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EXPLORING THE RESURGENCE OF MILITARY COUPS IN WEST AFRICA: AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Ibrahim Suleiman, PhD

Department of Political Science Sa'adu Zungur University Bauchi State

Abstract

The West African sub-region hailed for its democratic progress in the post-Cold War era, but witnessing a resurgence of military coups d'état. Since 2020, successful military takeovers have occurred in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022, twice), Niger (2023), and Gabon (2023), marking a significant reversal of democratic gains. This paper explores the multifaceted drivers of this trend, arguing that it constitutes an existential threat to the survival of democracy in the region. The paper adopted a qualitative case-study method anchoring the analysis in Samuel Huntington's theory of the "soldier as modernizer" and the contemporary "coup trap" thesis, the study found that the convergence of democratic governance failure characterized by electoral malpractices, constitutional manipulation, and corruption with acute security crises and worsening socio-economic conditions creates a conducive environment for military intervention. The paper concludes with recommendations for regional bodies (ECOWAS), international partners, and domestic actors to rebuild resilient democratic institutions, address security deficits, and foster inclusive governance to reverse this dangerous trend.

Keywords: Coup d'état, Democracy, Governance, Security, Military Intervention.

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century nurtured confidence for democratic consolidation in West African region transitioning from decades of authoritarian rule and conflict. However, this optimism has been starkly undermined by wave of military interventions beginning in 2020. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which once successfully enforced anti-coup norms (Hulse, 2023), now faces an unprecedented challenge as member states succumb to military rule. This re-emergence is not merely a series of isolated events but a systemic crisis threatening to unravel the region's democratic fabric. This paper argues that the contemporary coup wave is a symptom of profound democratic deficits, where citizens, disillusioned by the failures of civilian elites, and welcome military intervention as a corrective measure (Brooks, 2023). The paper seeks to analyze the structural causes of the coup resurgence; the study also examines the theoretical underpinnings of military intervention in West Africa; in addition, the paper seeks to assess the

implications of the menace for regional stability and democracy; and lastly, the paper proposes policy recommendations. The period 2020-2024 serves as the critical timeframe, reflecting the current cycle of democratic backsliding.

Literature Review

The Re-emergence of Military Coups in West Africa

The literature on military coups in West Africa has evolved through distinct phases, mirroring the region's political trajectory. This review synthesizes contemporary scholarship (2020-2024) that seeks to explain the alarming resurgence of military interventions after two decades of presumed democratic consolidation. The analysis clusters around four dominant thematic strands: 1) The Crisis of Democratic Governance, 2) Security-Governance Nexus, 3) Socio-Economic and Youth Dynamics, and 4) Regional and Geopolitical Architectures.

Crisis of Democratic Governance

A dominant theme in recent literature identifies the inherent flaws within West Africa's democratic practice as the fundamental precondition for military intervention. Scholars argue that what collapsed was not liberal democracy but its hollowed-out imitation. Cheeseman (2020) and Dulani (2022) posit that the subversion of democratic principles by elected civilians themselves through rigged elections, judicial capture, and most notably, constitutional amendments to remove term limits eroded public faith in democratic institutions. This "civilian constitutional coup" (Maïkorema, 2021) creates a legitimacy vacuum. When citizens perceive the ballot box as futile, they may become indifferent or even supportive of extra-constitutional change. Kühne (2023) terms this the "authoritarian bargain," where short-term stability under a junta is preferred over the prolonged misrule of a civilian elite.

Corruption and Elite Manipulation

Literature highlights how pervasive corruption and the blatant capture of state resources by political elites fuel public cynicism. Transparency International's reports (2022, 2023) correlate high perceptions of corruption with coup susceptibility in the region. Mentan (2024) argues that the military often steps in not as a disinterested modernizer but as a faction of the elite capitalizing on popular anti-corruption sentiment to seize its turn at the "patrimonial buffet." Dulani, (2022); Gyimah-Boadi, (2023) reveals significant portions of citizens in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso expressing support for military takeovers at the outset. Brooks (2023) explains this as a "corrective coup" narrative resonating with a populace deeply disillusioned by failed democratic promises. This literature cautions that measuring democracy merely by the absence of coups is inadequate; the quality and legitimacy of governance are paramount.

The Security-Governance Nexus

The literature ascertains that insurgency in the Sahel as the most potent cause of the recent coups, creating a deadly feedback loop with governance failures. Scholars like Odom (2022) and Shinn (2023) document how national armies, poorly equipped, underfunded, and suffering heavy casualties, grew deeply resentful of civilian leadership perceived as detached and corrupt. The

failure of internationally-backed strategies (e.g., France's Operation Barkhane) exacerbated this sentiment. International Crisis Group reports (2021, 2023) detail how military officers in Mali and Burkina Faso directly cited the government's incompetent handling of security as the primary justification for seizing power. Thurston (2024) and Solomon (2023) argue that the Sahelian coups represent a distinct "security coup" model. Here, the military intervenes not primarily for political power per se, but out of a professed existential need to salvage a collapsing counterinsurgency campaign. This narrative powerfully aligns with public fear and anger, granting the junta initial popular legitimacy. McGregor (2023) argues that the perpetual state of war elevates the military's political role and budget, inherently destabilizing civil-military relations. When the military becomes the most powerful and resonant institution, the threshold for intervention lowers.

Socio-Economic and Youth Demographics

Contemporary research emphasizes the role of structural socio-economic conditions in creating a permissive environment for upheaval. Uneca (2023) and World Bank (2023) reports underscore that coup-affected countries feature some of the world's highest youth unemployment rates and lowest human development indices. Liman (2022) contends that a vast population of economically marginalized, digitally-connected youth sees little stake in a system that offers no future. Their protests often pave the way for, or welcome, military intervention as a wrecking ball to the status quo. Recent scholarship explores how exogenous shocks have accelerated instability. Melde et al. (2022) analyze how pandemic-related economic disruptions deepened poverty and exposed state incapacity. Concurrently, Busby (2024) links climate change-induced agrarian stress in the Sahel to increased rural vulnerability and recruitment pools for armed groups, further straining the state's capacity to govern. Hulse (2023) and Idayat (2022), analyzes the decline of regional norm enforcement. They argue that ECOWAS's inconsistent responses perceived as lenient in some cases (Mali 2020) and overly harsh in others (Niger 2023) coupled with the formation of a "junta bloc" (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), has shattered deterrence. The regional body is now seen as weakened and divided.

Scholars highlight a major shift in the international cost-benefit analysis for coup plotters. Arieff & Maizland (2023) and Stoner (2024) detail how the rise of alternative security partners like Russia's Wagner Group (now Africa Corps) provides juntas with immediate legitimacy, security assistance, and a counterweight to Western condemnation. The decline of consistent, principled democracy promotion by traditional partners (France, US) has created a permissive geopolitical space. This aligns with Powell's (2022) contemporary coup theory, which emphasizes that interventions occur when perceived costs are low. Harkness (2023) provides empirical support for "coup contagion," where success in one state lowers psychological and practical barriers in neighboring states through demonstration effects and shared narratives of anti-colonial resistance. Others caution against overstating direct causation, pointing instead to shared underlying structural conditions (Folami, 2024).

Existing literature on coups in Africa has evolved. Early post-independence scholarship focused on the military as a modernizing, praetorian force (Huntington, 1968; Janowitz, 1977). The democratic wave of the 1990s shifted focus to "coup-proofing" and norm internalization (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Recent scholarship post-2020 grapples with explaining the reversal.

Crisis of Governance: Contemporary studies highlight how “illiberal democracy” and “constitutional coups” by civilians themselves erode legitimacy. Cheeseman (2020) and Dulani (2022) posit that the subversion of democratic principles by elected civilians themselves through rigged elections, judicial capture, and most notably, constitutional amendments to remove term limits eroded public faith in democratic institutions. This “civilian constitutional coup”.

Literature Gap

The literature reveals several frontiers. First, there is a need for more research on the internal dynamics and factionalism within the juntas themselves and their long-term governance projects. Second, the gendered dimensions of military rule and resistance remain underexplored. Third, a significant debate is emerging on whether these events signal the terminal decline of the post-1990 liberal democratic model in the region or a painful, corrigible setback. Finally, more work is needed on alternative forms of legitimacy and governance emerging in these contexts, beyond the binary of liberal democracy versus authoritarianism.

In conclusion, the contemporary literature converges on an integrated explanation; the resurgence of coups in West Africa is not an atavistic return to the past but a contemporary crisis born from the intersection of hollowed-out democracies, existential security threats, profound socio-economic despair, and a transformed international landscape that has reduced the costs of military intervention.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design utilizing a comparative case study approach. The primary cases are the successful coups in Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). Gabon (2023) is referenced as a contextual comparator, though its Central African location places it slightly outside the core West African focus. Data was gathered from a triangulation of secondary sources to ensure robustness and validity. Document was analyzed using official statements from ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and UN reports; constitutions and legal texts of the concerned states; reports from think tanks (ISS, ICG, Carnegie Endowment).

Academic Literature: Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and monographs published between 2020-2024. Reputable News Media: Reporting from trusted international and regional news outlets to chronicle event sequences and public reactions. Thematic analysis is used to code and categorize data into recurring themes: governance failure, security breakdown, public sentiment, and regional response. Process-tracing is applied to each case to identify common causal pathways leading to military intervention. Limitations; the research relied on secondary sources may inherit their biases. The rapidly evolving situation also means new developments may occur after analysis. The study acknowledges the difficulty in accessing the clandestine decision-making processes within military juntas.

Theory of Military Intervention

The resurgence of coups challenges the notion that they were an anachronism. Two theoretical frameworks are pivotal: Huntington’s “Soldier as Modernizer” Revisited: Samuel Huntington’s (1968) classic thesis posited that in politically underdeveloped societies, the military, as the most

modern and organized institution, intervenes to correct corruption, inefficiency, and stagnation. This framework finds renewed relevance. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, juntas have justified their actions as necessary to restore security, fight corruption, and rescue the nation from venal civilian politicians a direct echo of the modernizer rationale (Thurston, 2024).

The Contemporary “Coup Trap” and Permissive Environment: Modern theory emphasizes a permissive environment over a simple will to power. Powell (2022) argues that coups occur when civilian institutions are weak, public legitimacy is low, and the military believes it can succeed with minimal cost. The convergence of governance failure, security crisis, and economic distress creates this “trap.” Furthermore, the theory of “coup contagion” or “diffusion” suggests that successful coups in one state lower psychological and practical barriers for plotters in neighboring states, creating a regional cascade (Harkness, 2023). In West Africa, these theories merge: the military intervenes claiming a modernizing, salvific role (Huntington) in an environment made permissive by multiple, intersecting crises (Contemporary Coup Theory).

Findings/Results

The analysis reveals several interconnected findings:

The Primacy of Governance Failure: In every case, coups were preceded by significant democratic erosion. This included manipulated elections (Guinea 2020), constitutional term-limit extensions (Côte d'Ivoire as a stressor, Mali's pre-2020 context), and pervasive corruption. Civilian regimes had hollowed out the democratic compact.

Security as the Immediate Trigger: Particularly in the Sahelian states (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), the immediate catalyst was the government's perceived abject failure to contain jihadist violence. Military officers portrayed the civilian leadership as detached and incompetent, justifying intervention as a patriotic duty (ICG, 2023).

Initial Popular Acquiescence: A striking finding is the widespread public celebration or quiet acceptance following the coups. This reflects deep disillusionment with the ousted democratic regimes. However, this support often wanes as juntas fail to swiftly resolve the crises that brought them to power (Brooks, 2023).

The Weakening of Regional Deterrence: ECOWAS's response has been inconsistent and increasingly ineffective. While harsh sanctions were initially imposed, regional divisions, the solidarity among juntas, and the sheer number of suspended states have crippled the bloc's leverage. The threat of military intervention (as in Niger) has proven divisive and logistically dubious (Hulse, 2023).

Geopolitical Re-alignment: Successful juntas have rapidly leveraged anti-Western (particularly anti-French) sentiment and sought new security partnerships with Russia. This provides them with external patronage, mitigates international isolation, and creates a new model for other disaffected military elites (Arieff & Maizland, 2023).

Recommendations

To counter the coup trend and salvage democracy, a multi-pronged strategy is essential:

For ECOWAS and the AU:

Move beyond reactionary condemnation and develop a proactive Governance Monitoring Mechanism that addresses early signs of democratic backsliding (term extensions, electoral manipulation). Recalibrate sanctions to target junta leadership specifically while minimizing humanitarian impact on civilians, to avoid turning juntas into populist heroes. Lead inclusive, nationally-owned transition dialogues with clear, shorter timelines for return to constitutional order.

For International Partners (EU, US, etc.):

Align foreign policy to consistently support constitutional rule, not just stable anti-jihadist partners. Condition security cooperation on democratic governance. Increase support for civil society, independent media, and parliaments as pillars of accountability. Address the economic roots of instability through debt relief and investment in youth employment and agriculture.

For Domestic Actors:

Civilian Elites: Must recommit to genuine democratic principles respecting term limits, ensuring clean elections, and governing inclusively. Civil Society and Media: Must build robust, cross-national networks to defend democratic space and hold both civilian and military leaders accountable. National Militaries: Need professionalization programs that reinforce constitutional subordination and civic-military relations.

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