



# **INTERVIEW WITH**

**ROSA  
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WEST AFRICA OFFICE

# **PROFESSOR JIBRIN IBRAHIM**

**CONDUCTED BY JENNY OUÉDRAOGO**

# **ECOWAS AT 50 – WHO’S JUBILEE?**

**AN INTERVIEW WITH**  
**PROFESSOR JIBRIN IBRAHIM**

— CONDUCTED BY JENNY OUÉDRAOGO



## IMPRINT

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**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**

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# Professor

Jibrin Ibrahim is a political scientist as well as a development consultant. He is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Democracy & Development and Chair of the Editorial Board of Premium Times, focusing on democracy, governance and conflict in West Africa.

— *The interview was conducted by Jenny Ouédraogo, Project Manager at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation West Africa office in Dakar.*

***Half a century after its founding, how would you describe the relationship between ECOWAS and the citizens it claims to serve?***

ECOWAS has undergone major transformations. From the outset, it was established by authoritarian regimes across the sixteen West African countries at the time. Its founding vision was economic integration, but these were largely closed economies, closely tied to their former colonial powers. In that sense, the goal was never fully achievable because the economies were not open to one another. It was also a time of political crisis. From its early years, ECOWAS was drawn into conflict resolution and peacemaking. After the Benin National Conference in 1989, the organization shifted toward democracy-building. In 1991, it adopted the ECOWAS Declaration of Political Principles, committing member states to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law—later expanded through the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. These steps, in principle, brought ECOWAS closer to the people. But could one truly say it became the “ECOWAS of the people”? Not really. Under its Vision 2007–2020, this was supposed to be the main objective. Yet by 2020, ECOWAS admitted it had not achieved that goal and postponed it to 2050. It has been pro-people in rhetoric and principle, but not yet in practice. There has long been a social distance between ECOWAS and ordinary citizens. Ultimate authority rests with heads of state, who are often removed from their people, and this distance grows at the regional level. The key question is whether ECOWAS actually works for the people - and whether citizens perceive that it does. Most West Africans would likely say that they have not benefited from ECOWAS even if such a statement might not be accurate.

***With the AES breakaway, many question ECOWAS’s relevance. From your perspective, what does the emergence of the AES reveal about the weaknesses or blind spots within ECOWAS?***

The emergence of the AES is a real crisis for ECOWAS as it weakens the organization. A reduction from fifteen to twelve member states is significant. It happened largely because of weaknesses in West Africa’s own development and governance agendas; there has been an erosion

of democratic credibility which created space for alternatives - namely, the return of military rule. West Africa used to be the world champion of coup d'états. But with ECOWAS's democratic transformation and sanctions regimes, they became less frequent. Now, with democracy in decline, coups have returned. The military regimes of the AES countries all promised better governance and improved security - but the opposite happened. Security deteriorated and terrorism spread and deepened. These countries are now facing near-political collapse. As people question military rule, the juntas have responded with increased repression. Many citizens are now regretting the coups but the militaries still control the political machinery. Take Mali, for instance. There was an election, and it became clear the ruling party would lose. The government manipulated the process through electoral fraud and still failed to win a parliamentary majority. Then it used corrupt judges to overturn results in court, removing opposition MPs and replacing them with ruling-party candidates. That was a blatant affront to democracy. It created the environment for the coup because it signaled that democratic change was no longer possible.

***Regional leaders often invoke 'security' to justify military budgets and border closures, yet ordinary people continue to face both violence and repression. How should ECOWAS rethink security from the perspective of its citizens?***

There's a real security crisis in West Africa - terrorism driven by ideology or by banditry, with kidnappings, theft, and attacks on farmers. Travel has become dangerous in many areas, and insecurity dominates daily life. Part of the problem lies in our demographics: we have a very young population that feels excluded - either because they lack access to education, or because education no longer guarantees social mobility. When they protest, the state responds with violence. Since the collapse of the Libyan regime, firearms have flooded the region. Many young people have armed themselves - some to steal or harass, others to resist state oppression. This reflects a breakdown in the social pact between governments and their citizens. States must recognize that this crisis stems partly from their own failures. Improving governance, social provision, and security is essential to restore peace.

***How is the threat of terrorism perceived in the non-AES member states of West Africa?***

I believe there is a growing awareness across West Africa that no country is truly safe. This is a significant shift in perception and reflects a broader problem: our countries are increasingly unable to meet the needs of their populations. Naturally, the level and intensity of insecurity in the Sahel states remain much higher, but the wider West African population is increasingly conscious that they are not immune to these threats. For instance, Côte d'Ivoire has experienced incursions across its borders. Togo has also been affected. I've spoken previously about the JNIM presence near the border between Nigeria and Benin. More recently, there have even been incursions into Senegal. Authorities in these countries are very much aware of the risks. The bottom line is that the notion of any country in West Africa being "safe" is becoming increasingly outdated and distant from the public consciousness.

***What do you think about European governments pressuring ECOWAS to sanction military regimes that undermine democracy, while maintaining partnerships with governments accused of corruption or repression?***

I am a political scientist, and I know the history of international relations - countries act in their own interests, and hypocrisy is part of the fabric of diplomacy. But the world would benefit from a genuine commitment to promoting democracy and resisting the rise of authoritarianism. Today, populist regimes can easily come to power, not only in West Africa but also in Europe. I lived in France for seven years, where many assumed the National Front would never win because it was considered extremist. Now, the government is even avoiding elections for fear the National Front will take power. Here in West Africa, many young people are calling for coups to overthrow what they see as corrupt democratic governments. This is deeply worrying for those of us committed to democracy. We are witnessing a broader collapse of the global, rule-based order and a growing ability to manipulate people—especially through social media. Europe and Africa therefore share a common interest: to uphold democratic standards, defend them, and

resist the populist forces seeking to revive authoritarian rule and sow division.

***ECOWAS promises free movement across West Africa, yet people still face harassment and closed borders. Who is actually benefiting from regional integration?***

Studies show that the free movement of goods and people is more effective in West Africa than anywhere else on the continent, and this is a major achievement that deserves recognition. The challenges in implementation, however, are unsurprising, as they reflect the nature of the states involved. For example, here in Abuja, citizens are often stopped and interrogated even when moving around the city at night—something that should not happen. Across borders, a frontier culture has developed. ECOWAS's free movement assumes travelers have passports, yet many do not, creating administrative gaps that officials often exploit. Corruption persists and citizens frequently encounter bureaucratic obstacles that drain their resources, particularly those without proper documentation.

***Why do governments of ECOWAS member states accept EU migration deals if they only increase repression of their own citizens?***

European countries pursue policies designed to protect themselves from immigration despite struggling to maintain pension and health-care systems. It would make sense for them to negotiate with other countries for people who could help them sustain their societies but unfortunately, racism has become a major problem in Europe. Externalized border regimes turn migration control into a tool of repression, creating spaces of violence and exploitation across the Sahel. African governments have a responsibility to protect their young people. There is an urgent need for public campaigns across West Africa to show that the risks of irregular migration are extreme and that individuals could easily die or suffer unspeakable harm. Yet governments of ECOWAS



member states continue to accept these agreements because they receive significant financial aid from European countries. The deeper problem is leadership: many of these leaders are not genuinely committed to their own people. Elected to serve their citizens, they instead pursue policies designed to satisfy foreign interests. This reflects a broader challenge: West Africa lacks leaders who are truly devoted to the welfare of their populations.

***If ECOWAS is to serve the people in the next 50 years, what would need to change?***

If ECOWAS is to survive the next two years, it must make major changes to its system of governance. Above all, the authority of heads of state must be guided by the democratic and constitutional principles enshrined in the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. ECOWAS is due to take key decisions this December. The outcome of the next 50 years depends on the choices made in the next two. If those decisions reinforce democratic governance, the region's future could be very promising. The urgency is now. The first priority must be to stop the erosion of democratic culture, which in almost every case arises from executive excesses. Presidents in West Africa often come to power through democratic means but fail to deliver on their promises. As they lose popular support, they manipulate constitutions, extend mandates, or rig elections to remain in power. This pattern has driven much of the region's current crisis. We see this clearly in recent elections. In Benin, the Supreme Court has barred the main opposition party from running. In Côte d'Ivoire, the two principal rivals to President Ouattara were disqualified from contesting. You cannot expect democratic dividends when leaders rewrite the rules to block competition. That is the central challenge ECOWAS must confront if democracy is to endure for the next 50 years.