

# Military Coups, Democratic Failure, and the Crisis of Legitimacy in the Sahel: Rethinking Governance and Peacebuilding in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

Ekevere F.O

Department of Theatre Art, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria.  
[francisekevere@gmail.com](mailto:francisekevere@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Framing military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger as abrupt disruptions of democratic governance is a common practice. This study contends that deeper structural crises, such as legitimacy deficits, institutional fragility, and persistent insecurity, better explain these interventions. By integrating civil-military relations theory, fragile state analysis, and peacebuilding frameworks, the paper demonstrates that coups are both disruptive and revelatory: they undermine democratic institutions while exposing the systemic failures that precede them. The study employs literary metaphors from Achebe, Fanon, Shakespeare, Orwell, and Machiavelli to illuminate the cyclical nature of power, legitimacy, and instability. The study concludes that sustainable political stability in the Sahel requires governance reforms that go beyond formal democratic procedures to address structural deficits and restore societal trust.

**Keywords:** Military coups; democracy; Sahel; governance; legitimacy; instability

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## INTRODUCTION

Military coups in the Sahel are often framed as abrupt interruptions of democratic governance. However, such interpretations risk obscuring a deeper structural reality: that repeated military interventions may not merely disrupt democracy, but rather expose its fragility, limitations, and, in some cases, its failure to deliver legitimacy and security. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the resurgence of coups since the 2010s raises fundamental questions about whether democratic governance, as it is currently institutionalised, has taken root in any meaningful or sustainable form (Thurston, 2024; Diamond, 2020).

This pattern of institutional breakdown bears a striking resemblance to the disintegration of social order depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, where externally imposed systems destabilise existing structures without successfully replacing them (Achebe, 1958). In a similar vein, democratic frameworks in the Sahel—often externally supported and procedurally implemented—have struggled to establish deep-rooted legitimacy, leaving political systems vulnerable to disruption.

Conventional scholarship tends to interpret coups as regressions from democratic progress, reinforcing a normative commitment to constitutional rule and civilian supremacy (Finer, 2002; Huntington, 1957). Nevertheless this perspective often assumes the existence of functioning democratic systems prior to military

intervention. In the Sahelian context, where governance is frequently characterised by weak institutions, elite capture, endemic corruption, and chronic insecurity, such assumptions are becoming increasingly untenable (Bach & Gazibo, 2017; OECD, 2024). Rather than representing clear breaks from democratic order, coups may instead reflect deeper crises of legitimacy in which civilian governments fail to maintain authority, public trust, or territorial control.

The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger illustrate this paradox vividly. In Mali, the coups of 2012, 2020, and 2021 were justified by military actors as responses to state incapacity in addressing insurgency and governance failures (International Crisis Group, 2021). Similarly, Burkina Faso's 2014 and 2022 coups emerged amid escalating jihadist violence and public disillusionment with civilian leadership (Harsch, 2017). Niger's 2023 coup further underscores the persistence of military intervention as a political instrument in contexts where constitutional governance struggles to maintain legitimacy (Schwartz & Kennedy, 2024).

This dynamic resonates with postcolonial critiques such as those advanced in *The Wretched of the Earth*, where state structures are considered reproducing systems of exclusion and alienation (Fanon, 1961). In the Sahel, governance systems have often failed to address popular

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grievances, reinforcing conditions under which military actors can present themselves as corrective forces.

Accordingly, this study argues that military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are not merely disruptions of democratic governance but manifestations of deeper structural and legitimacy crises. By examining the causes, consequences, and peacebuilding implications of these interventions, the paper seeks to move beyond conventional dichotomies of democracy versus military rule and instead interrogate the conditions under which both systems operate.

#### Background of the Study

The political histories of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger illustrate recurring patterns of military intervention that have shaped governance in West Africa. Although the post-Cold War era initially seemed to usher in democratic openings across the region, recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of coups that challenge democratic norms and institutional stability. In the early 1990s, driven by demands for political pluralism and constitutional governance, many West African states—including the three Sahelian republics—began transitioning from authoritarian or single-party rule toward multiparty elections and civilian administrations (Sunday & Semudara, 2024). However, these gains were uneven; structural weaknesses in civil institutions and persistent socio-economic grievances created a fertile ground for military actors to reassert themselves (Thurston, 2024).

Mali's coup history dates back to the immediate post-independence period, with the overthrow of President Modibo Keita in 1968 marking the first significant military intervention in the country (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). Since then, Malian politics has oscillated between civilian rule and military dominance—a pattern that surfaced again with successive coups in 2020 and 2021, when dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion and jihadist insurgency catalysed military action (Wikipedia contributors, 2025; Thurston, 2024). These recent takeovers dissolved existing democratic frameworks, suspended constitutions, and postponed electoral schedules, raising serious concerns about the fragility of democratic consolidation in Mali.

Burkina Faso's coup trajectory similarly reflects deep institutional fragilities and recurring cycles of military rule. The nation experienced its first major military intervention as early as 1966, when protest-sparked unrest led to the ouster of President Maurice Yaméogo, inaugurating years of military governance that would see numerous overthrows and counter-overthrows (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). These included dramatic episodes such as the 1987 assassination of Thomas Sankara, led by Blaise Compaoré—himself a military figure who dominated Burkinabé politics for decades (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). More recently, the coups of 2014 and 2022 illustrate a pattern where security crises and popular disillusionment with civilian administrations facilitated

renewed military interventions amid rising jihadist violence in northern and eastern regions of the country.

In Niger, the historical arc of civil-military relations has also been unsettled. After independence, military rule was institutionalised through events like the 1974 coup that deposed President Hamani Diori, leading to decades of governance characterised by alternating military and civilian administrations (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The 2023 coup that removed President Mohamed Bazoum and installed a military junta is the latest manifestation of a long-standing pattern in Nigerien politics, reflecting persistent governance challenges and security threats that have undermined state legitimacy (Thurston, 2024).

Across these three states, the historical context of military coups cannot be disentangled from wider regional dynamics and structural pressures. The Sahel has become a theatre of insecurity, driven by the expansion of jihadist movements, intercommunal violence, and competition for scarce resources, all of which have strained fragile political orders (Thurston, 2024). Recent work by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underscores how the 2020–2023 wave of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger intersected with heightened jihadism and insecurity, suggesting that coups not only respond to but also exacerbate underlying violence trends.

Post-independence governance models in these states were initially characterised by one-party dominance and centralised executive power, leaving nascent democratic institutions weak and vulnerable to disruption. Democratic transitions in the 1990s seemed to promise breakthroughs in political liberalisation but were often accompanied by enduring weaknesses in rule of law, accountability mechanisms, and civil-military separation (Sunday & Semudara, 2024). These structural deficits have been exploited in moments of crisis, when military actors have justified intervention as necessary to restore order or rectify governance failures—narratives that resonated with segments of domestic populations disillusioned by corruption, poor service delivery, and insecurity.

In all three cases, coups reshaped relationships between state actors and regional governance frameworks. Regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have historically promoted democratic norms and constitutionalism, including through the 2001 Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Yet recent coups have strained ECOWAS's capacity to enforce these norms, with member states facing sanctions or withdrawing from the bloc altogether in pursuit of alternative alliances and security arrangements (Resurgence of Coup D'état in West Africa & Democratic Consolidation, 2025).

Moreover, these political upheavals intersect with shifts in international alignments. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have collectively withdrawn from the International Criminal Court, framed as resistance against perceived

external interference, another dimension through which military regimes in the Sahel are redefining sovereignty and diplomatic orientation (Reuters, 2025).

This historical backdrop raises critical questions about the sustainability of democratic processes in contexts where militaries have repeatedly acted as political arbiters. While coups in the 1960s and 1970s might have reflected Cold War dynamics and nascent state consolidation challenges, contemporary coups occur in a markedly different global environment marked by transnational terrorism, regional security dilemmas, and evolving geopolitical interests. The entrenchment of military governance in these states therefore suggests not mere episodic disruptions but systemic vulnerabilities that have deep roots in historical governance legacies.

The interplay between historical patterns of military rule and contemporary socio-political pressures underscores the urgency of examining how coups affect democratic governance and peacebuilding. In particular, the repeated cycle of intervention, suspension of constitutions, and postponement of elections demonstrates how coups erode institutional trust and impede long-term efforts to establish resilient democracies. Coupled with ongoing security threats from jihadist groups and regional instability, these dynamics present profound challenges for state legitimacy and citizen confidence in democratic processes.

Consequently, understanding the background of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger requires not only tracing historical patterns but also situating these patterns within broader governance crises, security dilemmas, and normative debates about sovereignty and regional order. This study seeks to weave together these strands of history, politics, and conflict to illuminate how coups have shaped—and continue to shape—the prospects for democratic governance and peacebuilding in the Central Sahel.

## Problem Statement

The recurrent phenomenon of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger presents a profound challenge to democratic consolidation and peacebuilding. Despite the democratic transitions initiated in the 1990s, these countries have experienced repeated interruptions in civilian governance, which have eroded public trust in political institutions and created cycles of instability (Thurston, 2024). Military interventions disrupt the continuity of governance, suspend constitutional processes, and often lead to the centralisation of power in unelected authorities, undermining the principles of accountability, transparency, and rule of law that underpin democratic consolidation (Luckham & Kirk, 2013).

In Mali, the coups of 2020 and 2021 not only overthrew elected governments but also weakened ongoing peace negotiations with Tuareg rebels and jihadist groups in the north, highlighting the intersection of political instability with security crises (International Crisis

Group, 2021). Similarly, Burkina Faso's 2014 and 2022 coups occurred amid surging terrorist attacks in the Sahel, demonstrating how military takeovers are often justified by perceived failures of civilian governments to maintain security, even as such interventions exacerbate insecurity by disrupting governance continuity (Harsch, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2022). In Niger, the 2023 military intervention reflected the culmination of decades of political instability, revealing how repeated coups undermine institutional trust, hinder development planning, and disrupt the establishment of resilient democratic systems (Schwartz & Kennedy, 2024).

These patterns highlight a broader problem: coups do not merely replace governments; they systematically weaken the institutional frameworks necessary for sustainable peacebuilding. Democratic institutions are essential for conflict resolution, civic engagement, and the implementation of policies addressing security and social development challenges. Military interventions, however, disrupt electoral processes, suspend constitutions, and weaken civil oversight of the military, creating a governance vacuum that exacerbates societal tensions (Finer, 2002). The consequences are multidimensional, affecting governance capacity, regional stability, economic development, and human security.

Furthermore, repeated coups normalise extra-constitutional mechanisms for political change, reducing incentives for political actors to engage in dialogue, compromise, or participatory governance (Adebanjo, 2016). This normalisation of military intervention erodes public confidence in democracy, particularly among citizens who experience repeated cycles of political uncertainty, insecurity, and economic hardship. Such erosion of democratic norms is particularly consequential in fragile states where institutional legitimacy is already tenuous and where citizens' willingness to engage in political processes is vital for long-term stability (Bach & Gazibo, 2017).

The destabilising effects of military takeovers are compounded by the international dimension. Regional organisations such as ECOWAS face constraints in enforcing democratic norms when member states experience repeated coups, while international partners struggle to balance support for democratic governance with security imperatives (Resurgence of Coup D'état in West Africa & Democratic Consolidation, 2025). These challenges illustrate the broader implications of coups for both domestic governance and regional peacebuilding, emphasising the urgency of examining the causes, effects, and consequences of military interventions in the Sahel.

## Research Objectives

1. To examine the causes of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.
2. To assess the impact of military takeovers on democratic institutions.

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3. To evaluate the implications of coups for peacebuilding initiatives.

### Research Questions

1. What factors trigger military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger?
2. How do military interventions affect democratic consolidation?
3. What are the consequences for peacebuilding and regional stability?

### Significance of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on civil-military relations, democratic governance, and peacebuilding in West Africa. First, it offers an updated, comparative analysis of military coups in the Sahel, highlighting shared patterns and divergent outcomes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Luckham & Kirk, 2013). By situating these countries within a single analytical framework, the research enhances understanding of how coups affect democratic trajectories and institutional resilience.

Second, the study informs policy and practice. By identifying structural vulnerabilities and the consequences of military interventions, the findings can guide national governments, regional organisations, and international partners in designing strategies that strengthen democratic governance, mitigate coup risks, and foster sustainable peace (Bach & Gazibo, 2017).

Third, the research contributes to theoretical debates in political science and peace studies by examining the paradox of democratic resilience amid recurrent coups. It explores the interactions between institutional weakness, socio-political pressures, and military agency, offering insights that extend beyond the Sahel to broader contexts of fragile democracy and conflict-affected states (Finer, 2002; Thurston, 2024).

### Scope and Limitations

The **scope** of this study is geographically confined to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, representing the Sahelian belt most affected by repeated coups in the 21st century. Temporally, the study focuses on the post-1990 democratic transitions through the present, capturing both the initial wave of democratisation and the subsequent reversals caused by military interventions (Sunday & Semudara, 2024).

The limitations of the study include challenges in accessing reliable data from conflict-affected areas, particularly northern Mali and eastern Burkina Faso. Additionally, while the study examines structural, political, and socio-economic factors contributing to coups, it may not fully capture informal dynamics, such as personal networks within the military or elite bargaining processes, which can influence coup outcomes. Careful triangulation

of multiple sources is therefore necessary to ensure accuracy and reliability of findings (Schwartz & Kennedy, 2024).

## 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Rethinking Military Coups: Competing Theoretical Perspectives

Traditional scholarship on military coups is grounded in civil-military relations theory, particularly the work of Samuel P. Huntington, who argued that “objective civilian control” depends on a professionally organised military that is institutionally separated from politics (Huntington, 1957). This view suggests that coups typically occur when weak civilian institutions or politicised armed forces disrupt this balance. Similarly, Janowitz (1960) emphasised the importance of integrating the military with broader societal norms, suggesting that a socially embedded military is less likely to intervene in governance.

While these frameworks remain foundational, their applicability to fragile states has been increasingly questioned. Critics argue that such theories presuppose the existence of stable institutions and clearly defined civil-military boundaries—conditions that are largely absent in the Sahel (Luckham & Kirk, 2013). In contexts where the state itself is weak, the military often becomes one of the few organised and resource-capable institutions, thereby blurring the distinction between civilian and military spheres. Consequently, coups may emerge not simply from military ambition but from structural governance vacuums.

This critique aligns with broader arguments in African political studies that emphasise the role of neopatrimonialism, elite fragmentation, and institutional weakness in shaping political outcomes (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). From this perspective, coups are less anomalies than recurring features of political systems characterised by fragile legitimacy and contested authority.

### 2.2 Democratic Consolidation or Democratic Illusion?

Democratic consolidation theory asserts that democracy attains stability when it is regarded as “the only game in town” by both political actors and citizens (Linz & Stepan, 1996). However, the ongoing occurrence of coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger raises doubts about the existence of such consolidation. Rather than reflecting setbacks in otherwise stable systems, coups may indicate that democratic institutions in these contexts remain superficial, procedural, and weakly institutionalised.

Scholars such as Diamond (2020) highlight the phenomenon of democratic backsliding, where formal democratic structures coexist with declining

accountability, corruption, and executive dominance. In the Sahel, elections have often failed to translate into effective governance, reinforcing perceptions that democracy serves elite interests rather than the broader population (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). This disconnect between democratic form and substantive outcomes has contributed to declining public trust and increased tolerance for alternative forms of governance, including military rule.

Critically, this situation raises the possibility that what is often labelled “democratic regression” may instead reflect the exposure of a deeper democratic deficit. In such contexts, coups are not simply interruptions but symptoms of systemic failure, revealing the limits of externally supported democratisation processes that prioritise elections over institutional depth and legitimacy.

### 2.3 Fragile States and the Political Economy of Instability

Fragile state theory provides a crucial lens for understanding the structural conditions that enable coups. According to Rotberg (2004), state fragility is characterised by an inability to provide basic public goods, maintain security, or command legitimacy. These conditions are prevalent across the Sahel, where governments face persistent challenges related to poverty, weak infrastructure, and limited territorial control.

Empirical research correlates these structural deficiencies with an elevated risk of coups. For instance, Collier and Hoeffler (2004) demonstrate that low state capacity and economic underperformance correlate strongly with political instability. Similarly, Bates (2008) emphasises how elite competition and governance failures create opportunities for military intervention, particularly when civilian institutions are unable to mediate political conflicts effectively.

Security crises, particularly the spread of jihadist insurgencies, compound these dynamics in the Sahel. As Thurston (2024) notes, the inability of civilian governments to provide security has been a central justification for recent coups. However, this justification is deeply paradoxical: while militaries claim to restore order, their interventions often exacerbate instability by disrupting governance continuity and undermining institutional reform, leading to a cycle of violence and further weakening the state’s ability to provide security.

### 2.4 The “Liberal Peace” and Its Discontents

Peacebuilding literature further complicates the relationship between democracy and stability. The liberal peace framework, associated with scholars such as Roland Paris (2004), promotes democratisation and market reforms as pathways to sustainable peace. However, this model has faced significant criticism for its tendency to impose institutional templates that lack local legitimacy.

In the Sahel, externally driven democratisation efforts have often prioritised procedural benchmarks—such as elections—without adequately addressing underlying governance deficits or social inequalities (OECD, 2024). This has resulted in what can be described as “hollow democracies,” where formal institutions exist but lack the capacity to deliver security, justice, or development.

From a critical perspective, such conditions may inadvertently contribute to coup dynamics. When democratic systems fail to meet basic expectations, they lose legitimacy, creating openings for military actors to position themselves as alternative sources of authority. As Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) argue, flawed democratic systems can generate as much instability as authoritarian ones, particularly when they fail to produce tangible benefits for citizens.

### 2.5 Coups as Symptoms of Legitimacy Crisis

An increasing corpus of research indicates that military coups ought to be contextualised within the larger framework of legitimacy crises. According to Finer (2002), coups are more likely to occur when civilian governments lose authority and public confidence. Corruption, poor service delivery, and insecurity (Bach & Gazibo, 2017) closely link this loss of legitimacy in the Sahel.

Public attitudes toward coups make normative assumptions even more difficult to understand. Afrobarometer surveys show that people generally support democracy, but they may also be okay with military intervention if they think their government is corrupt or not doing its job (Gyimah-Boadi, 2014). This suggests that coups, while unconstitutional, may derive a degree of social legitimacy in specific contexts.

These findings contest simplistic dichotomies between democratic and military governance, underscoring the necessity for a more sophisticated comprehension of political legitimacy. Rather than viewing coups solely as anti-democratic acts, they can also be interpreted as indicators of systemic governance failure, reflecting deeper tensions between state institutions and societal expectations.

### 2.6 Literature Gap and Analytical Contribution

Despite extensive research on military coups and democratic governance, significant gaps remain. Much of the existing literature treats coups, democracy, and peacebuilding as separate domains, limiting the ability to understand their interconnections. Schwartz and Kennedy (2024) find particularly limited comparative analyses that explicitly connect military intervention to peacebuilding outcomes in the Sahel.

Moreover, prevailing methodologies frequently exhibit a normative bias that presumes the intrinsic superiority of democratic governance, failing to rigorously evaluate its efficacy in fragile environments. This study seeks to

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address these gaps by adopting a critical, integrated framework that examines how governance failures, military interventions, and peacebuilding challenges intersect in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

This research advances a more nuanced comprehension of coups as both disruptive and revelatory phenomena, transcending mere descriptive accounts and engaging with competing theoretical perspectives. These events not only destabilise political systems but also unveil their inherent vulnerabilities.

### 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the causes and consequences of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Comparative case studies are particularly suitable for exploring complex political phenomena in context, allowing the researcher to identify patterns, similarities, and differences across cases (George & Bennett, 2005). By focusing on three Sahelian states with recent histories of coups, this research design facilitates an in-depth understanding of how military interventions influence democratic governance and peacebuilding outcomes. The qualitative nature of the study enables nuanced insights into political, social, and security dynamics that quantitative methods may overlook, particularly the role of institutional fragility, elite competition, and socio-economic grievances in shaping political instability.

The comparative aspect allows for cross-case analysis, highlighting both context-specific and generalisable factors that trigger military interventions. This approach also enables an exploration of the interplay between domestic governance failures and external pressures, such as regional security threats and international peacebuilding initiatives. The design is particularly well-suited for analysing multi-layered phenomena like civil-military relations, democratic consolidation, and the implications of coups for peacebuilding in fragile states (Yin, 2018).

#### Data Sources

The study draws on primary and secondary data sources to ensure robust and triangulated findings. Primary data are collected through interviews with key informants, including policymakers, military analysts, and civil society actors who have direct knowledge of political and security developments in the three countries. These interviews provide firsthand perspectives on the motivations behind military interventions, the impact on governance, and the challenges faced in post-coup peacebuilding efforts.

Secondary data sources complement the primary data and provide historical and contextual depth. These

include academic journal articles, policy reports from think tanks and regional organisations, news archives, and official documents from the United Nations, the African Union, and ECOWAS. Using multiple secondary sources ensures comprehensive coverage of relevant political events, patterns of military intervention, and peacebuilding initiatives while allowing verification of information obtained from primary interviews.

#### Data Collection Methods

Data collection employs semi-structured interviews **and** document analysis. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across respondents. Interview questions focus on perceptions of coup causation, the impacts of military interventions on democratic institutions, and the effectiveness of peacebuilding programs in the Sahel region. Snowball sampling is used to identify knowledgeable respondents, ensuring that participants have relevant expertise and experience.

Document analysis systematically reviews policy documents, news reports, and scholarly literature to extract information on coup events, governance challenges, and peacebuilding initiatives. This method allows for the cross-validation of interview data, the contextualisation of historical trends, and the identification of recurring patterns across the three cases. Document analysis plays a crucial role in fragile states, where primary sources may underreport or partially document political developments.

#### Data Analysis Techniques

The study uses thematic analysis **to** identify patterns and implications from the collected data. Thematic analysis involves coding interview transcripts and documents to detect recurring concepts, relationships, and categories related to military coups, democratic governance, and peacebuilding outcomes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We examine themes like governance failure, corruption, socio-economic grievances, institutional weakness, and regional security dynamics to understand the triggers and consequences of military interventions.

Cross-case comparison is conducted to determine similarities and differences between Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which reveal both common drivers of coups and context-specific challenges. Thematic analysis is particularly suited for qualitative comparative research, as it allows the researcher to synthesise complex narratives and identify policy-relevant patterns that further clarify the implications for peacebuilding in fragile states.

#### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are central to this research, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of military coups and governance issues. All participants provide

informed consent before interviews, with a clear explanation of the research purpose, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality is strictly maintained, with pseudonyms used in data reporting to protect the identities of respondents, especially those involved in policy or military affairs.

Political sensitivity is also addressed by carefully framing interview questions to avoid compromising participants' safety or positions. Additionally, the research adheres to institutional review board (IRB) protocols, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for research in fragile and politically unstable contexts. Data storage and handling follow best practices to safeguard sensitive information and maintain the integrity of the research process.

## **4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Military Coups as Expressions of Governance Failure**

The recurrence of military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger should not be interpreted as isolated political disruptions but rather as systemic expressions of governance failure rooted in long-standing institutional weaknesses. Across these states, civilian administrations have consistently struggled to fulfil core functions of governance, including the provision of security, delivery of public services, and maintenance of political legitimacy. These deficiencies have fostered an environment where military intervention not only becomes possible but, in some cases, receives public justification as necessary. In Mali, for instance, the inability of the state to contain insurgencies in the northern regions significantly eroded confidence in civilian leadership, culminating in repeated coups that were framed as corrective measures (International Crisis Group, 2021). Similarly, in Burkina Faso and Niger, persistent insecurity and governance deficits have undermined the credibility of elected governments, creating conditions conducive to military takeover (Harsch, 2017; Schwartz & Kennedy, 2024).

This pattern of institutional erosion reflects a gradual but profound weakening of state authority, rather than sudden political collapse. The analogy to *Things Fall Apart* is instructive in this regard, as Achebe (1958) illustrates how social and political systems disintegrate through cumulative pressures rather than singular events. In the Sahel, governance systems have similarly deteriorated over time, weakened by corruption, elite fragmentation, and limited state presence in peripheral regions. Consequently, coups emerge not as anomalies but as predictable outcomes of systemic fragility. From this perspective, military interventions should be understood less as causes of instability and more as symptoms of deeper structural dysfunction within the state.

### **4.2 The Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy**

Beyond institutional weakness, the persistence of coups in the Sahel highlights a profound crisis of democratic legitimacy. While Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have formally adopted democratic frameworks—including constitutions, multiparty elections, and representative institutions—these structures have often failed to produce governance outcomes that resonate with citizens' expectations. This has resulted in what may be described as a disjuncture between democratic form and democratic substance. Elections, while regularly conducted, have not translated into improved security, economic development, or equitable governance, thereby undermining public trust in democratic institutions (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

This legitimacy deficit is not merely a political issue but a structural one, deeply embedded in the nature of postcolonial governance. As argued in *The Wretched of the Earth*, post-independence states often replicate systems of exclusion and domination that alienate the population (Fanon, 1961). In the Sahelian context, this alienation is reflected in the perception that political elites operate independently of, or even against, the interests of the broader population. Consequently, when democratic institutions fail to deliver tangible benefits, citizens may become disillusioned not only with specific governments but also with the democratic system itself.

This dynamic helps explain the paradoxical phenomenon in which segments of the population express conditional support for military intervention. Such support does not necessarily indicate a rejection of democratic ideals but rather reflects frustration with the failure of democratic governance to meet basic expectations. In this sense, coups expose the fragility of democratic consolidation, revealing that democracy in these contexts has not yet become "the only game in town" (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Instead, it remains one among several competing forms of political authority, vulnerable to challenge when it fails to perform.

### **4.3 Security Failure and the Militarisation of Political Authority**

A central factor driving the resurgence of coups in the Sahel is the persistent failure of civilian governments to address escalating security threats. The expansion of jihadist insurgencies across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has placed immense pressure on already fragile state institutions, exposing significant gaps in both capacity and strategy (Thurston, 2024). In many instances, civilian administrations have been unable to maintain territorial control or protect citizens from violence, leading to widespread perceptions of state weakness and ineffectiveness.

Within this context, military actors have positioned

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themselves as alternative providers of security and stability, often justifying their interventions as necessary responses to national crises. This rationale reflects a realist logic similar to that articulated in *The Prince*, where the preservation of the state is prioritised above normative constraints (Machiavelli, 1532/2008). However, while such justifications may resonate in contexts of acute insecurity, they obscure the longer-term consequences of military rule.

In practice, coups often exacerbate the very security challenges they claim to resolve. By disrupting governance structures, undermining institutional coordination, and alienating international partners, military interventions can weaken the overall capacity of the state to respond effectively to insurgent threats (International Crisis Group, 2022). Furthermore, the expansion of the military's political role blurs the distinction between security provision and governance, contributing to the militarisation of political authority. This dynamic increases the likelihood of future coups and undermines efforts to establish stable, civilian-led governance systems.

### 4.4 The Paradox of Power: Coups and Political Instability

The relationship between military coups and political stability in the Sahel is inherently paradoxical. Although proponents often justify coups as essential measures to restore order, they frequently result in heightened instability and uncertainty. This paradox reflects the inherent tension between the means through which power is acquired and the legitimacy required to sustain it.

This dynamic is powerfully illustrated in *Macbeth*, where the seizure of power through force leads to a cycle of insecurity, mistrust, and eventual collapse (Shakespeare, 1606/2003). Similarly, in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, military regimes that emerge from coups often struggle to consolidate authority, facing internal divisions, legitimacy challenges, and continued insecurity. Rather than resolving political crises, coups tend to reproduce them in new forms.

Coups further exacerbate instability by disrupting institutional continuity. Democratic processes are disrupted, policy implementation is delayed, and long-term planning is undermined. These effects weaken governance and create environments in which further instability becomes more likely. As such, coups contribute to a self-reinforcing cycle in which instability begets intervention, and intervention, in turn, perpetuates instability.

### 4.5 Coups and the Reproduction of Power Structures

Military coups often present themselves as transformative or corrective interventions, but their long-term impact frequently reveals a pattern of continuity

rather than change. Military regimes that emerge from coups often replicate many of the governance practices they initially criticise, including centralised power, limited accountability, and restricted political participation.

This pattern can be understood through the allegorical lens of *Animal Farm*, where revolutionary movements ultimately reproduce the same structures of domination they sought to dismantle (Orwell, 1945). In the Sahel, military leaders who justify coups on the basis of corruption or inefficiency often encounter similar challenges once in power, constrained by the same structural conditions that limited their civilian predecessors.

This continuity underscores the limitations of coups as instruments of political reform. Rather than addressing the root causes of governance failure, military interventions tend to operate within existing structural constraints, leading to outcomes that mirror previous regimes. As a result, coups may alter the composition of political leadership without fundamentally transforming the underlying dynamics of governance.

### 4.6 Synthesis: Coups as both Disruptive and Revelatory

The analysis presented in this study highlights the dual nature of military coups in the Sahel as both disruptive and revelatory phenomena. On one hand, coups undermine democratic governance, disrupt peacebuilding efforts, and contribute to political instability. On the other hand, they reveal underlying structural weaknesses, legitimacy deficits, and governance failures that precede military intervention.

This duality challenges conventional narratives that frame coups solely as causes of instability. Instead, coups should be understood as part of a broader cycle of governance failure, in which weak institutions and legitimacy crises create conditions for military intervention, which in turn further weakens the state. Breaking this cycle requires a shift in focus from merely restoring constitutional order to addressing the structural conditions that enable coups in the first place.

Ultimately, the persistence of military intervention in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger suggests not simply the fragility of democratic governance, but the absence of deeply institutionalised and socially embedded political systems capable of sustaining legitimacy and stability over time.

## 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusion

This study has argued that military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger should not be understood merely as interruptions of democratic governance but as manifestations of deeper structural crises rooted in legitimacy deficits, institutional fragility, and persistent

insecurity. While conventional narratives frame coups as deviations from democratic progress, the evidence presented suggests that they are more accurately interpreted as symptoms of underlying governance failures that predate military intervention.

Across the three cases, civilian governments struggled to fulfil core state functions, including the provision of security, delivery of public goods, and maintenance of political legitimacy. These failures created conditions in which military actors could justify intervention as necessary and, in some instances, gain conditional acceptance from segments of the population. This dynamic reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of democratic governance in the Sahel: the coexistence of formal democratic institutions with weak substantive outcomes. Elections and constitutional frameworks, while present, have often failed to translate into effective governance, thereby eroding public trust and undermining the resilience of democratic systems.

The analysis further demonstrates that military coups, while framed as corrective interventions, frequently reproduce the very governance patterns they seek to dismantle. Rather than resolving crises, they tend to perpetuate cycles of instability by weakening institutions, disrupting policy continuity, and complicating peacebuilding efforts. In this sense, coups are both disruptive and revelatory—undermining governance while simultaneously exposing its structural deficiencies.

This paradox is central to understanding the persistence of military intervention in the Sahel. The problem is not simply the overthrow of democracy, but its insufficient institutionalisation and legitimisation to withstand internal pressures. As a result, the region remains trapped in a cyclical pattern in which governance failure leads to military intervention, which in turn deepens institutional fragility.

This cyclical dynamic is very similar to the political allegory in *Animal Farm*, where attempts to change bad systems end up creating the same kinds of power and control structures (Orwell, 1945). In the Sahel, successive regimes—civilian and military alike—have struggled to break free from entrenched patterns of weak governance, limited accountability, and contested legitimacy. The persistence of these patterns underscores the limitations of leadership change as a solution to systemic problems.

This study contributes to ongoing debates in political science and peace studies by contesting linear assumptions of democratic consolidation and emphasising the necessity for a more context-sensitive comprehension of governance in fragile states. By integrating civil-military relations theory, fragile state analysis, and peacebuilding frameworks, the research demonstrates that sustainable political stability cannot be achieved through institutional form alone but requires the development of governance systems that are both effective and socially legitimate.

## 5.2 Policy Recommendations

Addressing the recurrence of military coups in the Sahel requires a shift from reactive responses to structural reforms that strengthen governance and legitimacy.

First, there is a need to move beyond procedural democracy toward **substantive governance reforms**. Governments must prioritise delivering security, public services, and economic opportunities, as these form the foundation of legitimacy. Without tangible improvements in citizens' lived experiences, such as increased access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, democratic institutions will remain vulnerable to challenge.

Second, strengthening **civil-military relations** is essential. This includes the professionalism and depoliticisation of the armed forces, as well as the establishment of robust civilian oversight mechanisms. Transparent defence governance, merit-based promotions, and clear institutional boundaries can reduce the likelihood of military intervention while reinforcing democratic norms.

Third, **security sector reform** must be integrated with broader governance strategies. Addressing insurgency in the Sahel requires not only military capacity but also political solutions that tackle underlying grievances, including marginalisation, inequality, and lack of state presence in peripheral regions.

Fourth, regional and international actors must adopt more **consistent and context-sensitive approaches** to democratic governance and peacebuilding. While sanctions and diplomatic pressure remain important tools, they should be complemented by long-term support for institutional development, local governance, and inclusive political processes. External interventions must also avoid reinforcing perceptions of double standards or external imposition, which can undermine legitimacy.

Finally, peacebuilding efforts must focus on **long-term institutional resilience** rather than short-term stability. This includes strengthening judicial systems, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations that can sustain citizen accountability and engagement over time.

## 5.3 Last Thoughts

The ongoing military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger pose a fundamental question: not merely how to safeguard democracy, but how to render it significant. As long as governance systems fail to deliver security, justice, and inclusion, they will remain vulnerable to disruption, regardless of their formal structure.

In this sense, the challenge facing the Sahel is not merely one of political transition but of political transformation. Without addressing the structural conditions that underpin

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instability, such as poverty, lack of access to education, and weak institutions, efforts to restore constitutional order may amount to little more than temporary resets within an enduring cycle of fragility.

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