

Democratic Reversal in Africa and the Rise of Military Coups in the Sahel and West Africa: An Assessment

John Okon Obisung, *PhD*

Department of Political Science, Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus

Email: johnobisung@aksu.edu.ng

Phone: 08027870897

Abstract

In recent years, Africa has witnessed a noticeable return of military interventions in politics, particularly across West Africa and the Sahel, reversing decades of gradual democratic progress. This study investigated the resurgence of coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea-Bissau, with a focus on understanding both their immediate triggers and deeper structural causes. The analysis examined how governance challenges, institutional fragility, and persistent insecurity shaped the renewed relevance of military actors in political transitions. It also evaluated the implications of these developments for democratic governance and considered the responses of regional and international actors, including the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union, and the wider global community. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study drew on secondary data and applied a case study framework to compare developments across selected countries. The discussion is informed by theoretical perspectives such as contagion dynamics, institutional weakness, and security failure, which together provide insight into the conditions that make military intervention more likely. The findings indicated that the resurgence of coups is closely linked to declining governance performance, weak state institutions, and the inability of civilian governments to effectively address security challenges. To address this trend, the study emphasised the need to strengthen democratic institutions and improve governance outcomes. It further argued that regional bodies must move beyond symbolic condemnation and play a more proactive role in addressing the socio-economic and security concerns that fuel political instability.

Keywords: Democratic reversal, military coups, insurgency, Sahel region, West Africa

Introduction

The transition to democratic governance in Africa during the early 1990s marked a significant shift away from military and one-party rule. Across the continent, many states embraced multi-party systems, raising expectations of improved political accountability, economic progress, and institutional stability. Although these democratic systems often faced limitations, civilian rule gradually became more entrenched over the following decades.

This trajectory, however, has been disrupted in recent years. Since 2020, a series of military takeovers has emerged across West Africa and the Sahel, challenging earlier assumptions about the consolidation of democracy. Countries such as Mali experienced consecutive coups between 2020 and 2021, while Burkina Faso witnessed two separate interventions in 2022. Similarly, Niger underwent a military takeover in 2023. Although Guinea-Bissau has not recorded a fully successful

coups within this period, its political landscape remains characterised by repeated military interference and instability.

The recurrence of these events has raised important questions about the resilience of democratic systems in Africa. The growing frequency of coups, combined with instances of public support, suggests that underlying political, economic, and institutional challenges have weakened civilian governance. Rather than being isolated disruptions, these military interventions reflect deeper structural issues that have eroded public confidence in democratic institutions.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the resurgence of military coups as a manifestation of broader democratic decline. It seeks to understand the conditions that have enabled this trend and its implications for governance across the region. To achieve this, the study addresses four key questions: What factors have contributed to the recent wave of coups in selected West African states? How do these interventions interact with existing democratic structures? How have regional and international actors, particularly the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union, responded to these developments? Finally, what prospects exist for restoring democratic stability in the region?

Conceptual Framework

Democracy and Democratic Reversal

Democracy is commonly understood as a system in which political authority is derived from the people through regular, free, and competitive elections. Beyond electoral processes, it is sustained by institutional principles such as the rule of law, separation of powers, protection of civil liberties, and accountable leadership. In many African states, however, democratic practice often remains limited to procedural elements, with elections taking place regularly but without corresponding strength in institutions or governance outcomes.

Democratic reversal describes a process in which previously established democratic systems begin to deteriorate or collapse. This decline may take various forms, including the suspension of constitutional order, weakening of state institutions, restriction of political freedoms, or the replacement of civilian governments with military regimes. In the context of West Africa and the Sahel, the recent wave of coups represents a clear and significant instance of such a reversal, highlighting the fragility of democratic gains achieved in the post-Cold War period.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical perspectives have been advanced to explain the occurrence of military coups. This study adopts the Institutional Weakness Theory and the Security Failure Theory as its analytical framework.

The Institutional Weakness Theory posits that military coups are more likely to occur in environments where state institutions are weak, politicised, or characterised by corruption. Scholars such as Huntington (1957), Finer (1962), and Janowitz (1960) have all emphasised the relationship between weak institutional structures and the emergence of military intervention in politics.

Huntington, through his concept of a “praetorian society,” argues that coups are more likely in political systems where institutional development is low but political participation is high. Finer contends that although the military possesses the capacity to intervene in politics, it is the weakness and instability of civilian institutions that create the opportunity for such intervention. Janowitz, on the other hand, maintains that the military is not entirely separate from society; rather, its

internal structure and professional orientation shape its political behaviour and level of involvement in governance.

The core argument of this theory is that weak civilian governance, reflected in ineffective institutions such as the legislature, judiciary, and political parties, creates conditions that encourage military intervention. When these institutions fail to manage political crises, curb corruption, or deliver public services effectively, governance performance declines. This results in a legitimacy crisis, where citizens lose confidence in civilian leadership and become more receptive to military intervention. The military, often perceived as more disciplined and efficient, may then exploit these governance failures to justify seizing power. Furthermore, when democratic institutions lack independence, it becomes easier for the military to rationalise intervention in the political process.

The Security Failure Theory, associated with scholars such as Talentino (2005) and Seybolt (2007), is also referred to as the security gap or guardianship model of intervention. This theory argues that military coups often occur when civilian authorities are unable to provide basic security, maintain public order, or deliver essential services. In such situations, the military perceives a vacuum of authority characterised by insecurity, corruption, and ineffective leadership. Within this framework, military intervention is often justified through a “guardian” narrative, in which the armed forces present themselves as acting in the national interest to restore order, protect the state, and prevent further collapse. Such interventions are typically framed as temporary and necessary responses to civilian mismanagement or security failure. In many cases, coups occur when civil-military relations deteriorate, and civilian governments are perceived as incapable of safeguarding national sovereignty and citizen welfare. The recent wave of coups in the Sahel region is closely linked to the inability of civilian governments to effectively manage insurgency and extremist violence.

Together, these theories provide a useful framework for understanding the resurgence of military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, particularly in the context of insecurity, economic hardship, and weak institutional performance.

Literature Review

Scholarly debates on military coups and democratic reversal in Africa have evolved significantly over the past three decades. Early post-Cold War literature generally assumed that the spread of multiparty democracy and constitutional reforms would reduce the likelihood of military intervention in politics. However, more recent studies indicate that many African states are experiencing a renewed pattern of democratic decline and political instability.

Levitsky & Way (2010) describe democratic backsliding as a process in which elected leaders gradually weaken democratic institutions without completely dismantling the formal democratic framework. In the African context, this often manifests in practices such as constitutional manipulation, weakened electoral commissions, and the suppression of opposition groups. These developments can create political instability that may be used to justify military intervention by both the armed forces and segments of the population.

Ake (1996) argues that democracy in Africa is largely elite-driven rather than genuinely participatory. This disconnect between political leaders and the general population has contributed to widespread dissatisfaction and declining trust in civilian governments. As confidence in democratic institutions weakens, the military is increasingly perceived by some as an alternative source of order and governance.

Empirical studies by Cheeseman et al. (2015) further demonstrate that persistent insecurity, particularly the rise of jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel region, has significantly undermined

civilian authority. In many cases, civilian administrations are viewed as incapable of providing adequate security or protecting territorial integrity, thereby increasing the perceived relevance of military institutions in political affairs.

Regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have also been widely examined in relation to unconstitutional changes of government. While both organisations consistently condemn military coups and impose sanctions, several studies suggest that their enforcement mechanisms are often weak, inconsistent, and sometimes counterproductive. Sanctions frequently affect ordinary citizens more than the political or military elites responsible for the coups and do not always succeed in restoring constitutional governance.

Recent empirical findings further indicate that public perception of military coups in parts of West Africa has become increasingly favourable. In several cases, segments of the population have expressed support for military takeovers, viewing them as corrective responses to corruption, poor governance, and ineffective leadership. This shift in public sentiment represents one of the most significant and concerning dimensions of democratic reversal in contemporary Africa.

Methodology

This study adopts a historical-descriptive research design. Data were collected from secondary sources, including academic journals, textbooks, policy reports, and publications from reputable international organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN), and the International Crisis Group.

The study employs a case study approach, focusing on Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea-Bissau. These cases are selected to examine the causes, patterns, and consequences of recent military coups in West Africa and the Sahel region. A comparative analytical approach is also applied to identify both shared structural factors and country-specific dynamics that contribute to military intervention in politics. In addition, content analysis is used to examine official communiqués, sanction frameworks, and diplomatic engagements to assess the responses of regional and international actors to unconstitutional changes of government. This approach provides a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of democratic reversal in Africa. All data collected are analysed through qualitative techniques.

Military Coups and Democratic Practice in Africa

The resurgence of military coups across Africa represents a significant departure from established democratic principles and constitutional governance (N'Diaye, 2013). Democratic systems are founded on key principles such as regular elections, civilian supremacy over the military, separation of powers, and adherence to the rule of law. Military interventions undermine these principles by suspending constitutions, dissolving legislative institutions, and governing through decrees.

Despite these violations, several recent coups in Africa have initially received notable public support. This support is largely driven by widespread dissatisfaction with corruption, economic hardship, insecurity, and perceived political exclusion under civilian administrations (Cheeseman, 2015). However, historical evidence indicates that military regimes rarely achieve sustainable governance reforms and often evolve into prolonged authoritarian rule.

The tension between public support for coups and commitment to democratic governance reflects a deeper crisis of legitimacy within African political systems. It suggests that democracy is increasingly evaluated based on performance outcomes rather than adherence to constitutional

procedures. When elected governments fail to deliver security, economic stability, and effective governance, citizens may become more receptive to non-democratic alternatives. This broader regional context provides the structural foundation for understanding the recent wave of military coups in West Africa and the Sahel region.

Patterns and Drivers of Military Coups in West Africa and the Sahel (2020–2025)

Country/Year of coup	Reasons advanced by coup leaders	Responses by citizens	Responses by sub-regional/regional bodies
Mali (2020 and 2021)	The 2020 coup against President Ibrahim B. Keïta was precipitated by mass protests over insecurity, corruption, and disputed electoral outcomes. The inability of the transitional government to address these challenges led to a second coup in May 2021, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta.	Public reaction was largely supportive, driven by expectations that military intervention would curb corruption and restore national security.	ECOWAS suspended Mali and imposed stringent economic sanctions to pressure a return to civilian rule.
Burkina Faso (January 2022 and September 2022)	Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba overthrew President Roch Kaboré, citing the government's failure to address escalating insecurity. In September 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré removed Damiba on similar grounds, pointing to continued deterioration in security conditions.	The coups were widely welcomed, with citizens expressing support through protests and public demonstrations in favor of military intervention.	ECOWAS, the African Union, and the broader international community condemned the coups and imposed sanctions on the military leadership.
Niger (July 2023)	Members of the Presidential Guard overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, citing insecurity, poor governance, and the failure of civilian authorities to safeguard national interests.	Public reactions were mixed. While some segments opposed the takeover, significant public demonstrations also showed support for the military authorities.	ECOWAS suspended Niger, imposed sanctions, and threatened military intervention to restore constitutional order.
Guinea-Bissau (November 2025)	President Umaro Sissoco Embaló was reportedly overthrown by Brigadier General Dinis Incanha, citing alleged electoral irregularities and concerns over the credibility of the electoral process.	Protests emerged demanding the release of detained officials and the announcement of election results, reflecting public concern over constitutional disruption.	ECOWAS and the African Union condemned the coup and called for the immediate release of the president and the completion of the electoral process.

Military Coups and Democratic Practice in Africa

The resurgence of military coups in Africa stands in direct opposition to democratic norms and constitutional governance. Democratic systems are founded on principles such as regular elections, civilian supremacy over the military, separation of powers, and adherence to the rule of law. Military interventions undermine these principles by suspending constitutions, dissolving legislatures, and governing through decrees. Despite these violations, many recent coups across Africa initially attract significant public support. This support is largely driven by widespread dissatisfaction with corruption, economic mismanagement, insecurity, and political exclusion under civilian administrations. However, historical evidence indicates that military regimes rarely deliver sustainable improvements in governance and often evolve into prolonged authoritarian systems.

The tension between public approval of coups and commitment to democratic governance reflects a deeper crisis of legitimacy within African political systems. It suggests that democracy is increasingly evaluated based on performance outcomes rather than constitutional procedures. Where elected governments fail to deliver security, economic stability, and development, citizens become more receptive to authoritarian alternatives. This regional context provides the structural foundation for understanding the recent wave of military coups across West Africa and the Sahel.

Discussion of Findings

Although the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea-Bissau occurred under different national circumstances, they share important structural and political similarities. These patterns point to systemic weaknesses in African democratic governance rather than isolated national incidents.

Governance Failure and Democratic Performance Crisis

The findings suggest that democratic stability in many African states is increasingly determined by governance performance rather than the mere existence of electoral institutions. Where elected governments fail to address corruption, economic hardship, social exclusion, and poor service delivery, democratic legitimacy is significantly weakened. In such contexts, elections become procedural rituals rather than meaningful mechanisms of accountability, as citizens remain disconnected from governance outcomes. Persistent governance failure also erodes public trust in constitutional order and increases acceptance of alternative forms of authority. As civilian governments lose legitimacy through poor performance, military interventions are increasingly framed not only as coercive takeovers but also as responses to prolonged civilian failure. This allows coups to be interpreted as symptoms of democratic exhaustion rather than abrupt disruptions of stable political systems.

Across the cases studied, weak democratic performance emerges as a common factor. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, civilian administrations were widely criticised for corruption, weak service delivery, and failure to meet citizens' expectations (UN Security Council, 2021). Although elections were conducted, governance outcomes remained poor. In these states, democracy functioned more as a procedural arrangement than a substantive system. Citizens participated in elections but continued to experience poverty, insecurity, unemployment, and inflation. This erosion of performance-based legitimacy weakened resistance to military intervention.

In Guinea-Bissau, governance failure is more structural and persistent. Civilian governments are frequently destabilised by elite competition, fragile coalitions, and recurring military interference, resulting in long-term institutional weakness.

Insecurity and State Breakdown

Persistent insecurity fundamentally reshapes political authority in fragile states. In environments affected by insurgency, terrorism, and territorial instability, civilian governments increasingly depend on the military for state survival. This dependence strengthens military influence while weakening civilian control and institutional balance. Over time, emergency governance becomes normalised, and constitutional procedures are subordinated to security imperatives. This blurs the boundaries between civilian and military authority, increasing the likelihood of military intervention.

In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the rise of jihadist insurgency has significantly destabilised governance. Armed groups control territories, attack civilians, and target state institutions, while civilian authorities struggle to respond effectively. This situation enhances the visibility of the military as the most effective state institution, thereby normalising military rule as a perceived solution to insecurity.

Although Guinea-Bissau does not face jihadist insurgency, it experiences insecurity linked to drug trafficking, organised crime, and political violence (International Crisis Group, 2019), which similarly undermines civilian authority.

Public Disillusionment and Civilian Legitimacy Crisis

Across all four cases, there is clear evidence of declining public confidence in civilian leadership. Citizens increasingly perceive democratic governments as corrupt, self-serving, and incapable of protecting national interests. In Mali and Burkina Faso, public protests preceded military takeovers. In Niger, although protests were less widespread, dissatisfaction with elite governance and external influence created conditions favourable to the coup. The growing acceptance of military intervention reflects a shift in political attitudes. Democracy is increasingly judged based on its ability to deliver security and economic well-being rather than adherence to constitutional norms.

Military Professionalism and Politicisation

Another common feature is the politicisation of the armed forces. In these countries, the military often operates beyond strictly professional boundaries and becomes involved in political and economic disputes. In Mali and Burkina Faso, junior officers overthrew senior commanders, reflecting internal breakdowns in military discipline. In Niger, the Presidential Guard emerged as a powerful independent actor. In Guinea-Bissau, the military has historically functioned as a dominant political force.

Role of Regional and Sub-Regional Organisations

Regional and international actors play a significant role in shaping post-coup political outcomes. While ECOWAS and the African Union consistently reject unconstitutional changes of government, their enforcement capacity is constrained by political divisions, inconsistent commitment, and geopolitical limitations. Sanctions and diplomatic pressure often lack coherence and may produce unintended consequences, including worsening humanitarian conditions without effectively restoring constitutional order. Long-term external security cooperation may also unintentionally strengthen military institutions at the expense of civilian governance, thereby reinforcing conditions that enable military elites to resist pressure and sustain authoritarian rule.

ECOWAS and its Enforcement Challenges

ECOWAS has taken the lead in responding to coups in West Africa through suspension of member states, sanctions, and diplomatic engagement (ECOWAS Commission, 2021, 2022, 2023). In Mali, strict sanctions were imposed following delays in the transition process, but these measures did not immediately compel compliance. In Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau, responses were largely diplomatic. In Niger, ECOWAS adopted a more forceful stance, including sanctions and threats of military intervention. However, internal divisions among member states prevented coordinated action, exposing institutional limitations.

African Union and Continental Norms

The African Union (AU) maintains a strong normative framework against unconstitutional changes of government, as outlined in the Lomé Declaration and subsequent AU instruments. In practice, the AU routinely suspends member states following military coups and condemns the interruption of constitutional order. However, despite this strong normative stance, the AU's responses are often constrained by limited enforcement capacity and reliance on regional mechanisms such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for operational implementation. As a result, its interventions are frequently perceived as symbolic, with limited direct influence on restoring constitutional governance in affected states.

Role of the International Community

The international response to military coups in West Africa and the Sahel involves multiple actors whose interventions have produced mixed implications for democratic stability in the region.

France and Post-Colonial Influence

France has historically maintained strong political, economic, and military ties with several West African states, particularly through counterterrorism operations in the Sahel. However, in recent years, its presence has become increasingly controversial, with rising public sentiment linking French involvement to continued insecurity and perceived political interference. Following recent coups, French military forces were expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, reflecting a sharp decline in French influence and the rise of strong anti-French sentiment across parts of the Sahel.

United States and Security-Focused Engagement

The United States has primarily engaged the Sahel region through counterterrorism cooperation, military assistance, and security partnerships. While these interventions were intended to stabilise fragile states, they also contributed to the strengthening of military institutions relative to civilian governance structures. Following the 2023 coup in Niger, U.S. assistance was suspended. However, long-term security cooperation before the coup had already reinforced the political influence of military actors in the region.

European Union and Conditional Assistance

The European Union (EU) has focused on development aid, migration management, and security cooperation. In response to recent coups, EU assistance programs were suspended in affected countries. However, such measures have been criticised for disproportionately affecting civilian populations rather than directly influencing political or military elites.

Russia and Strategic Expansion

Russia has expanded its influence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger through military cooperation and strategic partnerships with post-coup governments. This development reflects a broader shift toward multipolar international relations and has provided military regimes with alternative external alliances, thereby reducing the effectiveness of Western diplomatic and economic pressure.

Recommendations

1. African political leaders should prioritise governance in the genuine interest of citizens rather than personal or elite advantage.
2. Corruption should be addressed through strong legal frameworks, institutional reform, and judicial independence.
3. Leaders must respect constitutional provisions and avoid manipulating electoral processes for tenure extension.
4. Governments should strengthen their capacity to respond effectively to insecurity, insurgency, and organised crime.
5. ECOWAS and the African Union should adopt more proactive and consistent enforcement mechanisms to prevent unconstitutional changes of government.
6. The international community should prioritise human development, institutional strengthening, and democratic stability over narrow strategic and economic interests.

References

- Ake, C. (1996). *Democracy and development in Africa*. Brookings Institution.
- African Union. (2000). *Lomé Declaration on the Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government*. African Union Commission.
- African Union Peace and Security Council. (2022). *Communiqués on the situation in Mali and Burkina Faso*. African Union.
- Cheeseman, N. (2015). *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform*. Cambridge University Press.
- ECOWAS Commission. (2021). *Final communiqué on the political situation in Mali*. ECOWAS.
- ECOWAS Commission. (2022). *Sanctions regimes and transition frameworks for Burkina Faso*. ECOWAS.
- ECOWAS Commission. (2023). *Extraordinary summit on the political situation in Niger*. ECOWAS.
- Finer, S. E. (1962). *The man on horseback: The role of the military in politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huntington, S. P. (1957). *The soldier and the state: The theory of civil-military relations*. Harvard University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2019). *Guinea-Bissau: Beyond the election deadlock*. International Crisis Group.
- Janowitz, M. (1960). *The professional soldier: A social and political portrait*. Free Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Way, L. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lynch, G., Cheeseman, N., & Willis, J. (2020). *The politics of new authoritarianism in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

- N'Diaye, B. (2013). *The challenge of institutionalizing civil-military relations in Africa*. Lexington Books.
- Seybolt, T. B. (2007). *Humanitarian military intervention: The conditions for success and failure*. Oxford University Press.
- Talentino, A. K. (2005). *Military intervention after the Cold War: The evolution of theory and practice*. Ohio University Press.