RESURGENCE OF MILITARY COUPS AND THE CRISIS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN WEST AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Military coups in Africa, once seen as instruments of reform in the 1960s, largely failed to deliver sustained political stability and economic development, often reproducing many of the governance shortcomings associated with civilian regimes. Recently, renewed coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have gained varying levels of public support, particularly among segments of the youth population, driven by frustration with corruption, insecurity, and perceived neo-colonial dependence. This raises an important question: why have recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger received significant public support despite the continent's transition toward liberal democracy? Adopting a qualitative desk-research design that draws on secondary sources, including academic literature, institutional reports, and news media, the study applies Relative Deprivation Theory to examine the relationship between public disillusionment, rising youth consciousness, and support for military intervention. It also accounts for France's declining influence and Russia's growing role in the region. The paper

argues that the legitimacy crisis confronting liberal democracy in West Africa stems from the widening gap between citizens' democratic expectations and governance outcomes. It concludes that without inclusive governance and economic reform, West Africa risks deeper militarisation and erosion of democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: Youth Political Participation, Coup d'états, Military Coups, West Africa, Liberal Democracy, Relative Deprivation, Neocolonialism, Francophone, Russia

INTRODUCTION

Questions surrounding state legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, and democratic governance have become increasingly important in contemporary African politics. Military intervention became a recurring feature of postcolonial African politics, particularly during periods of political instability, economic crisis, and contested state legitimacy from the 1960s through the 1990s, beginning with Egypt's 1952 "Free Officers" coup and West Africa's first military takeover in Togo in 1963, and recurring across Ethiopia, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Burundi, Guinea, Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali, often justified by allegations of corruption, poor governance, and foreign interference (Japhet, 1978).

The early 1990s "third wave" of democratisation brought renewed multiparty politics across the continent, yet neither democratisation nor neo-liberal economic reforms such as Structural Adjustment Programmes delivered the expected development, as rigged elections, constitutional manipulation, and weak institutions persisted (Leon, 2010; Herbst, 2008).Since 2019, against a backdrop of expanding jihadist insurgency, France's declining regional influence, and Russia's growing presence, military intervention has resurfaced sharply in West Africa and the wider Sahel. Sudan (2019, 2021), Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022, twice), and Niger (2023) each experienced coups in this period, with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in particular emerging not as isolated military power grabs but as cases where the juntas secured notable public backing (Adeduyite, 2023).

In Sudan on April 11, 2019, upon an ensuing mass demonstration, the government of President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in a coup d'état. Similarly, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Sudanese military staged a coup against the country's government on October 25, 2021. On August 18, 2020, some officers of the Malian Armed Forces started a mutiny, which was followed by a coup d'état and the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keta. Following the 2012 coup, this was the country's second coup in less than ten years. Again, on May 24, 2021, the Malian Army removed the interim civilian government, and Vice President Assimi Gota seized power (Adeduyite, 2023).

Furthermore, Alpha Condé, the President of Guinea, was overthrown from power by the military on September 5, 2021. As if that was not enough, Burkina Faso had a military coup on January 23, 2022, which led to the exit of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and the emergence of President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. He was later removed from power on

September 30, 2022, and Captain Ibrahim Traoré was appointed. In the Niger Republic, the presidential guard of the country detained President Mohamed Bazoum, and on July 26, 2023, Abdourahamane Tchiani assumed control of a new military junta.

This raises an important puzzle: why have recent military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger received significant public support despite the continent's broader transition toward liberal democracy? Relatedly, how does Relative Deprivation Theory explain this public support for military intervention, and what implications do these developments hold for the future of liberal democracy in West Africa? This paper argues that the resurgence of military coups in these three countries is not solely a function of military opportunism but reflects growing public disillusionment with liberal democratic governance as practised in the region. Drawing on Relative Deprivation Theory, the study contends that unmet socio-economic expectations, persistent insecurity, and perceptions of neo-colonial dependence have weakened democratic legitimacy and increased popular support for military intervention, particularly among youth.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relative Deprivation Theory

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) explains how perceptions of inequality, rather than objective conditions, drive emotional and behavioural responses: individuals or groups feel deprived not because of absolute lack, but through unfavourable comparison with a reference group, leading to discontent, resentment, and potentially collective action (see Runciman, 1966; Smith & Pettigrew, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). First articulated by Stouffer et al. (1949) and formalised by Runciman (1966), the theory distinguishes egoistic deprivation, where an individual compares their own situation to another person, from fraternal deprivation, where a group compares its position to another group (Webber, 2018). Fraternal deprivation is the more relevant variant for this study, since it is more likely to translate into collective political action, such as protest or support for regime change, than individual-level dissatisfaction (Power et al., 2020). A related distinction is temporal deprivation, where the comparison is not with another person or group but with one's own past circumstances or future expectations (Rios & Mackey, 2020); this is particularly relevant to youth who anticipate being worse off than their parents' generation. Critically, it is not deprivation itself that produces discontent, but the perception that the gap between expectation and reality is illegitimate or unjust (Rios & Mackey, 2020).

RDT is preferred in this study over rival explanations of military intervention. Political opportunity theory and state failure theory account well for the structural conditions that make coups possible, such as weak institutions or security vacuums, but neither explains why ordinary citizens, rather than elites alone, would actively welcome military rule. Democratic legitimacy theory captures the erosion of trust in elected governments but does not specify the comparative, expectation-based mechanism that converts disillusionment into active support for an alternative. Neo-colonial dependency theory illuminates the anti-French and pro-Russian dimension of the

coups but is less suited to explaining the domestic socio-economic grievances driving youth mobilisation. Frustration-aggression theory, RDT's closest relative, explains the emotional trigger for unrest but, unlike RDT, does not specify the comparative reference point, that is, the gap between what citizens expected from democracy and what they received, that gives the frustration its target. RDT therefore offers the most direct fit for this study's puzzle: it explains not just that citizens are dissatisfied, but why that dissatisfaction has been channelled into support for the military specifically, rather than into apathy, emigration, or other forms of disengagement.

Relevance of the Relative Deprivation Theory to West Africa

Relative Deprivation Theory (RDT) offers a powerful framework for understanding the resurgence of military coups in West Africa, particularly the unexpected public support they have received from large segments of the population, especially the youth. In countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea, democratic governance was initially embraced with high hopes. Citizens, especially younger generations, expected democracy to bring tangible improvements in daily life, peace, economic opportunities, infrastructure, and emancipation from neocolonial influences. These expectations were not merely passive hopes; they were actively shaped by global discourses promoting democracy as a vehicle for development and justice. However, the lived reality diverged starkly from these aspirations. Instead of delivering on its promises, democratic governance in many of these countries became associated with elite capture, endemic corruption, chronic insecurity (particularly from jihadist insurgencies), and the collapse of basic public services. This perceived failure has created a deep and emotionally charged sense of fraternal relative deprivation, as large segments of the population, particularly marginalized youth, compare their expectations of democratic dividends to the harsh realities they face which is a cycle of poor governance, economic stagnation, and political volatility (Daramola et al., 2025). The result is not just disappointment, but a collective feeling of betrayal and injustice, consistent with the affective dimensions of relative deprivation that often fuel social unrest or radical political shifts.

Within this context, the military emerges as a symbolic alternative, perceived not necessarily as benevolent or democratic, but as a "lesser evil" or even a restorative force capable of correcting civilian failures. This perception is not based on objective military success, but on comparative judgment: when civilian governments are viewed as irredeemably corrupt and complicit in foreign dependence, the armed forces are recast as more capable of defending national interests. This phenomenon reflects classic Relative Deprivation Theory dynamics, where people experiencing progressive or aspirational deprivation, believing that things should be getting better but are not, may be more likely to embrace radical change or authoritarian alternatives (Kliuchnyk & Oleynik, 2020). Furthermore, the perception of neocolonial control, especially from former colonial powers like France, has intensified this collective grievance. Many citizens see foreign involvement not as a partnership but as an extension of economic and political domination. The frustration over perceived external exploitation, combined with

domestic governance failures, has cultivated a fertile ground for anti-establishment sentiment. The coups are thus not only viewed as military takeovers but also as symbolic acts of reclaiming sovereignty, particularly by younger citizens who feel excluded from political and economic power structures.

In summary, the Relative Deprivation Theory helps explain why, in West Africa, support for military coups can be understood less as a rejection of democracy per se and more as a reaction to the profound gap between democratic ideals and lived experience. This does not imply that citizens have abandoned democracy as a value. Afrobarometer survey data show that majorities across the continent, including in coup-affected states, continue to prefer democracy to alternative systems and to reject one-man or one-party rule in principle, even as substantial shares simultaneously express tolerance for military intervention against corrupt or incompetent elected governments. In Niger, for instance, roughly seven in ten respondents agreed that the military should intervene when civilian government is corrupt, despite continued majority support for democracy as a system. This apparent contradiction is precisely what RDT predicts: relative deprivation does not produce a rejection of democratic ideals, but a conditional, situational endorsement of military rule as a corrective mechanism when those ideals are seen as betrayed by incumbent elites. Popular support for the juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger should therefore be read as fraternal deprivation translating into tolerance for an extra-constitutional remedy, not as a settled ideological preference for authoritarian rule over democracy.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Resurgence: Resurgence refers to the reappearance or revival of a phenomenon that had previously diminished or disappeared. In this study, the concept refers to the renewed occurrence of military coups in several West African states following a period in which unconstitutional changes of government had become less frequent after the democratic transitions of the 1990s. From the 1990s to the early 2000s, many African countries embraced multiparty democracy, and regional organizations like ECOWAS adopted strong anti-coup protocols. However, the last five years have witnessed a noticeable and troubling comeback of military rule, particularly in the Sahel and Francophone countries like Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

As used in this study, the term denotes specifically the return of unconstitutional military takeovers after a period in which such interventions had become comparatively rare, distinguishing the present wave from earlier, isolated incidents and from sustained military rule. Whether and why this resurgence reflects a broader rejection of liberal democracy, rather than simply a tactical opportunity for the military, is an empirical question this paper investigates rather than assumes; the evidence is presented in the analysis section below.

Coup d'état: A *coup d'état* is the sudden, unconstitutional, and often violent overthrow of a sitting government, typically led by the military or a faction within the political elite. It bypasses

democratic processes and transfers power to the perpetrators without the consent of the people. Coups have been a recurrent feature in post-colonial Africa, especially during periods of political instability, economic hardship, or foreign interference. In West Africa, the first recorded coup was in Togo in 1963, and the region has seen multiple cycles of military rule and civilian transitions, often without substantive improvements in governance or development.

Recent scholarship such as Akinola and Makombe (2025) and Tuki (2024) has suggested that some contemporary coups have occurred in contexts where sections of the population expressed support for military intervention, although the extent and durability of such support remain subjects of debate. The military justifies its actions on grounds of security failures, corruption, economic collapse, and foreign domination. Unlike earlier coups, which often promised but failed to deliver development, these new interventions are fuelled by public anger at liberal democracy's failures and are strategically aligned with anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments, adding a new geopolitical layer to their motivations.

Liberal Democracy: Liberal democracy is a form of governance that combines free and fair elections, rule of law, civil liberties, and checks and balances to protect individual rights and ensure accountable leadership. The model became particularly influential following the end of the Cold War and was widely adopted across Africa during the democratic transitions of the 1990s e. Liberal democracy allows for multiparty participation, judicial independence, press freedom, and protection of minorities. After the Cold War, many African states formally adopted liberal democratic systems under pressure from donors, international institutions, and civil society movements.

Scholars such as Tar (2010) and Gyimah-Boadi (2021) have noted significant variations in the quality of democratic governance across African states, with challenges including electoral irregularities, weak institutions, corruption, and executive dominance.. In several West African states, elections have not consistently translated into accountable governance or measurable improvements in living standards, a gap that this paper examines as a contributing factor in declining public confidence in liberal democracy, particularly among younger citizens (evidence presented in the analysis section below).

The Sahel States or West Africa: West Africa is the ECOWAS-defined subregion comprising fifteen coastal and inland states, both Anglophone and Francophone, stretching from Senegal to Nigeria. “Sahel” is a distinct and contested geographic term: the Greater Sahel spans the continent from Senegal to Sudan, while “Sahel” in security and policy literature most often refers to the Central Sahel, namely Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, sometimes extended to Chad and Mauritania. Nigeria’s far north is occasionally classified as Sahelian in some literature, despite Nigeria’s firm identity as a West African and ECOWAS state. This paper’s three core cases, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, sit at the intersection of both categories: they are West African states by regional and institutional membership, and Central Sahelian states by the security and climate criteria that drive much of the literature this paper engages with. The terms

are therefore used as follows: "West Africa" denotes the broader regional and institutional context (ECOWAS, colonial history, regional organisations), while "Sahel" denotes the narrower geographic and security band in which the three case countries are situated and which shapes their shared exposure to jihadist insurgency and the conditions explored in the analysis below.

Youth Political Participation: Youth political participation refers to the involvement of young people, typically those aged 15 to 35 in African Union usage, in political and civic life, ranging from formal channels such as voting and party membership to informal channels such as protest, online mobilisation, and public commentary on governance. In this study, the term refers specifically to the observable role of youth in expressing support for, or opposition to, military intervention in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, including street demonstrations welcoming the juntas, social media activism, and youth-led advocacy on issues such as resource governance and foreign troop presence.

Neocolonialism: Neocolonialism, a term most closely associated with Kwame Nkrumah, refers to the continuation of economic, political, or cultural control by a former colonial power over a nominally independent state, typically exercised through monetary arrangements, military basing agreements, trade dependency, or elite patronage networks rather than direct territorial rule. In the case of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the concept is invoked in this study in relation to specific, contestable mechanisms, namely the CFA franc monetary arrangement, French military basing agreements predating the coups, and resource-extraction arrangements in sectors such as Nigerien uranium, rather than as a general description of the Francophone relationship. Whether these mechanisms constitute neocolonial dependency, as juntas and some scholars argue, or are better explained by other factors, is addressed as a contested empirical question in the analysis section, rather than assumed at the outset.

AFRICA'S DECLINING INTEREST IN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Declining confidence in liberal democracy in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is linked to unfulfilled socio-economic promises, persistent corruption, and the perceived ineffectiveness of civilian governments against jihadist insurgency. While Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger transitioned to multiparty systems in the 1990s, the operationalisation of democracy in practice, measured through electoral competitiveness, executive accountability, and tangible improvements in living standards, has by several metrics lagged behind formal democratic transition. Youths, who make up the majority of the population in all three countries, show measurable declines in democratic confidence. Afrobarometer data tracked across thirty countries since 2011 show that preference for democracy fell by 23 percentage points in Mali and 17 points in Burkina Faso, alongside an 11-point decline in rejection of military rule across the region (Afrobarometer, 2024). This decline corresponds with persistent unemployment, insecurity, and limited improvement in public service delivery in these three states.

Noteworthy is the understanding of the motives and reasons behind the recent coups in Sudan, Mali, Burkina-Faso, Guinea, and Niger. Ajala (2023) argued that the justifications advanced by military juntas were broadly similar economic stagnation and persistent insecurity. The other significant inclination is that the coups were welcomed by visible segments of the public, documented through street demonstrations in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Niamey in the days following each takeover, and corroborated by Afrobarometer polling that found roughly seven in ten Nigerien respondents agreeing that the military should intervene when civilian government is corrupt (Tuki, 2024). The three core case countries under interrogation are identified among the twenty nations with the lowest Human Development Index scores. They are faced with prevalent poverty, deprived education, absence of satisfactory health care, and, possibly most significantly, poor administration. It was recorded that, as of 2023, GDP per capita stood at approximately US$869 in Mali, US$870 in Burkina Faso, and US$643 in Niger, all below the US$1,000 threshold and among the lowest globally (World Bank, 2024). The international community, led by Western countries, frowns on military intervention, but it was found that many people in these African countries are not worried about their countries' system of government and only want regimes that will provide decent governance, as well as security and a suitable, effective economic structure (Ajala, 2023).

The understandable support for military overthrows in these countries is hinged upon two main influences. The foremost factor is the enlarged attention that is centred on corruption and the nonexistence or intangible development in the nations undergoing recent military takeovers. This increasing consciousness emanates from greater access to education and the progressive and prevalent use of social media. A higher number of young people have become educated, civilized, and urban in the contemporary globalisation era, and make use of social media, which makes them more informed about developments in government and politics. This, in turn, has led to concerns and awareness that make them raise questions about how their government is performing, and if their activities are proportionate to the required expectations. In addition, social media made pictures of the ruling class and the display of affluence available, and assessments and criticisms of their stewardship are equally seen and read. The young people understand that the lifestyles of these leaders and their associates are funded by the public treasury via corruption and embezzlement. As a case in point, some enlightened citizens of Niger want to know the amount of money their country is making from uranium and how it is being utilized. It became evident that Africans with many youths were willing to support practically any substitute, as well as the military, if democracy did not provide better living conditions for the masses(Akinterinwa, 2023). This pattern is consistent with the mechanism RDT predicts rising education and social media access do not themselves cause grievance, but they widen the comparative frame within which citizens evaluate their circumstances, exposing the gap between elite affluence (observed directly through social media) and the population's own stagnant living standards. Afrobarometer data corroborate this mechanism directly: across the thirty-nine African countries surveyed in 2021–2023, respondents who reported regular internet or social media use were measurably more likely to rate their country's economic conditions negatively

and to express willingness to consider non-electoral alternatives than respondents with limited access (Afrobarometer, 2023), supporting the claim that heightened awareness sharpens, rather than dampens, perceived relative deprivation.

Also, another identified factor for waning interest in democracy in Africa is that the relationship with one of the past foreign powers, France, had become acerbic in the last ten years. The decline in rapport has been detected for a while; the dawn of COVID-19 further strained the association. Some francophone countries that are mostly underdeveloped on the continent felt neglected by France. They see the colonial power as being unhelpful and exploitative, and desire to relate with other powerful countries such as China and Russia. These questions are more entrenched by the helplessness of France to stop the Islamic insurgency in the broader region. Anti-France sentiments were seen and expressed in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and some of them have completely disconnected their relations with the country, taking a significant decision to eject the French military services from their countries. The early public enthusiasm generated by the coup in Niger might be a momentary sensation; nonetheless, it is likewise a suggestion that Nigeriens do not have adequate indications that their constitutionally elected government is operating as an autonomous authority, bereft of foreign pressure and impact (Adeduyite, 2023; Ajala, 2023). Scholars disagree on how much of this anti-French sentiment reflects substantive neo-colonial structures, such as the CFA franc arrangement and French basing rights, as opposed to junta-led propaganda that strategically amplifies and channels pre-existing grievances toward an external target. Proponents of the structural reading point to concrete mechanisms, including monetary policy constraints and military agreements predating the coups, as evidence of genuine dependency (Charbonneau, 2017). Sceptics counter that juntas have a clear incentive to redirect domestic blame for governance failures toward France, and that anti-French rhetoric escalated sharply only after each coup, suggesting a propaganda function rather than a pre-existing structural grievance (Chafer et al., 2020). This paper treats both dynamics as plausibly operating simultaneously rather than treating anti-French sentiment as straightforward evidence of one or the other.

Akinterinwa (2023) affirmed that some African Francophone countries are at this time making efforts to drive France out of the continent through the instrumentality of military takeovers that removed incumbent regimes that are obliged and owe political loyalty more to France than to their home country. The coups, though carried out by military officers, have uninterruptedly been endorsed and met with visible public approval in each capital, as documented in street demonstrations and corroborated by the Afrobarometer figures cited above, though the extent of that approval and its durability beyond the immediate post-coup period remain open empirical questions. Hence, it is critical to understand and separate this type of military coup, which is not only envisioned at simply shifting the required president and his government, but also to stop the French unscrupulous activities in Africa. In the crow's nest of the French, they do not assess their methods as being manipulative but as a partner and benefactor. The former colonies of France in Africa admit that France promotes corrupt

governance and consequently launched coups to avert immoral governance, politico-economic abuse, and other political irrationality. Thus, military overthrows are devices for creating opposition against the French State and for sovereignty and autonomy from external influence in West Africa.

In Mali, the military junta in power refused to prepare for an early return to democratic and civilian rule. This is in opposition to the demands of France, and the junta accused France of stirring antagonism among its neighbours in the direction of its government. This resentment was intensified with the Mali-Russia understanding in 2021, with the Russian dispatch of military instructors to Mali, and with the participation of the pro-Kremlin Wagner group. The French Ambassador to Mali, Joel Meyer, was declared unwelcome by the Malian government in January 2023. And by February 2023, France declared the pullout of its troops from Mali and those of the French-led Takuba Force. In a more significant move, the three agreements that made available the legal groundwork for French forces in Mali were condemned ostensibly for the reason that it was a 'deliberate abuse of Mali's national authority by France.' France was accused of espionage and sedition. What is remarkable at this time is the major underlying issue of misinterpretation. Malians contemplate that the French troops had been in Mali since 2013 uninterruptedly and had failed to defeat terrorism in the Sahel region, which had subsequently affected Burkina Faso and the Niger Republic (Akinterinwa, 2023). The Mali case illustrates the central mechanism this paper investigates: a decade of unresolved insecurity widened the gap between what citizens expected from the French military partnership and what it delivered, and the junta's decision to expel French forces and pivot toward Russia drew on, and reinforced, the resulting sense of betrayal, lending the coup a legitimacy it might not otherwise have secured on domestic governance grounds alone.

The Influence of Russia on Democracy in Africa

Russia is spreading its influence in Africa through the Wagner Group (rebranded Africa Corps after 2023) and by offering security and governance partnerships that explicitly do not condition assistance on multiparty elections or human-rights benchmarks, in contrast to Western and EU aid frameworks, and these developments have consequences in the mindset of Africans, including their vibrant youths. France has been trading in economic raw materials with its colonies, including those located in Africa, since the colonial era, and such international trade in commodities has not ended, particularly with Niger. The country supplies France with a minimum of a quarter of its nuclear needs (mostly uranium). Over 70% of Niger's foreign reserves are set aside in the French Central Bank, and when Niger withdraws from it, interest is required and must mandatorily be paid to France (Akinterinwa, 2023). This colonial power has lost respect in these West African countries, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, which are the major cases of investigation in this paper. Resentment toward these arrangements has been sufficient that the juntas have opted to pursue security cooperation with Russia instead, despite Russia carrying its own well-documented record of human-rights abuses through Wagner-linked operations elsewhere on the continent. In this circumstance, it is largely because of the Wagner

group of private armies supported by Russia in Francophone countries that France had to speedily agree to withdraw its troops from these three West African countries. France cannot envisage how its soldiers will work in partnership with the Wagner band of soldiers in fighting jihadist terror in the Sahel (Tharoor 2022).

Following the September 2022 coup that brought Ibrahim Traoré to power in Burkina Faso, the late Wagner Group leader Yevgeniy Prigozhin (killed in August 2023) publicly framed the junta's actions as resistance to colonial-era exploitation, a message that resonated with thousands of Burkinabes who demonstrated in Ouagadougou waving Russian flags. This response reflected both the reach of Russian information operations and pre-existing local frustration with the preceding security establishment's ties to a decade-long French counterterrorism presence across the Central Sahel that had not contained the insurgency. The Wagner Group, since rebranded Africa Corps under direct Russian state control following Prigozhin's death, has operated in Mali, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Mozambique since 2018, and has been credibly linked to human-rights violations, including the 2022 Moura massacre in Mali (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Tharoor 2022).

Scholars are still observing the implications of what real presence Russia will have in Burkina Faso and other African countries. The military intervention creates the stage for a new interval in a wider geopolitical competition. Some African nations, including a few states in West Africa, have noticeably supported Russia at the United Nations and in other settings as it attempts to evade international condemnation for its attack and the continuing war in Ukraine. This is not the first time that Russia has made inroads into Africa; it did so during the Cold War era under the auspices of the erstwhile USSR (its predecessor state). There was palpable Soviet/Russian influence in countries such as Egypt, Angola, Nigeria (during their civil wars), Ethiopia, Mozambique, and others. Presently, Russia is appreciated by a new generation, and young pro-Russian figures are emerging, including Lassane Sawadogo, founder of a group called "France Must Leave." The group met with journalists, and at a consultation, it brought a list of grievances against France. They comprise the CFA franc, formed by France as a single currency to enable economic relations among its past colonies, but criticized by campaign groups as economic despotism. It is obvious that Burkina Faso and others in the Sahel region urgently looked for Russian military support against insurgents (AFP,2022). It was reported in January 2024 that Russia sent an estimated number of one hundred soldiers to Burkina Faso. This military positioning will increase Western anxieties about Russia's broadening influence in Africa's Sahel areas (*Reuters,* 2024). Read through RDT, Russia's appeal in the Central Sahel is best understood not as ideological conversion to an alternative model of governance, but as a strategic substitution of reference point: where France had become the visible benchmark against which citizens measured unmet security expectations, Russia is positioned, deliberately, as an alternative external partner untainted by that specific history of disappointment. The durability of this substitution, given Wagner's own documented record of abuses, remains an open question this paper does not resolve but flags as a limitation of the optimistic reading of the pivot.

The Global Decline of Democracy and Its Impacts on Africa

A high number of over sixty countries had their national elections in 2024, which involved a staggering figure of 4 billion people. It means that about half the earth will possibly go to the elections in what one could describe as the most progressive display of democracy in global political history. This statistic might not be seen or matched until 2048, when the international political scenery may perhaps appear significantly different. The "third wave" of democracy, the stable global extension of elected governments that poured through the end of the Cold War, has retreated over the previous decade (V-Dem Institute, 2024). Elections are taking place across nations, but the fundamental political values seem to be fluctuating internationally. In different social and political orders, illiberal standards and politicians who support them are increasing. Many elected governments seem determined to sabotage the core doctrines of the democratic mission, from the independence of the media to the freedom of institutions such as the courts to the facility of opposition parties to honestly contest against the reigning establishment or incumbent political parties (Tharoor, 2024).

A poll conducted by Freedom House, an American-based and Washington research group, found that the strength of democracies and global liberty deteriorated for the 17th successive year in 2023. The organisation's annual statement mentions an upsurge of coups that have overthrown elected leaders in Africa and the snowballing intimidation of the constitutional rights of reporters in many countries (Freedom House, 2024). Similarly, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) reported in its Global State of Democracy report that democratic performance has continued to contract across every world region, with more countries experiencing net democratic decline than advances for several consecutive years, a trend it found persisted into 2023 (International IDEA, 2023). Separately, Tharoor, 2024). contextualised these trends in their analysis of the broader global retreat from liberal democratic norms (Tharoor, 2024).

The crisis confronting democracy in Africa also reverberates in Europe, a continent that is regarded as the origin of this system of government. The party system has transformed historically with the growth of radical political parties, especially in Europe, and has become enlarged, leading to an increase in the number of members in many European parliaments, and may reduce the success and political rationality of governments. It is interesting to observe that there has been a wide-ranging deterioration in voter numbers in many European nations, predominantly among young and lower-income voters, in the last twenty years. Similarly, a lesser number of people are joining political parties, and an increase in electoral unpredictability as electorates have turned out to be more prone to alter loyalties. Consequently, some scholars are anxious that the continent hitherto known for strong democratic institutions and values may be facing a decline. This European parallel matters for the West African argument advanced here because it weakens any explanation of the Sahelian coups that relies primarily on cultural or developmental exceptionalism: if relative deprivation logic, declining trust in elites, and disillusionment with unresponsive institutions can erode democratic commitment even in

consolidated, wealthy democracies, this lends support to treating the same psychological mechanism, rather than a uniquely African pathology, as the more parsimonious explanation for the Sahelian cases (Kundnani, 2020).

Scholars validated the illogicality of double standards by Western countries in supporting democracy in third-world regions. They are accused of imposing it in Africa and accepting non-compliance in the Middle East, and, understandably, they articulated how well and how comparative development in the Middle East has empowered some countries in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain, to counterattack external pressure to democratisation. A thought-provoking interrogation develops from these scenarios: Is it compulsory for countries to accept liberal democracy to advance? Countries in the Middle East have demonstrated that democracy is not a required condition for development (Tar, 2010). More recent scholarship complicates this picture, however: Clarke (2025) argues that Gulf states' oil-funded sovereign wealth funds have not merely insulated their own populations from democratic pressure but have actively financed counterrevolution elsewhere in the region since 2011, suggesting that Gulf authoritarian resilience is less a self-contained development model than a deliberately exported one. This complicates a straightforward reading of Tar's (2010) account as still fully describing the present Middle Eastern landscape, though Tar's core point, that authoritarian governance and material development are not mutually exclusive, remains relevant to this paper's argument.

Furthermore, researchers were able to detect some difficulties that impede the application and adoption of liberal democracy in Africa and the Middle East. In the case of Africa, the significant problems deterring democracy comprise factors such as elite control, manipulations of elections, and corruption. In the Middle East, issues such as state ideology as expressed in Turkey and Iran, leading to Islamic extremism and resource and sectarian disintegration in Iraq, are notable illustrations. It is well-intentioned to remark that these influences are not explicit to these regions; the issues acknowledged there are also present in other regions of the world (Tar, 2010). In another development, the governments of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso pulled their respective countries out of ECOWAS. The three countries accused the subregional body of wandering away from the standards of its founding fathers and the essence of Pan-Africanism. It further reprimanded the body for serving as stooges of foreign powers, adding that ECOWAS had failed to help them block the jihadist viciousness in their nations (Wong, 2024). This can be interpreted to underscore the fact that democracy and Western security efforts have failed in the Sahel region, and they are now turning towards Russia, which embraces illiberal democracy.

CONCLUSION

This paper was able to examine the resurgence of military coups in Africa, particularly in Francophone West Africa, and the deterioration in liberal democracy. The analysis indicates that poor governance, corruption, insecurity, neocolonialism, popular support, and increased youth awareness were the instigators of these resurrections. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the

military juntas secured visible public approval from significant segments of the population, even as other segments opposed the takeovers and continued to favour a return to constitutional rule. Youths played a significant role in this cataclysm owing to greater access to education and social media. These tools were able to provide a spotlight on misgovernance, foreign exploitation, corruption, and the rest. Also, Islamist jihad and terrorism in the Sahel region incidentally prompted the military junta to seek alternatives to French military support, which had failed for over a decade. It also coincided with a period when Russia invaded Ukraine and required areas of influence and support in the international community. Yet, Russia represents an illiberal democracy that exposes the inherent weaknesses of liberal democracy. As if that was not enough, the revitalization of BRICS was a ready instrument in the hands of the Russians, who maximized every opportunity to provide a counterweight to the Western order of American imperialism that is immersed in democracy. Therefore, there is a lot of danger in West Africa if the economies of the three countries improve, which would encourage others in the subregion and the continent to consider the possibility of embracing military intervention, thereby promoting illiberal democracy.

The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger illustrate a pattern in which military juntas have gained popular legitimacy by positioning themselves as alternatives to civilian regimes that are perceived as ineffective, externally dependent, and indifferent to public needs. The declining appeal of Western-style liberal democracy in these regions has been further worsened by the perceived ineffectiveness of international partnerships in addressing pressing local challenges such as terrorism, poverty, and governance. Looking forward, African states must address the root causes of democratic fatigue and coup resurgence by strengthening institutional accountability, delivering tangible socio-economic improvements, and ensuring that governance structures are both inclusive and locally legitimate. There is a need to rebuild trust between citizens and the state, particularly among young people, by fostering transparent leadership, equitable development, and responsive public service delivery. At the international level, both traditional and emerging partners must engage African nations on equal terms, supporting indigenous priorities rather than perpetuating dependency or external control. Without such deliberate and systemic reforms, the trend toward militarized governance and illiberal alternatives may continue to grow, posing long-term risks to stability, sovereignty, and democratic progress across the continent.

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