

# Democratic rollback in West Africa: Coup contagion, sit-tight tyrants and best options for regional organizations

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## ABSTRACT

Unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) have resurfaced in West Africa, undermining decades of democratic progress. This article examines the effectiveness of intervention strategies by regional organizations, specifically the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), in preventing democratic backsliding and mitigating military coups. Despite these organizations' efforts, their strategies, including diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and military threats, have often yielded limited success. The study investigates the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches, highlighting the inconsistency in sanctions application and the internal divisions within ECOWAS that hamper effective intervention. Through a comprehensive review of recent coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, the study explores the broader political and economic factors contributing to instability, such as corruption, weak institutions, and socioeconomic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that enhancing democratic institutions, promoting good governance, and enforcing strict term limits are crucial for long-term stability. This study aims to contribute to the development of more robust frameworks for safeguarding democracy in West Africa, offering recommendations for regional organizations, national governments, and international actors to address the challenges of democratic backsliding and coup contagion.

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## Introduction

After independence from colonial powers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, African countries embraced a semblance of Western-style democracy before being ravaged by unconstitutional changes of government (UCG), which lasted till the 1990s. There followed a resurgence of democratic governance, which is currently threatened by the fallout from decades of authoritarian civilian regime, sit-tight leadership, and a creeping contagion of military coups. Consequently, Africa has been one of the world's regions most prone to coups since the majority of its states attained political independence (Baltoi, 2023), having experienced 220 attempted or successful coups in total since 1950, accounting for nearly half of all attempted or successful coups worldwide (Fleck, 2023). As shown in Figure 1, as of August 2023, that is, after the Gabon coup, 45 of the 54 countries that make up the African continent had experienced one or more coup attempts, with an average of four coup

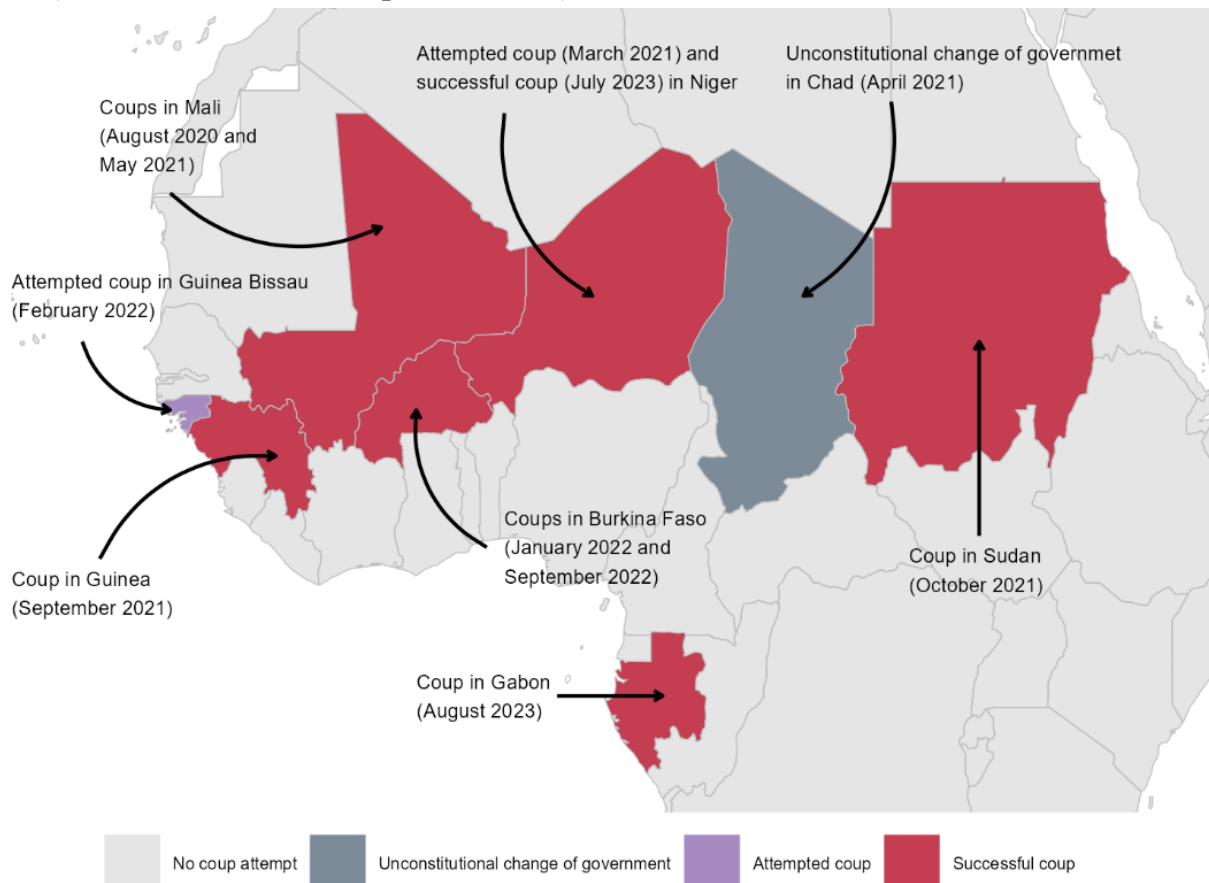
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attempts per country, except for Sudan has experienced it seventeen times, including two in 2021 (Ani, 2021; Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023).



**Figure 1.** Coup d'état in Africa since 2020.

Since 2020, amid worldwide threats to international stability and peace, there have been nine successful coups<sup>1</sup> and five coup d'état attempts<sup>2</sup>—two of which were “coups within coups” (Eziakonwa, 2023) in sub-Saharan Africa, more than at any time in two decades. These include Mali in August 2020 and May 2021, Chad in April 2021, Guinea in September 2021, Sudan in October 2021, Burkina Faso in January and September 2022, Niger in July 2023 and Gabon in August 2023. A decade before the current wave of coups, the continent had witnessed seven popular uprisings that brought about changes in government across Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, all in 2011, Burkina Faso in 2014, Zimbabwe in 2017, as well as Algeria and Sudan in 2019.

Several academics and political analysts (Souaré, 2009; Ani, 2021; Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023; Campbell & Quinn, 2021; Siegle, 2021) posit that the wave of coups and military takeovers across the continent, along with other governance-related problems, is a setback for democracy with “widespread democratic backsliding” (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023) now exceeding advancement. It equally points to the failure of regional organizations and the international community to find a viable political pathway to end the wave of coups. This succession of coups definitely impacts the sustenance of democracy, good governance,

<sup>1</sup> Powell and Thyne (2011, p. 252) conceptually define coups as “illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive.” They operationally define a successful coup as one in which “the perpetrators seize and hold power for at least seven days.”

<sup>2</sup> The affected countries include: Sudan (September 2021 and April 2023), Niger (March 2021), Sao Tome and Principe (November 2022) and Guinea-Bissau (February 2022).

and regional stability. Only nine African countries—Botswana, South Africa, Cabo Verde, Namibia, Tanzania, Eritrea, Malawi, South Sudan, and Mauritius—have staved off coup attempts since gaining independence.

It suffices that decades of progress toward stable governance have been undermined in West Africa by the troubling resurgence of military coups and democratic backsliding in recent years. Despite concerted efforts by regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to uphold democratic norms and constitutional order, these interventions have often been met with limited success. The persistent occurrence of coups, alongside the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes, calls into question the effectiveness of current strategies employed by these organizations. This study aims to critically evaluate the intervention mechanisms of the AU and ECOWAS, assessing their impact on preventing democratic reversals and restoring stability in the region. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and exploring potential alternative strategies, this study seeks to contribute to developing more robust frameworks for safeguarding democracy and promoting good governance in West Africa.

The central argument of this paper is that the current intervention strategies employed by regional organizations such as the AU and ECOWAS are insufficient to prevent democratic backsliding and mitigate the impact of military coups in West Africa. The central hypothesis is that enhancing the robustness and consistency of these interventions, coupled with addressing the root causes of instability, such as corruption, weak institutions, and socio-economic challenges, will lead to more effective prevention of coups and stabilization of democratic governance in the region. In light of this, the article begins by examining the historical context of democratic transitions in West Africa and the subsequent emergence of democratic governance in the region. It explores the current state of democratic reversals and the extent to which African regional organizations (AU and ECOWAS) have responded to this trend. The article concludes by offering suggestions for future policy interventions and research agendas that can be implemented to address the phenomenon of military coup d'état in Africa. It emphasizes the necessity for expanded political engagement, sustained commitment to democratic principles and values, and enhanced governance systems to guarantee the steady advancement of African democracy.

In terms of methodology, this study employs a comprehensive literature review to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies by regional organizations in West Africa. Data was derived from secondary sources like books, scholarly articles, media reports, monographs, institutional journals, and government publications. By analyzing recent case studies of coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, the study examines the broader political and economic factors contributing to instability. The literature review method allows for an in-depth understanding of the historical context, current trends, and the roles of the AU and ECOWAS in mitigating democratic backsliding. Additionally, the study compares the approaches of these organizations to identify gaps and recommend improvements.

## **The trajectories of Africa's democratic reversals in two decades**

Civilian supremacy over the military is routinely challenged in many praetorian states of Africa due to the armed forces' political interference (Matei, 2021). This explains why the immediate post-independence decade experienced democratic reversals in different African states. The most successful coups in Africa occurred during the Cold War rivalry between

the United States and the Soviet Union, which lasted from 1946 to 1991 (Duzor and Williamson, 2022). The continent’s heyday for military takeovers recorded twenty-five successful coups in the 1970s (Munshi and Schipani, 2021). At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, there was a notion that the military was relinquishing its hegemony over African political matters due to the rise of democratization and the restoration of multiparty politics in various African countries. Before 2020, or a decade before the current wave of coups in Africa, there had been, on average, less than a successful coup annually (Thyne and Powell, 2019).

For nearly two decades, there has been a broad consensus among researchers (Brechenmacher and Carothers, 2014; Diamond, 2015; Freedom House, 2019; Papada *et al.*, 2023) and public policy think tanks such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Varieties of Democracy, Freedom House, Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance that there is a growing democratic decline across the globe. While it is established that the number of democracies across all regions of the globe is dropping and the number of autocracies is increasing, Africa, strangely, has the highest number of both democratizing (N=5) and autocratizing (N=12) countries (Papada *et al.*, 2023). For instance, the 2022 Freedom House report (2023) reveals that Burkina Faso has the world’s largest one-year score decline after experiencing two successive coups, which caused it to drop from “Partly Free” to “Not Free” status, whereas Kenya gained four points to have the region’s largest one-year score improvement following its most transparent presidential election ever. In West Africa, only Ghana and Cabo Verde remain eligible to be classified as full-fledged democracies, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2020.

During the Cold War, when the “third wave” of democracy surged over most of Africa, expectations were high that Africans would start to experience the freedoms granted to residents of the former colonial powers (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). The frequency of military takeovers has drastically decreased since the end of the Cold War in 1991 (Elischer, 2023). In the early 1990s, almost all countries in the sub-Saharan Africa region had established multiparty electoral regimes and legalized political opposition, resulting in one of the most substantial expansions in democracy. By the end of that decade, however, the process of democratization seemed to have stagnated in most of these countries mainly because of governance crises, third-termism, and constitutional manipulation (Théroux-Bénoni and Kanté, 2023), given how real democratization was limited to fewer than a dozen countries (Arriola, Rakner and van de Walle, 2023). Additionally, many democratic governments metamorphosed into electoral autocracies or authoritarian regimes despite holding regular multiparty elections.

These authoritarian regimes ventured into “constitutional coups” to allow tenure elongation through the connivance and acquiescence of weak, rubber-stamp parliaments and a docile and complicit judiciary (The Punch, 2020). They also adopted legal restrictions on crucial civil and political rights (Rakner, 2019), such as shutting down social media platforms, repressing public protests (Akinyetun, 2022), manipulating the judiciary and the law, and ultimately entrenching bad governance in their countries. As a result, many African countries became a flourishing ground for unconstitutional transfers of power and sit-tight heads of state, many of them transmuted from known reformists or progressives – when they took over power – to full autocrats (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Failed, attempted, and successful coups around the world since 1950.

Region	Coup attempts	Successful	Failed
Africa	220	109	111
Latin America	146	70	76

East Asia	49	27	22
Middle East	44	21	23
Europe	17	8	9
South Asia	16	10	6
Global	492	245	247

Source: Thyne & Powell (2023).

According to statistics compiled by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) and the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) (Zounmenou, 2020), twenty-five constitutional modifications aimed at favoring presidential third-term initiatives were sought between 2000 and 2020, out of which only seven failed. Unsurprisingly, Africa is home to “10 leaders who have ruled for over 20 years and two family dynasties that have been in power for more than 50 years” (The Punch, 2020; Siegle & Cook, 2021), as well as a considerable number of single party rulers and life presidents: Gnassingbe dynasty in Togo (since 1967), Bongo dynasty in Gabon (Since 1967-2023), Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea (since 1979), Paul Biya of Cameroon (since 1982), Mswati III of Swaziland (since 1986), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (1987-2017), Blaise Campore of Burkina Faso (1987-2014), Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (since 1986), Idrissu Deby of Chad (1990-2021), Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea (since 1993), Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia (1995-2012), Denis Sassou Nguesso of the Republic of Congo (since 1997), Mohammed VI of Morocco (since 1999), Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti (since 1999), and Paul Kagame (since 2000). This trend has hindered the entrenchment of a people-driven democracy on the continent.

Today, African states are left increasingly susceptible to illegitimate power grabs by military or executive leaders owing to perennial issues such as corruption and poor governance as well as the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Freedom House, 2023) even though the immediate triggers for coups are usually country-specific. According to the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2023) report, over 60 percent of Africans reside in countries where participation, rights, and inclusion have deteriorated over the past ten years, and more than one-third reside in countries where the trend has worsened since 2017.

The immediate post-independence variables precipitating military takeover, such as nationalism, anti-oligarchism, desire to promote modernization and economic development, anti-colonialism, and the urge to protect the military institution from encroachment or opposition to a nationalist civilian regime, appear to have faded away and been replaced by other complex variables in the political ecosystem. The fact that coup leaders often overthrow unpopular leaders works to their advantage. In other instances, coups “from below” only signify the overthrow of an older generation by a younger generation of army commanders (Ford and Versi, 2022) as against coups “from above” where officers move against civilian elites and executive incumbents in political power struggles within authoritarian elite coalitions (Albrecht *et al.* 2021). However, one persistent narrative, which is reinforced by a substantial body of civil-military relations literature (Aslan, 2020), is that military coups d’état occur either as domestic affairs or as an apparent result of global factors: exogenous pressure from other domestic or international actors.

Curiously, the non-violence nature of the recent coups in West Africa stands in some contrast to the broader political landscape in the region, given that political violence, in the form of protracted conflicts by armed groups and violent extremists, has been prevalent for some years. It could also be connected to the magnitude of support that some of these coups seem to have received from the general public (Ndiloseh and Hudson, 2022) across the affected countries.



## Governance failure-regime change nexus in the African political ecology

Growing armed conflict and threats from non-state actors, inter- and intra-state conflict, political repression, and human rights violations have all combined to destabilize several African states, derail the democratization process (undermining the legitimacy and capacity of democratic regimes), and exacerbate domestic instability in other countries (Perez, 2021). The rise of military regimes in the West African subregion has been linked to these variables (Al Jazeera, 2023), which often time result in the displacement of millions of people, the death of thousands, and the escalation of humanitarian crises in various parts of the continent.

Today, more Africans than at any other time in the previous two decades live in entirely or partially authoritarian countries, while many of them continue to experience varying degrees of internal conflict and violence. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2021), 75 percent of the African countries experiencing armed conflict have autocratic or semi-autocratic governments, while seven of the nine autocracies facing armed conflict have leaders who either came to power through a coup or extended their time in office by avoiding term limits. This trend has devastatingly negative effects on the political and institutional processes and outcomes since it hinders the promotion of sustainable development, democracy, and peace as well as contributes to excessive fragmentation and polarization of the polity.

Since the early 2000s, governments in different African subregions have experienced quadrupled levels of armed conflict, and they are being increasingly challenged with new forms of political violence. West Africa,<sup>3</sup> for instance, has been dealing with violent conflicts and civil unrest for decades. However, the two decades leading up to the new millennium offered increasingly severe and protracted hostilities that caused economic instability in several of the region's countries. Owing to the vast number of actors involved, dynamics in shifting alliances, and their underlying transnational movements, the geography of these conflicts is sometimes ambiguous (Gurría, 2020). History has shown that once coups become established in a country, they usually become easier to take place. The tendency, now evidenced in West Africa, has been studied and dubbed a "coup trap" (Africa Defense Forum, 2023) by scholars.

In 2014, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) affirmed that UCG originated from "deficiencies in governance." Like other world regions, there seems to be no more critical variable than governance in determining the level of peace and stability and the prospects for economic development in Africa. This is because "governance determines whether there are durable links between the state and the society it purports to govern" (Crocker, 2019). For example, despite efforts to avert volatile security challenges and UCG in West Africa, the region continues to experience recurrent conflicts. Numerous deeply ingrained and interconnected causative factors have been linked to these conflicts, including environmental crises, illicit maritime activities, fake news (Al Jazeera, 2023), poor governance, unstructured military governance, the proliferation of small arms, mismanagement of diversity, political dysfunctionality, corruption (Keili 2008; Bourkhars, 2013), and a lack of political will on the part of West African governments to carry out signed

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<sup>3</sup> Omar Touray, the head of the ECOWAS Commission, told the United Nations in July 2023 that there had been 1,800 "terrorist attacks" in West Africa in just the first half of 2023, resulting in 4,600 fatalities and the displacement of 4.5 million people.

peace agreements and resolutions (Ejibunu, 2007) or to address human rights concerns and create transparent and accountable governance institutions. As rightly posited by Ani (2021):

Uprisings are reflective of a new trend of democratic re-negotiation where ordinary populations are resolute against governance systems that fail to provide socio-economic dividends to their citizens.

At its core, effective governance is about establishing that a country's citizens are valued. Governments accomplish this by providing essential services like clean water, infrastructure, health care, and education and using accountable security forces that protect civilians while upholding human rights (USIP, 2022). This principle is contradicted by the political class (military and civil) in many African countries, which consistently exhibits a lack of organizational capacity in the formulation and implementation of public policies that have the potential to enhance the living standards of their citizens. A brief analysis of these factors arising from governance failures will be featured here, which are common denominators in countries affected by military coups.

Firstly, social discontent is widespread in these countries, and the military class capitalizes on it to overthrow its civilian counterpart. While there is a steady decline in coup attempts globally, its resurgence in sub-Saharan Africa points to the failure of democracy to deliver on development, given that "coups often occur amid public resentment against the regime" and "coups are most likely to overthrow authoritarian leaders" (Thyne & Powell, 2019). States have failed to create functioning democracies capable of delivering basic public services to their citizens or meeting people's fundamental security and means of subsistence (Carson, 2023). Considering the level of popular support for the putschists in the affected countries, especially at the local level, the poor quality of democracy and governance in Africa, which disregards accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and civic responsibility, has further been established. As seen in West Africa, putschists have taken advantage of these democratic shortcomings (see Kuwali, 2022) to position themselves as the savior and grab power.

Secondly, most coup leaders have often alluded to prevalent corrupt practices in their countries as part of the motivation for their takeover. The threat of corruption in government and governance, which has impeded growth and development in the region, is also provoking multiple military coups against democratically elected governments in various African countries. In the 2022 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (2023) analysis of regional trends, sub-Saharan Africa was rated as the most corrupt region in the world, with the majority of the countries (precisely 44 out of 49) falling below the midpoint of the CPI scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). At a time when the impacts of the pandemic and increasing costs of living are telling on the people, high levels of corruption are fueling more tension and conflict in sub-Saharan Africa (Transparency International, 2023). In turn, countries in conflict become more corrupt because it is a vicious cycle where corruption and conflict exacerbate each other.

Thirdly, the predominant presence of weak institutions is connected with democratic backsliding in Africa (Akinyetun, 2022). Africa is represented by fifteen of the top twenty countries on the Fund for Peace's index of fragile states for 2021 (FFP, 2021). Twelve of them have experienced at least one successful coup in the past. Many African countries continue to struggle to expand and institutionalize their democracies and effectively deal with abuse of executive power and human rights violations. Human rights, the rule of law, and citizen engagement in government are unquestionably important democratic ideals that may be protected by a strong institution, promoting good governance (Mbaku, 2020). In countries

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with weak institutions, it is difficult to meet any of these values, including the ability to prevent or resolve conflict, prevent state capture, guarantee the provision of public services, and fight corruption.

Fourthly, coups are increasingly restricted to the world's poorest countries, and Africa seems to contain many circumstances traditionally linked with coups (Powell, 2021). Many of the most prevalent coup-precipitating variables continue to exist in the Sahel region, where most recent coups have occurred. Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Chad all had GDPs of less than \$22 billion in 2022, according to a World Bank projection (2022), while Sudan had a GDP of \$52 billion. Despite Gabon's abundant natural oil, manganese, and timber resources, its citizens experience widespread poverty (Archibald and Murray, 2023). Meanwhile, Niger is one of the world's poorest and least developed countries (CRS, 2023). In addition to the "combined effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and inadequate access to food and energy" (The Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023), West Africa's advancement in economic fundamentals and human development is constrained by an increasingly tense security environment.

## Interventions by regional organizations and perceived gaps

Concerned about the instability and contagion of coups in recent years, the ECOWAS heads of state announced, in December 2022, the establishment of a regional peacekeeping force to restore security and constitutional order in member states (Onuah, 2022; Obiezu, 2022). In the wake of the July 2023 coup in Niger, which generated a heightened international response, the 15-nation regional bloc threatened to use force to put down the coup in Niger after giving a seven-day ultimatum to the putschists to reinstate the constitution and democratic institutions (The Guardian, 2023). This was in addition to issuing travel sanctions, imposing a strict economic sanctions campaign, freezing the country's regional central bank assets, and suspending its transactions with neighboring countries (Sharp, 2023). For ECOWAS, apart from the possibility of motivating other armed forces in West Africa to act unconstitutionally, the coup in Niger was considered an existential threat to the economic, security, and political stability of the entire Sahel region, as well as Coastal West Africa.

A month after a similar event in Niger, the military overthrow of Gabon's democratic government sparked alarm and concerns around the world. As expected, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) promptly condemned the coup in communiqués. ECOWAS convened two extraordinary summits to deliberate on appropriate responses and strategies in accordance with its zero-tolerance stance towards coups. Threatening military intervention, ECOWAS member states resolved to activate the organization's standby force at a meeting in August 2023. Suffice it to note that military action is often regarded as the last resort. Since the 1990s, for instance, ECOWAS has deployed peacekeeping troops in Sierra Leone (1997), Liberia (1990, 2003), Guinea-Bissau (1999), Ivory Coast (2003), Mali (2013) and the Gambia (2017). While some of these missions failed to maintain lasting cease-fires, others were able to establish peace agreements (Sharp, 2023).

While the region battled with devastating civil wars and military coups that undermined democratic development in the 1990s, ECOWAS member states transformed their community into a guardian of democratic norms despite the organization's original intent to be an intergovernmental economic union (Ronceray, 2023). Although ECOWAS has consistently faced criticism for its failure to take a firm stand against previous military



takeovers (Adeoye, 2023) as part of its broader mission to support and protect the subregion, its response has often taken the same approach- sanctions and the threat of military action. These adopted measures and sanctions- border closure, imposition of trade embargo, or freeze of assets- are unevenly applied<sup>4</sup> to the affected countries based on the peculiarity of each case. In almost all the cases, however, the UN, African Union, and ECOWAS have always condemned such unconstitutional takeover of democratic governments, demanded an immediate return to civilian rule, or agreed to transition to civil rule timeframes.

Over time, these regional bodies have developed a number of binding instruments relating to development, conflict prevention, governance, and peace, emphasizing the conditions considered threats to regional peace and security. The position of the AU and ECOWAS is grounded in elaborate guidelines and other regional protocols in the defense of constitutional order, insisting “on the intrinsic relationship between security and political good governance” (N’Diaye, Saine, and Houngnikpo, 2005) and committing state parties to higher forms of democratic governance (Hengari, 2017). For instance, the AU’s normative framework on UCG (Lomé Declaration of 2000), which specifically aimed at protecting the authority of civilian political institutions from military intervention or any form of authoritarian regimes, sternly frowns at the UCG in the form of:

A military coup against a democratically elected government; mercenary intervention to replace a democratically elected government; replacing a democratically elected government by dissident armed groups and rebel movements; or refusal of an outgoing government to relinquish power following defeat in free, fair, and regular elections. (Handy, Akum & Djilo, 2020)

In the event of UCG, the following measures are to be enforced: condemnation of the act and a warning to the perpetrators; a six-month period for the restoration of constitutional order and suspension from participation in the AU’s activities; and limited and targeted sanctions if constitutional order is restored after six months (Dersso, 2016). The 2007 Addis Ababa Charter, however, expanded the definition of instances that constitute UCG to include the issue of retaining power unconstitutionally; that is, “any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government” (Article 23(5)). It also stipulated further measures, which include preventing perpetrators from participating in elections held to restore the democratic order and imposing sanctions on any AU member state found to have encouraged or facilitated an UCG in another state.

For ECOWAS, the Niger case is the first time the organization has faced a division of some sort among its member states, and it poses a severe challenge to its regional authority as the stage seems set for a potential break-up of the West African bloc. Some member states’ vehement public opposition to ECOWAS’ stance further questioned the bloc’s influence. In the heat of the Niger crisis, the military regimes in neighboring Guinea, Mali, and Burkina Faso pledged their support to the new regime. Specifically, they warned, “that any military intervention against Niger would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali” (APA News, 2023).

That these regimes are mainly led by mid-level officers from the ranks of their countries’ elite forces<sup>5</sup> further confirms the guardianship dilemma hypothesized in a substantial body

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<sup>4</sup> In some instances, too, sanctions imposed against a member state impacted by unconstitutional changes of government are withdrawn prior to the holding of elections and the formation of a new administration.

<sup>5</sup> Colonels in charge of presidential guards or special forces units have led several of the recent military coups. Some of these young officers have become used to their privileged placement

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of work (Feaver, 1999; Svolik, 2012; McMahon & Slantchev, 2015): political elites are persuaded that the military forces need to be powerful enough to counteract foreign threats to the government and major upheavals within. Ironically, the same tools employed to avert threats from outside forces may be utilized to topple the government. These countries, earlier suspended from ECOWAS decision-making bodies,<sup>6</sup> also promised to take “self-defense measures in support of the forces, armies, and people of Niger” (Kulkarni, 2023) just as clandestine geopolitical contestation among imperialists and rival global powers with strategic interests in West and Central Africa became more palpable<sup>7</sup>. Put differently, the dynamics of coups and post-coup alignments in these regions are continuously shaped by Russia’s rising influence, growing anti-French sentiment, and the NATO factor.

Political upheaval in West Africa’s Sahel region is thus accompanied by escalating diplomatic tensions with former colonial power- France- over the extent of its regional counterterrorism activities, among other concerns (CRS, 2023). Given how the international community has often reacted hesitantly or ambivalently to these countries’ contentious elections, pervasive corrupt practices, and term limits, the external dimension appears to be more about strategic competition among Western powers than democracy promotion. As Siegle (2023) aptly captured, most often, unaccountable African governments are extremely susceptible to manipulation by foreign authoritarian entities, as recent events demonstrated at a significant cost to citizen sovereignty.

Despite their current political initiatives, practical experience, and robust political frameworks, regional organizations like the African Union and ECOWAS encounter significant challenges in handling threats to peace and security that impact their member states, institutions, and civil society organizations. ECOWAS, for instance, has continually struggled to contain a democratic backslide in West Africa, and previous appeals to the military juntas in Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali to return political power to democratic government were not heeded. Although ECOWAS has employed military action to restore constitutional order in the case of The Gambia in 2017 when Yahya Jammeh refused to leave office after losing an election (Akinpelu, 2023), a military intervention in Niger or Gabon by ECOWAS was considered unfeasible to execute for logistical, political, strategic, and legal reasons (Thompson, 2023), especially with the risk of escalating into a broader regional conflict and exacerbating the deteriorating security situation in West Africa. Already, the early pledges of the coup leaders to restore an atmosphere of stability to these West African countries are frequently derailed by shrewd political maneuvering as they alternately coopt and intimidate civilian politicians while playing hardball with the regional bloc at the same time (Thurston, 2022).

The inconsistencies between the African Union (especially the lack of transparency in the application of the AU’s UCG norm) and ECOWAS in the implementation and

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in the center of power and become politicized having regularly received specialised training, equipment, and salaries to boost their performance.

<sup>6</sup> Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso jointly declared on January 28, 2024, that they would be quitting ECOWAS "without delay." The three countries claimed that in an attempt to overturn the coups in each country, ECOWAS was enforcing "illegitimate, inhumane, and irresponsible" sanctions.

<sup>7</sup> Coup leaders are more likely to obtain support and protection from the international community rather than criticism and penalties when their countries are strategically significant or have close ties to non-Western autocracies. Also, coups are predominantly concentrated in a small number of the world's economically poorest countries, possibly giving the international community a considerable impact on the outcome of a coup.

enforcement framework, particularly the use of appeals, sanctions, or troop deployments in response to coups in the region, have also been pointed out. While ECOWAS failed to criticize the constitutional coups in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire publicly, the AU could not suspend Chad after an effective military takeover in the country and has remained largely silent on Tunisia despite anti-democratic developments in the country (Abebe, 2022). The military operations of the ECOWAS have not attempted to reestablish law and order in many isolated parts of the Sahel, nor have they tackled the jihadist insurgencies that thrive in the region (Ronceray, 2023). The ECOWAS has also been "less effective in preventing third-term bids by incumbents" (Campbell & Quinn, 2021), and it appears more concerned with safeguarding incumbents than upholding democratic principles (Zounmenou, 2020), while the position of the African Union regarding popular uprisings and manipulation of constitutional term limits does not categorize these events as UCG.

ECOWAS has, however, been negotiating democratic transition schedules with military juntas in the affected countries, albeit with varying degrees of success. With compromises reached between the regional bloc and Niger's neighbors in the Sahel region and amid international pressure, military leaders in all these countries have pledged to design and implement transitions back to civilian democracy. However, despite global criticism of the coups and the enforcement of sanctions by regional and international organizations, these pledges/diplomatic agreements are plagued with difficulties, with election dates being repeatedly pushed back (Akinpelu, 2023). For example, the military junta in Mali has repeatedly ignored timetables to transition to a legitimate civilian authority, and it has employed fear, harassment, and intimidation to restrict civic space and press freedom (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023). In Chad, Mahamat Déby promised to lead a transition to an elected government within 18 months following the death of his father in 2021, but the military-led hereditary succession shunned the deadline of October 20, 2022 (Eizenga, 2022). Both Niger and Gabon have each proposed a three-year transition program in the wake of global pressure.

## **The limitations of emphasized regular elections and term limits**

In many African countries that have experienced UCG, the quality of electoral processes and disregard for term limits by incumbents to allow them to stay in power have always been recurrent trigger points. With a lack of confidence in the general electoral system and citizens' widespread public disaffection with democratically elected leaders, a leeway has often been created for the military segment to "maneuver and claim their role in this political game" (Sakor *et al.*, 2021). Even though modern military coups are always accompanied by the pledge of a swift return to elections, the intervention of the armed forces in these countries' politics usually undermines the democratic principle that government power must be allocated and transferred through regular, free, and fair electoral contests. Based on both historical and contemporary analysis, a few instances indicate that such transition schedules and promises to revert to civil rule are made in response to pressure or merely to appease regional or international powers.

Most often, citizens' agitation for regime change is precipitated by disagreements over manipulated elections by the governing elite while "seemingly adhering to formal democratic processes" (Ani, 2021). However, regular elections and adherence to term limits have not proven an effective antidote to misgovernance and its attendant disenchantment, clamor for regime change, or uprisings in the polity, thereby threatening a reversal of the democratization process in sub-Saharan Africa. As a matter of fact, other potent conditions

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precipitating fertile grounds for military coups in Africa, six decades after political independence, include other structural deficits in the affected countries such as the youth bulge, poor human development indicators, failed security sector reform and mounting socio-economic pressure play a considerable role (Théroux-Bénoni & Kanté, 2023) in addition to other variables earlier highlighted in this paper.

As various researchers continue to explore the possibility of military coups to begin or facilitate democratization processes in the last decade, it is hypothesized that juntas must usher in competitive elections and hand over to democratically elected leaders within a specific period (Elischer & Lawrance, 2022). Sometimes, these juntas make provisions for civilian engagement in the transition government while outlining and demonstrating their commitment to election calendars and multiparty elections. The involvement of politicians and civilian bureaucrats in the composition of military regimes has, however, questioned the general definition of such regimes as being dominated by the military. A hybrid government with continuing military influence often reinforces skepticism in the democracy movement.

Though elections help citizens build effective democratic institutions and provide a tool for preserving the government through peaceful periodic replacement of recalcitrant and underperforming political elites (Mbaku, 2020), manipulated elections, as seen all too frequently in Africa, do not guarantee this lofty goal, having failed to establish a strong record of peaceful political competition and democratic power transfers. In certain countries, which Brian Klaas and Nic Cheeseman (2018) describe as “counterfeit democracies” amidst the varied landscape of democratic processes, elections are held regularly. However, opposition parties have no realistic possibility of unseating the ruling party, and over time, civil liberties have either stagnated or significantly degraded. To this end, Cheeseman (2021) submits that there is as much variation in the quality of democracy in Africa as in any other region of the world:

Africa features a small number of high-quality democracies and some highly authoritarian regimes, while most countries have political systems that fall somewhere in between – combining elements of democracy with elements of autocracy.

The region appears to have become a reference point for the hypothesis that elections alone would not guarantee accountable leadership where institutions are weak. This further explains why the African Union and ECOWAS should never allow the magnitude of elections with doubtful credibility to undermine the effectiveness of their anti-coup position and policy. The attention of the international community and regional organizations should extend beyond the negotiations around election calendars or acceptance of a comprehensive transition agreement, and it should also cover the critical period of overseeing democratic transitions that can guarantee credible elections. For the African region, where there are relatively weak independent democratic institutions, term limits, which form part of a reform effort started in the 1990s (Siegle & Cook, 2021), are considered an exceedingly significant component of checks and balances. However, three decades later, term limits, when institutionalized, have neither remedied the legacy of excessive executive power nor prevented unconstitutional coups. The provision of presidential term limits in the constitution is not an end (Bakare, 2021). Instead, it is a way to guarantee an orderly and peaceful leadership transition while preserving democratic ideals and stability.



## Reversing the trend of military takeovers in West Africa

Some academics (Harkness, 2022; Santamaria, 2022) contend that Africa may experience more military takeovers because coups only exacerbate conditions favorable to coups—political instability and poor economic growth—and that countries with a more recent history of coups are more susceptible to coups as evidenced by the most recent wave of coups in West and Central Africa. Thus, in order to enhance peace, security, and stability or avert UCG in Africa, the AU and other sub-regional bodies, especially ECOWAS, must genuinely promote and protect constitutionalism, democracy, and inclusive governance among member-states. Kuwali (2022) proposes three essential steps for halting coups: first, promote democracy and constitutionalism while discouraging UCG; second, Africa needs to enhance governance by building stronger social contracts between citizens and the public; and third, bolstering the security sector governance to improve civilian-military trust.

Building on his proposal, this article strongly recommends that the AU's instruments concerning these thematic areas should be monitored by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) and ensure their effective implementation by member states. It is sufficient to state that before possible implementation, all AU instruments must be approved and incorporated into national legislation. African Union and ECOWAS must be proactive in preventing political turmoil, humanitarian disaster, and unconstitutional seizures of power on the continent in any form.

Evidence from extant literature on state fragility and military takeovers suggests that future coup attempts would not be averted by merely denouncing the phenomenon or imposing penalties without fundamentally addressing the egregious failure of governance by those who exploit the system to achieve power (Ford & Versi, 2022). Even if they are well-targeted, sanctions can be a harsh tool that harms the well-being of common people in the affected country (Brack, 2022). Over the years, the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Fund for Peace, among other international development organizations and think tanks (See Aina & Nyei, 2022), have warned that Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali's extreme security and governance challenges could make them particularly vulnerable to instability.

Given the substantial backing from the civilian population, it may be deduced that people in these countries still regard the military as a viable option to the group of unscrupulous political elites who have been holding them captive in poverty and misery. Though a few studies (Marinov & Goemans, 2014; Thyne & Powell, 2014; Geddes *et al.*, 2014) indicate that coups against authoritarian governments may be beneficial to the people and improve the state's democratic chances, the danger, however, is that such widespread support for or recognition of military coups "normalizes these extralegal seizures of power" (Siegle and Eizenga, 2021). The paradox lies in the fact that people's expectations for political stability, economic growth, and good governance are rarely fulfilled by African military or authoritarian regimes. Other than Rwanda,<sup>8</sup> which stands out as a rare exception, no autocratic regimes or alternative forms of government have outperformed their democratic counterparts on the continent.

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<sup>8</sup> Although elections are peacefully conducted in Rwandan model of democracy, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Paul Kagame, has ruled the country since 1994. The government has a long history of repressing its political opponents, and members of opposition parties face the threat of disappearance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and assassination (Freedom House, 2023). It has also suppressed political dissent through pervasive surveillance, intimidation, torture, and renditions or suspected assassinations of exiled dissidents. Based on constitutional amendment, Kagame could be in power until 2034.

Building more robust democratic institutions that can withstand political leaders' manipulation is, therefore, necessary to find a solution to instability and insecurity, as opposed to authoritarian ones that exclude people and work against their desires (Mbulle-Nziege & Cheeseman, 2022). The extension of term limits by African leaders who make arbitrary constitutional amendments should not be encouraged by the African Union, ECOWAS, other regional organizations, and the larger democracy-supporting international community. Although there are either unapproved proposals or nonbinding resolutions by African regional bodies to prohibit the extension of presidential rule beyond two terms, a widely acknowledged model of presidential mandate restricted to two terms (Kuwali, 2022) should be implemented across the continent.

In light of this, the AU must be perceived as promoting independent institutions such as the media, electoral bodies, national human rights commissions, and civil society and organizations, as well as strengthening the independent functioning of constitutionally constituted democracy and the rule of law (Amani Africa Media, 2022). As is standard procedure in the EU, strict standards must be put in place for countries desiring to join or remain in the AU, placing particular emphasis on robust institutions that uphold human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the rule of law, and democracy as such prerequisites (The Punch, 2020). For instance, since Türkiye applied to join the EU in 1987, its inability to satisfy these requirements, particularly its dismal record on human rights, has halted that ambition. The African Union must begin by demonizing leaders who strive to remain in power forever rather than celebrating them. As has been the case with Presidents Alpha Condé of Chad, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Teodoro Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, the AU must halt the habit of choosing sit-tight dictators who abuse human rights as its chairman.

For ECOWAS, robust enforcement measures and efficient implementation and protection of its normative frameworks and efforts are essential, particularly in relation to the sanction regime (Bakare, 2021). For example, the suspension of electoral support should be firmly applied to those who engage in presidential term extension, as well as non-recognition of governments that emerge from such elections. The recent wave of coups in the West African sub-region underscores the necessity to revise the democratic governance framework within ECOWAS because most of the reforms introduced since 2015 appear to have distanced the citizenry from the political elite (Olukoshi, 2018). In light of this, political reforms should primarily be carried out in accordance with democratic principles while maintaining the strictest possible observance of fundamental human rights, accountability, and sustainability.

## Conclusion

The rise of power-hungry armies, violent conflicts, autocratic leaders, as well as intermittent political instability in West Africa continues to threaten the subregion's hard-won democratic gains since the early 1990s (Siegle & Eizenga, 2021; Akinyetun, 2022). Over the years, military interventions have often succeeded in removing ineffectual civilian governments and reducing the intensity of violence in the short term by destroying the bases of violent organizations. However, they still lack the public credibility and capacity to achieve good governance. Rather, coup perpetrators typically depose dictators to install new ones (Vasquez & Powell, 2021). In this context, this paper provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics of democratic backsliding and coup contagion in West Africa,

shedding light on the role of regional organizations in addressing these challenges and the necessity for democracy scholars to explore more workable frameworks in this regard.

Given the conspicuous absence of a social contract between the state (the military juntas) and society (the disenfranchised citizenry), many African countries have persistently endured deep-seated vulnerabilities that increase the risk of coups such as inequality, mass unemployment, multifaceted poverty, political corruption, and chronic insecurity. It is, therefore, logical to concede that democracy has greater prospects of restoring social contract with the people and establishing the ecological balances that are essential to both the survival of fundamental rights and human existence in the twenty-first century. It is also anticipated that the peculiarities of African governance deficits and other existential threats will be addressed frontally within the ambient of democratic principles and practice as well as through short and long-term commitments. A democracy must also offer responsible, inclusive governance that enhances the well-being of its citizens (Doss, 2020), and it must constantly preserve the political space to accommodate distinct viewpoints in the context of a participatory discourse.

It is established that “Africa’s recent military juntas have not been reformist” (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023) despite the fact that coup leaders in the cases cited in this article all touted real or imagined security and development concerns to justify their actions. Military coups in Africa are carried out for self-serving purposes, as evidenced by increased military budgets and the acquisition of cutting-edge military hardware for organizational security. Ultimately, this deflates the expectations of citizens who envision social, economic, and security improvements following regime change. It is common knowledge that regional African organizations, particularly the AU and ECOWAS, have been vociferous in their opposition to the spread of military coups across the continent. Despite the challenges, regional organizations like the AU and ECOWAS have the potential to play a significant role in halting the spread of military coups in West Africa. Future research should focus on identifying the most effective strategies for long-term stability and democratic governance in the region. By addressing the root causes of instability and enhancing the robustness of interventions, it is possible to safeguard democratic gains and promote good governance in West Africa.

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