrenched and belligerent. You impose sanctions on nations that you know are already, uh, are already hanging on tethers of poverty. So this is what has happened in the three nations. Mali evicted the United Nations, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force completely. Burkina Faso has done its own level and invited the Russians, and we have seen how confidently Niger has evicted the French and already thumping the nose of the generals.

So what will happen with ECOWAS then? You think these countries according to the articles of the Constitution of ECOWAS, they need a year for ECOWAS to consider this. They've already announced; ECOWAS said they've not been informed of it. Where are we going? Uh, is this a done deal or is this something that can be retracted? Or is this required now that ECOWAS itself look in the mirror and, uh, hopefully that will start a set of reforms, internal reforms for ECOWAS?

This should enable a set of reforms and this should also help to review the kind of leaders in our individual countries that we really select. It will also enable for us to actually reconsider how the process of our democracy is, that for sensitive things like this, the presidents of our country, of our countries will not just commit our nations to what has not been properly thought through. But then, going back to, uh, another segment of your current question, we have seen how Mauritania pulled out of ECOWAS and after some consideration and some negotiation, it came back.

So I see these two nations, which I read earlier today that the formal communication has already reached ECOWAS and the African Union, but, uh, the three nations, jointly agreed that they will maintain their participation in the physical union. So that tells you that tells you something. Okay? That tells you something that they indeed have the intelligentsia and the bureaucrats who are thinking deeper and working on a game, on a well-structured game plan than otherwise the other leaders of the balance of what is now ECOWAS are assuming to be.

And, uh, the notice of one year is just for ECOWAS to do its own administration. But, uh, the withdrawal itself was promoted by ECOWAS that has ostracized those countries. Those countries have to unite to work for themselves. So the sanction was perpetual so it could run for the one year, but I see the leaders of
ECOWAS, of what remains of ECOWAS coming to their senses and knowing that, uh, they do not decide for other countries how those countries act.

Uh, but then if you ask me also has ECOWAS really been united in its segmentations? Uh, you would expect that the operations in the- in the Lake Chad Basin should be an ECOWAS operation. But it became a sub-regional operation. Ghana is busy trying to cook up an Accra Initiative of which actually Ghana was depending on the mass of Mali, on the strength of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Republic of Benin and Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. And actually the force, the thinking was on the strength of Operation Barkhane, on the G5 Sahel and how the governments, the military governments actually of these various nations are able to build the capacity, the military capacity and capability to ensure that the incursion of Islamists is curtailed to the coastal areas.

Okay, now the heart of this threat, the heart of this threat has now cut off. In intelligence operations, those nations could actually in clandestine operations send, encourage these terrorists to really come down southwards. This happens in the arcane world of intelligence operators.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: What lesson, General, should the international community take from this? 'Cause there's ECOWAS in the case of these coups, particularly in former colonies of France, there've been a lot of tension between France and those countries, but country like the United State is also very interested. Of course, uh, Secretary of State was just in the region. He was in Nigeria and he was there before. Our Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee and some of her colleagues also visited the region. It looks like Africa, particularly ECOWAS at this point, but this is a problem that's beyond ECOWAS. What you're describing is a problem we see or problems that we see, uh, across the continent. Yet we get a sense that the international community, particularly European powers don't seem to get it.

General Saleh Bala: The Western powers particularly should start to understand that Africa has come far of age, and the human, the intellectual, human and bureaucratic component of the people are as advanced as whatever component of human resource are out there in the West and that we are patriotic people who love our nations, who understand that we are underdeveloped and we understand the mechanisms of keeping us underdeveloped to maintain us as sources of resources for the industrialized nations, and that if our leaders who are democratic in inverted commas will play the game right even if they do not deliver on good governance, they are good to stay.
So the West should begin to understand that we understand democracy. We understand the good fine principles of democracy, but we want to understand it also basically from what report card, what key performance index we are able to establish for our own peop- of our own government by our own standards and not necessarily by a Western expectation. So until the West begins to see us as such, that the people who want to really live and enjoy their independence in our own sovereign states to such strength that we are able to contribute strongly to global security and development, the better, and that we also have the thinking and the minds to be able to stabilize our people and serve our people, but not in accordance to some strict Western precepts by which if we do not comply, we are vested with sanctions.

It’s however you go in- in the international system at the basis- at the basic is that we are- we are human beings and we are bound to interact from a human level. And so governments are made up of human beings, and respect and understanding at all levels of development is very, very important. And that w- we have every right and every presence to be able to make friends from any part of the globe that is- that could- that is helpful to us and will progress our interest in developing our nations.

On that note, respect, understanding and appreciation of the humanity of the African people, but also the sovereign and independent nature of this country or those countries since the three of them in this case, but also the options and possibilities of choices that they have within the great power competition. Uh, I would like to thank you, General Bala, for joining us today on Into Africa. There is a lot to unpack there, but we will continue this conversation another time. Thank you very much, General Bala.

Thank you very much, Mvemba, and thanks for tolerating my ranting. You know, I’m- uh, I’m just a Nigerian.

We love Nigeria. (Laughing) So thank you.

Thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

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(END.)