The Ecosystem of Coups in West Africa: Implications for Democracy and Regional Peace[1]

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Abstract:

The Sahel region of Africa, characterized by political and security fragility has been the theatre of coups that significantly challenged democracy and peace consolidation. Most of the coups operated in recent years have been led by military juntas, who often claim their facts as motivated by governance crises, corruption, and social injustice. This phenomenon, recurrent since the post-independence period, constitutes a significant challenge to political stability and governance in the region, raising questions on the real ability of coups to be positioned as real governance alternatives likely to propose sustainable solutions. Departing from a historical analysis of coups and cases studies of the most recent episodes (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso), this article delves into the main causes and factors of coups namely bad governance, socio-political instability, and the recent uprising security concerns. Taking reference to the democracy theories and that of regional security, the article studies the extent to which coups represent an effective alternative to the governance crisis in Africa and how they affect regional peace and democratic stability. The analysis concludes by arguing that far from being a valid solution to governance challenges, coups only contribute to exacerbating in most cases already existing structural challenges while undermining democracy.

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Introduction

The Sahel region of Africa, characterized by political and security fragility, has witnessed considerable pushes since the early 2000s that say much about democracy's state in this part of the continent, as democratization processes and peace consolidation are being influenced. Countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger as recently undergone periods where their governments were overthrown par military juntas, leading thus their respective countries into a circle of institutional crises. Such a resurgence of coups appears to be contextualized by a complex dynamic where internal (weakness of democratic institutions, endemic corruption) and external factors (foreign interventions, rise of extremist movement) correlate. Consequently, political stability in the Sahel is being progressively compromised, with peace consolidation becoming harder.

In sub-Saharan Africa and specifically the Sahel region, local factors such as ethnic conflicts and rural population marginalization play an integral role in the outbreak of pushes. As supported by Powell and Thyne 2011, coups in this part of Africa, far from only being the results of internal dynamics, are also resulting from complex dynamics beyond legitimate discourses, like geopolitical pressure that worsen instability, namely military interventions of foreign powers like France, the USA, and recently Russia. According to Marinov & Goemans (2014, p. 9) as it is the case in most parts of the world, pushes in the Sahel far from being isolated events, are generally perceived as answers to governance crises through which the democratic cycle is being seen as vulnerable to the military takeover.

As a matter of fact, the situation resulting from the military interventions is generally motivated by rationale like "national rescue", pretending to remediate the civilian government shortfalls, characterized by corruption, economic chaos, and power abuse. Such dynamics, although illegal according to the constitutional order, find some kind of support within a fragment of the population, tired and desperate from never-fulfilled promises by civilian regimes and therefore motivated by the desire to seek an immediate change in their daily life.

In the analysis of dynamics, it is fundamental to sense the diverse motives upon which military actors justify their actions while confronting them with the observed facts: If some coups seem to be justified by the need to restore order and peace, they sometimes lead to grave repression on freedom, delay democratic transitions and causes a long-term instability weakening states institutions. As previously mentioned, the cases of Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, and recently Niger portray how regime changes, far from leading to crisis resolution, contribute to human rights erosion and the worsening of insecurity.

These situations necessitate a profound reflection on the essential conditions necessary to pave the way to building sustainable peace in the sub-Saharan region. Are pushes in Africa representing an effective response to governance problems or are they a threat to long-term stability? The recurrence of military interventions sheds light on the structural weaknesses of most states' institutions and questions the international community's role in preventing crisis as well as in the support for democratic transitions.

Perceived as major challenges to peacebuilding in the region, such context highlights the urgent need to reinforce institutional capacities and promote inclusive political reforms likely to restore citizens' trust in their leaders and their democratic institutions.

Therefore, by examining the instances of recent coups witnessed in Sub-Saharan Africa with a highlight on their respective implications for regional security and the efforts to consolidate peace, this paper seeks to study the extent to which coups represent an effective alternative to governance crisis in Africa and how they affect regional peace and democratic stability. Ultimately, the paper will try to understand if pushes are symptomatic of an institutional fragility in the larger region of West Africa, and to which extent they compromise efforts to democratization and pacification in the long run.

Answers to these questions are crucial to the extent that regional actors such as ECOWAS and the African Union constantly find themselves in the incapacity to effectively react in front of situations that lead to democratic erosion and by extension to some sort of violence and political unrest.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

To address the impact of pushes on democracy and peace in West Africa, it is necessary to take reference to the numerous theories and concepts related to political science and peace studies. But before moving on, it ought to be precise that the term ecosystem here refers to its political aspect and depicts how various actors (military elites, civil societies, regional and international institutions) interact in a complex and interdependent environment. The concept will allow us to understand how the political, economic, and security aspects of a country mutually influence each other and create an environment suitable for coups.

The work of Samuel Huntington, namely his theory of the third wave: democratization in the late 21st century (Huntington, 1991), is particularly important to understand the transition toward democracy consolidation in West Africa. According to him, developing countries, including that of Africa undergo some form of periodic cycles to democratic transitions followed by authoritarian backlash as observed in recent coups. Likewise, scholars such as Linz & Stepan (1996) developed theories on democracy consolidation. Through those theories, the fragility of African democracy vis a vis structural challenges like military influence, weakness of civil institutions, and economic crisis has been tested. Cheeseman (2015) has also highlighted how political elites in Sub-Saharan Africa usually make use of crises to remain in power.

When it comes to peace and security, the work of Galtung (1969) is sine qua non. His distinction between negative peace (absence of direct conflict) and positive peace (social justice, human rights, and inclusive governance) allows an effective analysis of the way coups in West Africa disturb not only immediate stability but also long-term efforts to sustainable peacebuilding.

Theories of regional security, developed by Buzan et al. (1998) in its work regional security, serves as a framework to explain how internal crises in a country are likely to destabilize neighbour countries. In the West African context, pushes give way to the

creation of instability zones that affect the entirety of the region, particularly when it comes to efforts for collective security deployed by organizations like ECOWAS.

Historical Analysis of Pushes in West Africa

The movement of coups in West Africa, although constant since post-independence, has been the theatre of an eye-catching resurgence in the last decades. This part of the continent seems to have become a field of political tension and instability given that in most of its countries, attempts at democratic transitions are regularly impeded by military takeovers. A thorough understanding of these events necessitates an examination of structural factors, a look back at recent coups, and the role of regional and international institutions. The first evet coup that occurred in Africa was at the beginning of independence years, as Sylvanus Olympio, the then President of Togo was assassinated by a group of French legionaries that fought in Indochine and Algeria. The assassinated president, replaced by a civilian Nicolas Grunitzky was him to, overturned on 13 January 1967 by a military Kleber Dadjo. This latter, having been in power for 3 months, was himself overthrown by Gnassingbé Eyadema who would then rule the country from 1967 until he died in 2005.

The same patterns have been observed in the neighboured country Benin, where due to ethnic conflicts between north and West populations and particularly because of the then economic hardship, Colonel Christophe Soglo constrains Hubert Maga, the country's first President to resign in 1963. And so, within 6 years, has been recorded 4 coups et military regimes intercepted by short-term civilian regimes. Until 2011, over 200 coups and coups attempts were recorded in the whole African continent with more than half of them having succeeded, according to J. M. Powell & Thyne (2011). Although a lack of data on the exact number of coups in the ECOWAS geography, an approximate number of 30 coups is estimated to have occurred since the independence. Include the August 2020 and Mai 2021 episodes in Mali, the September 2021's episode in Guinea, the Burkina Faso cases in January and September 2022, and that of Niger in July 2023, the most recent cases of coup d'états in the region are a testimony of how the phenomenon regurgitated in the ECOWAS space.

Those events although sharing common characteristics, do also bear the traits of local specificities in their respective context. After a decade of struggle with armed groups in the north of the country, the government of Mali ended up being overthrown in 2020 by militaries who claimed as motives, the endemic corruption and the inability of the government to stabilize security. A few months later, the coup of 2021 operated by the same militaries has been seen as a milestone in consolidating power by militaries as the political transition failed. In the case of Burkina Faso, two coups were successively operated in 2022, shedding light on the desperation of militaries in front of their fight with armed groups destabilizing the Sahel region, part of which the country is. The armed forces of the country, feeling some sort of abandonment by the then civil government, justified their action as necessary to bring back security. In Guinea, after having modified the constitution to run for a 3rd term, President Alpha Condé was

overthrown. These coups raised questions concerning the role of an aging president wanting to remain in power. In the case of Niger, military forces dismissed President Mohamed Bazoum for the inability of its government to effectively fight insecurity and address internal conflicts in the country. Notwithstanding with motives evoked, a suspension of media outlets judged to be criticizing the military regimes were suspended. The same patterns in the case of Mali were also observed when journalists were expelled from the country upon the arrival of the military regime. The episode in Niger particularly had a considerable impact on regional and international relations, namely with countries like France who had strong military ties with Niger in the context of the fight against terrorism.

Common Factors to Coups in West Africa

The analysis of these cases provides us with some insights into the causes of these pushes in that particular region of the Continent. A considerable number of structural factors seem to contribute to pushes and among the most important, can be noted the following. The mismanagement of public resources, endemic corruption, the marginalization of populations, and bad government overall appear as the most important factors creating social tensions in most countries (Bhanye & Ngwenya, 2023). Such issues weaken the legitimacy of governments and offer in extenso, incentives to militaries' interventions, as supported by Collier & Sambanis (2005) according to which bad governance is generally seen as the most important factor in conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa. On the other hand, the level of inequalities and poverty, exacerbated by the lack of access to basic needs, give way to a situation of desperation and frustration among citizens particularly young people, as they form most of the population. Political instability as highlighted by Rodrik, (2011) is in more than one case linked to political instabilities in fragile democracies. Then, it is a well-known fact that in most African countries, the army holds a significant place in the political structure.

As supported by Amoateng (2022), contexts in which the lack of civil control of the armed forces observed, coupled with weak democratic institutions (Cebotari et al., 2024; Malik, 2013; Nwala, 2024) easily leads to chronic military interventions. Last but not least, foreign interference is a factor to not overlook. Superpowers, both old colonial, and new economic power, sometimes play a non-negligible role in push dynamics. Be it through direct interventions or financial and/or military support to some regimes as extensively discussed referring to France, the US, or Russia's role (ISYAKU, 2024; J. Powell et al., 2016), such interference sometimes contributes to exacerbating international tensions (Nwala, 2024). The analysis of Bayart (2006) on neocolonial external politics highlights this link between foreign interest and political crises in African states. With the recent rise of violent extremism and jihadism in the region, the security concerns have joined the list of coups' causes in West Africa and the case of Mali and Burkina is on point in this regard. According to a UN analysis, violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa is to a great extent fuelled by the lack of economic opportunities and youths' social exclusion. The feeling of marginalization, coupled with unemployment

triggers young people's engagement with extremist groups as this later promises them not only a sense of their life but also financial compensation. Such a dynamic creates a circle of insecurity within which the state, already fragilized, struggles to deal with insurrection, and this opens the way to military interventions and coups.

Furthermore, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2024), highlighted the lack of perspectives for youth as an ideal factor of youth recruitment by jihadist groups. In the face of an uncertain future, many young people feel abandoned by their government. This leads them to seek a kind of protection. Such movements contribute to the fragilization of the state authority and in some cases, the army intervenes to restore order in the face of civilian authorities' incapacities to manage the crisis. Leading to coups. In clear, the interaction between youth unemployment, violent extremism, and institutions' weakness is a key dynamic in political instability in the region.

Role of External Actors (Regional, International Institutions Superpowers)

In front of such episodes of pushes, regional institutions like ECOWAS, who are expected to play a significant role in the management of those crises and in restoring constitutional order, have in most cases barely taken effective actions in this regard or in the best-case scenario, remained passive. Initially created to promote economic and political integration, it has progressively found itself in the role of political crisis management, by sanctioning, mediating and in other cases sending militaries to bring back order. However, the quality of its actions has sometimes been questioned specifically in the recent coups in Mali and Guinea where sanctions have had limited effects.

Since the beginning of 1990, ECOWAS has reinforced its peacekeeping mandate by adopting protocols such as the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, through which sanctions against regimes from coups d'états is being applied, the protocol on democracy and good governance (2001) that engage member states to respect democratic principles and the rule of law while prohibiting anti-constitutional changes of governments. For instance, in the case of Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Niger (2023), ECOWAS in the hope of assisting to restore constitutional order, instantly react par suspending concerned countries' membership alongside the economic and diplomatic sanctions it implies. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of its interventions has always been subject to a lot of criticism. Scholars point out the incapacity of ECOWAs to effectively cope with coups as the result of internal divisions and divergent interests of its member states. Despite these challenges, ECOWAS remains one of the most active (Onapajo & Babalola, 2024) regional organizations in the political crisis management in Africa, adopting both a coercive and diplomatic approach to restore stability and promote democratic governance.

As far as the African Union is concerned, the recent cases of [attempted] push in the continent provide some insights on the challenges faced by the organization in the context of the African Union's Unconstitutional Change of Government's framework. Though, compared to its predecessor (Organisation of African Unity), one can say that

its role in managing coups d'états has significantly evolved since its creation. Contrarily to the OUA which had an approach of non-intervention based on the sovereignty principle, the African Union has been operating through a more proactive approach through which it attempts to condemn and respond to unconstitutional changes of government. According to Williams (2011), the AU has implemented a normative framework for responding to pushes, taking into account measures like concerned member suspension, the practices of targeted sanctions, and the utilization of diplomatic means to restore constitutional order. This Framework comes after an initial attempt by the AU to discourage pushes through a moral and political approach (De Wet, 2021) through which actions contrary to constitutional order were simply condemned without practical actions. Since then, the new strategy has been supported by key instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, elections, and Governance adopted in 2007, which explicitly prohibits coups d'état and rather encourages collective actions in the events of violence.

However, although the organization's adoption of a zero-tolerance policy toward unconstitutional changes of government, its interventions have always been perceived as insufficient and ineffective, principally due to the lack of coordination with other regional organizations and the limited support of the international community. Many scholars among which De Wet (2021) and Singh (2024) support that the effectiveness of the AU remains limited due to internal challenges like the lack of coherence in the application of its sanctions, the politicization of its interventions, and the divergences of interests between member states. Furthermore, the AU's response to the recent coups in the Sahel (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) has been criticized for its incapacity to prevent crisis although the existence of a wide range of conflict prevention mechanisms.

To superpowers, coups are considered a means to reinforce their regional ambitions in most parts of Africa. The United Emirates Arabs, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have actively contributed to maintaining the Sudan army in power. Likewise, Russia has intensified its presence in Africa sometimes making use of illegal means like the use of the mercenary group Wagner, misinformation campaigns, and weapon versus natural resources exchange agreements. This approach aims to create a political influence on the continent by supporting authoritarian regimes and overlooking democratic governance. Regardless of who they are, such interventions are usually perceived as a way to build an alternative international order in line with their specific strategies, to the detriment of popular democratic aspirations. In the case of Russia for example, the misinformation campaign that has been qualified pro-Russia, denigrated the democratically elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a year before the coups of August 2020.

The coup that resulted in Keita's fall is to some extent the result of the protests resulting from the manipulations. Parallelly, others if not the main actors particularly from the West, are known for their military intervention history directly or indirectly in Africa, particularly in their old colonies under the umbrella of protecting regional stability. However, such interventions are being more and more perceived as attempts to maintain their colonial influence, bringing some contestation and mistrust of local

populations. France and the USA have de jure always been limited to supporting the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. Nevertheless, with the deterioration of their relations with the new juntas particularly Niger and Mali, the limit of their influence has been challenged.   Such external influences usually contribute to fragilizing democratic processes and the extended instability on the continent. By supporting military regimes or authoritarian governments, they reinforce non-democratic systems, therefore delaying the development of a governance system based on the rule of law and human rights principles.

As far as the United Nations is concerned, it has always played an important role in coups d'état in Africa, particularly through the Security Council. However, the UN implication depends in most cases on if the concerned country is either or not, on its agenda. In the instance of Mali, an active implication of the security council in the context of repetitive coups occurred in the countries was witnessed, together with statements supporting ECOWAS initiatives and resolutions to extend sanctions. Such steps aim to discourage military takeover of power and encourage a return to constitutional order by facilitating political transition toward democratic elections. Nevertheless, the UN interventions have always been limited by the principle of non-interference in States' internal affairs. It was observed in the case of Guinea, where the Security Council did not immediately react, although a request was explicitly formulated by the African Union Peace and Security Council and from ECOWAS. The coordination between regional organizations like ECOWAS is essential in such contexts as they usually strive to restore democracy, unlike the United Nations which brings diplomatic and logistic support, reinforcing regional efforts of crisis resolutions.

When it comes to sanctions, the UN sometimes adopts target precautions against actors concerned in coups as was the case in Guinea in 2012. Including travel restrictions, and accounts freezing, those sanctions contributed to a progressive restoration of the constitutional order and had dissuasive effects on potential attempts to military coups. Notwithstanding the previously said, the capacity of the UN to effectively sanction sometimes depends on the position of its members and their political will to coordinate actions with regional actors so that the international responses to unconstitutional change of government are reinforced.

Ecosystem of Pushes in West Africa
Interdependence of actors and factors

The ecosystem of coups in West Africa lies in a complex interaction between internal and external actors. At the internal level, political and military leaders play a considerable role. As put by (Bayart, 2006) in "La Politique du ventre" (2006), African leaders sometimes motivated by their personal interest and a desire to remain in power, make use of clientelism networks to make up or justify coups. Militaries, traditionally seen as warrants of the nation's stability, become in most cases key actors of power seizing. According to Decalo (1990), militaries take advantage of institutional weakness

and political crisis to legitimize their interventions. In West Africa, as witnessed in the case of Mali, the loss of trust toward civilians in power is always used as a rationale for military interventions presented as "correctors of political trajectory" Cheeseman (2015) On the external, regional organizations like ECOWAS, the African Union, and to some extent international organizations like the United Nations and the European Union have proven to always adopt unclear positions. Although the latter seems to have always stood for sanctions against military regimes, their ability to restore a stable constitutional order remains considerably limited. According to Bekoe & Mengistu, (2002), the effectiveness for instance of ECOWAS interventions in preventing coups is compromised by internal ambiguities, like the lack of consensus among member states on the way putschist governments shall be treated. As far as external powers are concerned, their role in most cases is observed to be double. While some powers unofficially support coups in the context of the war against terrorism, others' support of the issue is usually situated in the context of their geopolitical and economic interests (Reno, 1998). For instance, the French's intervention in the Sahel through Operation Barkhane has according to some analysts, contributed to reinforcing its military powers in the region (Charbonneau, 2017). This is proof of how factors typically economic such as access to resources, and security motivations like the fight against terrorism influence coups environment.

Regional dynamics, Role of armed conflicts and terrorism

The contaminating effects of coups in neighbourhood countries are a fact that has been observed. In their work on coups d'états, scholars like Li & Thompson, (1975) and J. Powell et al. (2016) theorized the idea of contagion politics where pushes in a country increase the probability of a similar event happening in the neighbouring country. Although refuted by N. Singh, (2022) according to whom coups are the results of coincidence, the western part of Africa illustrates the contagion dynamic with the series of pushes recently experienced in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Neighbour states, while following with interest updates around, fear the idea of similar events occurring in their own territory, especially when socio-economic conditions appear to be similar.

   Furthermore, proliferous borders in this region facilitate not only the diffusion of revolutionary ideas but also the movement of armed actors fuelling crises. For Example, mercenaries and armed groups roaming between Mali, Niger, and Libya worsen political tensions and contribute to the militarization of regional politics (Thurston, 2024). This leads to the discourse about coups in West Africa as in some other instances being linked to armed conflicts and the terrorism threat. For example, Jihadist groups operating in the Sahel region, namely the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Etat Islamic of Grand Sahara (EIGS), take advantage of the state's weakness during crises to neutralize its influence and expand theirs while creating conditions suitable for social unrest. Marchal (2013) and Thurston demonstrated how military interventions against those groups, generally planned by fragile regimes, worsen the security situation

(Thurston, 2024) as the urgency to fight against terrorism gives way to some unexpected and intricate challenges. On the other hand, the fight against terrorism is becoming more like an excuse for the militarization of politics, giving way to a kind of legitimacy of military or semi-authoritarian regimes that arose from coups d'état.

Impact of coups d'état on democracy
Democratic regression

As true as it might appear coups d'état has been considered as one of the most important factors leading to the downfall of democratic governments (Marinov & Goemans, 2014). As a matter of fact, and in the West African context, it has led to a significant regression of democratic institutions, undermining decades of efforts of transition toward some more open political systems. According to reports of the Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, the democratic scores of countries that experienced coups have always been negatively impacted. Those indexes measure criteria like the freedom of opinion, electoral transparency, and the efficacy of public institutions, all drastically impacted throughout the restoration processes of military regimes. In the case of Mali for example, the successive coups in 2020 and 2021 have led to the deterioration of civil and political freedom, with the repression of independent media and the marginalization of opposition political parties. As highlighted by Cheeseman, (2015), these coups weaken democratic institutions by creating a climate of incertitude where citizens lose trust in the legitimacy of elections and political leaders.

One of the adverse effects of this regression is the decrease in political participation. In post-push societies, the fear of repression and the absence of citizen participation initiatives limit populations' abilities to make use of their political rights. Such a situation does not only jeopardize democracy, but as well give ways to social tensions likely to create conflicts like those observed in Guinea and Burkina Faso.

However, the quest to condemn coups and popular obsession with their impacts on democracy should not lead to overlooking the fact that although coups disturb democratic consolidation, a great deal of coups are not operated in what could be called democratic states. Thyne & Powell (2016) therefore suggest that rather than focusing on one aspect of coups (as a threat to democracy), more attention should be paid to how it could set a path to engage in the democratization process.

Consequences on governance

Coups in West Africa result from profound and complex factors that have multiple consequences on the governance of the concerned countries. One thing about these consequences is that they exacerbate the already existing problems in the region. First, it disrupts the democratic process, weakening civic institutions and negatively impacting the democratic culture. The takeover of power by militaries interrupts the electoral cycle and obliges authoritarian governance that limits citizen participation and power concentration on the military junta. The quest for centralized power contributes to

setting barriers to political competition, and together with the weakness of institutions, democratic values end up being eroded, and the rule of law challenged. The decrease of political dialogue spaces and transparency are the typical characteristics of this power concentration, which ultimately leads to unstable regimes that lead to new crises.

Unlike military coups, constitutional coups imply playing around with the Constitution or using an arsenal of legal tools to justify the necessity of remaining in power, most of the time under the umbrella of democratic processes. Such tendencies, observed in almost every corner of the African continent, from Uganda to Cameroon, passing through Togo to Côte d'Ivoire, have been instances where leaders adjusted their presidential term limits to remain in leadership. This has led in more than one case to creating internal troubles marked by socio-political instability (through protest and civil disobedience) and public confusion of the democratic system's essence (Mbaku, 2018).

Political instability resulting from pushes equally leads to the exacerbation of inter-ethical conflicts and insurrections. In countries like Niger and Mali where ethnic tensions already existed pushes have worsened the divisions by weakening the central state authority. Likewise, it also exacerbates power competitions between different ethnic groups and the army. Marchal (2013) showed that coups fragilize existing peace agreements and give way to an outbreak of armed conflicts.

The political instability issued by coups exacerbates as well as the humanitarian, in the sense that resulting conflicts trigger displacements as populations concerned about security, seek to migrate to neighbour countries. Such a tendency has been observed in Burkina Faso and Mali, where increasing security concerns have forced displacements and created additional pressures on social infrastructures. This situation is perceived as a challenge both to humanitarian response and to the governance capacities and therefore the need for effective mobilisation from international organizations.

The economic impacts of coups are also considerable. By troubling political stability, these events worsen the business climate and discourage foreign investments. The case of Niger and Burkina Faso prove that these countries need on average 2 to 3 years to expect some kind of economic stability upon the coups. In Mali, although the country has reached a certain level of resilience after the coup of 2012, the way toward growth has revealed challenges particularly due to constant security issues. The irregularity of political activities due to coups has led to economic instability marked by a decrease in investment (See Graphic 1) and the disturbance of supply channels.

Consequence on Mediation, Peace efforts, and Regional Security

Coups in West Africa have a destabilizing effect not only at the national level but also at the regional level and compromise efforts to peacebuilding. It fragilizes diplomatic processes and conflict resolution mechanisms established by ECOWAS. Forced transitions in the crisis period negatively impact regional cohesion and complicate the implementation of peace agreements. Efforts to peace consolidation in countries like Mali and Guinea have been seriously compromised by military transitions. Those regimes, much more preoccupied with the management of internal security and the

consolidation of their power, usually neglect the already fragile peace process. Moreover, in instances of non-democratic countries with coups are operated, the national priorities are usually redesigned to be orientated to the consolidation of military power, over questions of national interest like peace initiatives or regional cooperation.

This dynamic undermines collective efforts aimed at resolving cross-border conflicts and weakens states' capacities to effectively collaborate to fight terrorism and insecurity, both of which keep increasing from the lack of proper responses. The insecurity arose by pushes extends sometimes beyond national borders, creating an environment suitable to regional instability. For instance, Jihadist groups like those operating in the Sahel, take advantage of the security and institutional vacuum to reinforce their power in some regions. Such a dynamic has particularly been noticeable after coups in Mali where armed groups have extended their influence beyond neighbouring countries.

Burkina Faso and Mali are points in case as they showed that military insurrection disturbs strategies to fight against jihadists. This leads to the perpetuation of violent attacks and the extension of conflict zones. When countries suffer from abrupt leadership change, they are less capable of efficiently coordinating joint military operations and sustaining security agreements. This situation weakens the capacity of regional blocks to stabilize crisis-affected zones, contributing to constant security degradation in the region.

Likewise, pushes decrease the level of trust in peace processes and mechanisms of collective security. Citizens as well as civil society actors become more and more sceptical about regional interventions and in this case, that of ECOWAS or the African Union to resolve the crisis. In this case, citizens' scepticism becomes a factor complicating peacebuilding efforts as they are less and less willing to adhere to peace initiatives, and this gives way to a situation where violence circles and instability are reinforced.

In front of such challenges, diverse organizations, regional and international have always attempted to play the role of mediator. ECOWAS for instance has sometimes been on the frontline of organizations negotiating for political transitions after coups. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Eghosa in its work on regional intervention (2002), the effectiveness of these efforts is limited by the internal divisions among country members and by the incapacity to efficiently execute economics and diplomatic sanctions.

The African Union and the United Nations have equally undertaken initiatives to bring stability to countries in crisis. Here again, it's needless to say that they are also faced with institutional challenges and geopolitical rivalries. In most cases, efforts at mediation have been undermined by the lack of coordination between different international actors, as well as by the influence of external powers supporting sometimes military juntas likely to help them preserve their geostrategic interests.

Analyse and discussions

Pushes in West Africa seem to result from a complex interaction between the searches for political stability, the fragility of democratic instructions, and the challenges related

to regional peace. The above analysis proves that coups are always perceived as a temporary solution to internal and security crises. However, one thing that could be said is that military interventions also generally worsen the situation by compromising long-term peace efforts. Authoritarian emerging from the transitory regimes tends to reduce dialogue spaces and citizens' participation, further nurturing internal divisions and creating conditions suitable to new insurrections.

The phenomenon of political militarisation has furthermore contributed to the erosion of citizens' trust in Leaders. This is a situation that constrains sometimes people to seek other means of expression, sometimes violent. According to Collier and Hoeffler's (2004) theories on armed conflicts and economic development, the economic precarity and the weakness of institutions are some of the important factors of instability. When militaries come to power, they face the same challenges similar to those faced by civilians. The only difference here is that the latter has less legitimacy and limited resources to respond to socio-economic needs, although clarification needs to be made as far as legitimacy is concerned.

There are common factors that create conditions in which the military feels obliged to break democratic rules with relative impunity, and often with the support of large sections of the urban population, especially disillusioned young people. While in most cases this relatively significant support has been the foundation of their legitimacy, in other cases the issue of legitimacy has been out of context. But here again, the focus on coups' legitimacy shall not lead to distraction on what seems to be on point here: Does the population support of most coups in Africa neutralize the destructive effects they have on democracy? Considering the central question of this paper was not this, it will be fair to clearly respond no, the reason being that initial public support, is in more cases demonstrated as the promise of change rather than being an expression of any concerns regarding democracy.

In fact, the population, and particularly young people in much of West and Central Africa are deeply disillusioned with the traditional political class. This disillusionment stems from a range of issues, including the lack of employment and even informal economic opportunities for the educated and the less educated, the perception of high levels of corruption and privilege among elites, and resentment over the continuing influence of the former colonial power France in many countries. Else than that, there is also a deep resentment at the way many civilian leaders manipulate electoral processes or constitutional rules to extend their time in power.

All these factors create an environment in which the military is increasingly emboldened to seize power by claiming to offer a "new beginning," while each coup is also motivated by specific national or narrowly local reasons. The question is, however, how effective are those promising a new beginning?

Research shows that the decline in democracy and insecurity are some of the relevant actors undermining human development and economic growth in Africa (Akçetin et al., n.d.; Gründler, 2020). Drawing concerns about the increase in the number of coups operated in Africa between 2012 and 2021, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance

(2024) points out Mali and Burkina Faso, both ruled by military juntas as examples of countries whose security indicators worsened, some possible reasons being the presence of jihadists among other reasons. This might be understandable to the extent that the impacts of coups range from economic disruption (Fosu, 2002) to the decline in foreign investment (Idris et al., 2023) and collapse of business activities.

The impact of coups on economic growth, measured by the nominal GDP and FDI (% of GDP) is shown in Graphics 1 and 2. Graphic 1 portrays how the FDI drastically decrease in the 3 countries (Mali 2012, Burkina Faso 2014-2015, and Niger 2010), showing coups as representing a challenge to economic attractivity and foreign investors trust. While the GDP nominal

(Figure 1) growth at a relatively stable pace, the post-coups periods show a temporary break in economic development. With a structurally weak FDI, Niger shows a relative GDP stability tough with less remarkable growth. Such Tendencies support the point that coups directly disturb investment flows and affect economic dynamics, although local resilience softens their long-term impacts.
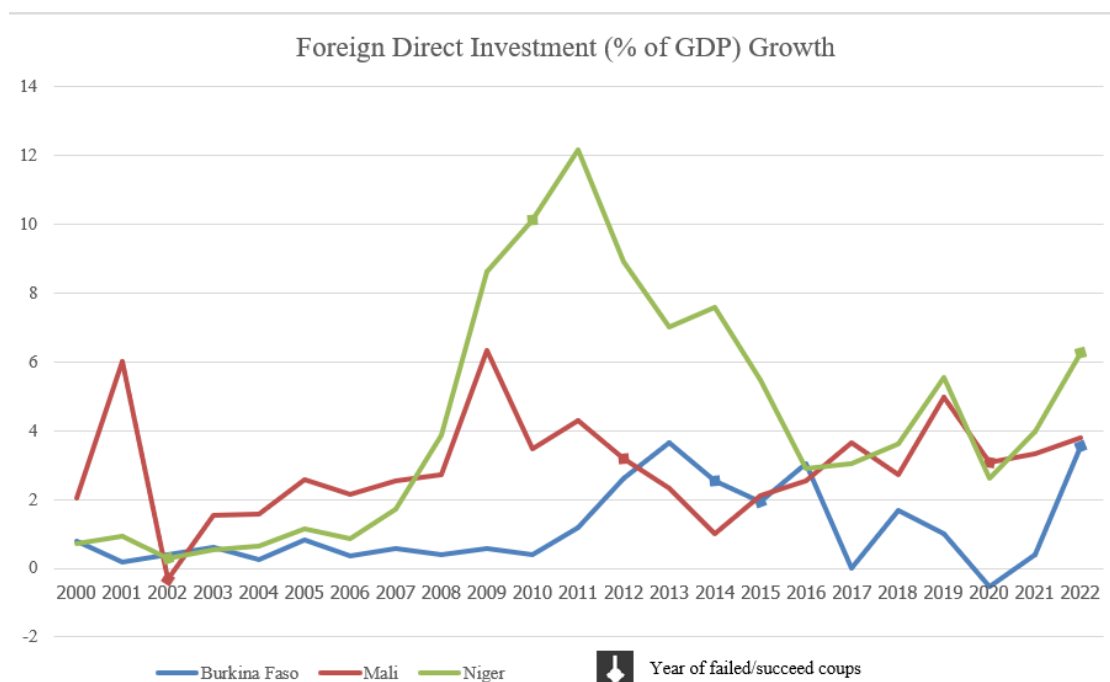

Figure 1: Selected Countries' Foreign Direct Investment (% of GDP) Growth. Source: World Bank, 2024.

In Mali, for example, the FDI flow although high in the early 2000s, has known a considerable decrease after the 2012 coups. Although the change in the flows afterward remained meaningless, the successive crises of 2020-2012 have not been an occasion to restore a significant level of foreign investments.

Here, precision seems necessary regarding the concerned coups as there are instances (in autocratic countries) where coups lead to economic development in contrast to cases

(in democracies) in which coups' impacts are detrimental to growth (Meyersson, 2016). Taking the example in the series of coups experienced in Cote d'Ivoire where the countries needed on average a period of 2 years to recover from instability, Bloomfield Intelligence experts raised concerns about similar patterns in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso as the recent coups in those countries have proven to be detrimental to their economic growth (See Figure 2.).
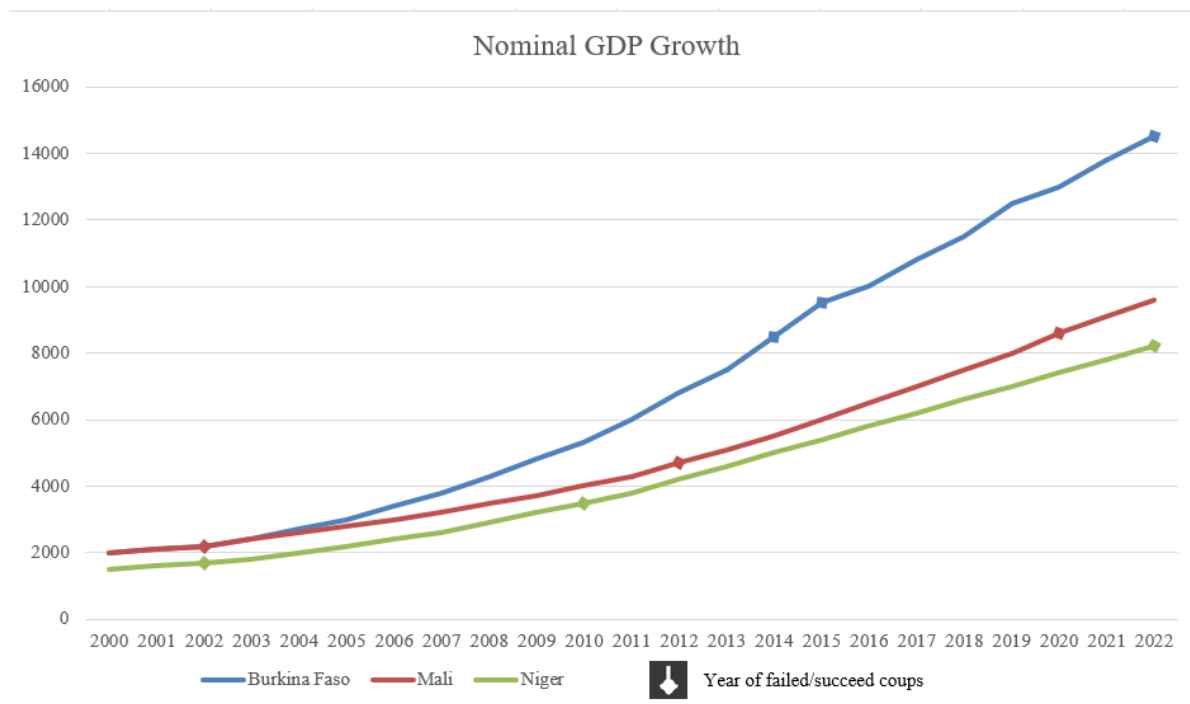

Figure 2: Selected Countries' Nominal GDP Growth. Source: World Bank, 2024

Regarding the political aspects of coups' impact, much has to be said about how the democratic process is undermined. Military or transitionary regimes that seize power after coups usually promise democratic and institutional reforms, which materialization proves difficult in the face of reality. In most cases, military governments in power fail to respect their commitment by undertaking effective reforms, and as I look for instance to the case of Gabon, it must be said that it is no exception to the rule.

During the last Presidential election that led to the fall of the Gabonese regime, Ali Bongo was elected with almost 65% of the votes and he was re-elected for another term. Were there any irregularities in this election? Undoubtedly. Yet, the strange thing is that the coup plotters complain that there were none. The question to know if they cared or not about it must lead to something else, but facts show their real motivations had nothing to do with how fair or transparent the election had been. Their communication on TV announcing that they seized the power referred to the outgoing government's mismanagement of the country's affairs as the rationale. In such a situation, while many people expected the military to take power over the opposition candidate or at least to hold new elections in the coming weeks, the exact opposite

happened. The Junta's leader, General Brice Oligui Nguema, was appointed as the president of a "transition" for which he did not specify the term and promised to establish "more democratic institutions" before "free elections". This is a sign that nothing good can be expected from this coup, so to speak, as an element that resembles the situations in Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad. In the example of Mali as well, the junta after having announced the organizing of democratic elections several times, kept delaying this promise evocating security concerns.

Such abuses undermine the moral authority of organizations such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), often referred to as the club of incumbent presidents, which aim to force coup plotters to restore an elected civilian regime. The Central African regional community, to which Gabon belongs, does not even seriously claim to establish or maintain governance standards in its member states.

When it comes to the impact at the regional level, marked by an effect of political contagion as theorized by Jonathan Powell, coups dynamics in a country are proven to encourage similar movement in neighbouring countries, therefore worsening instability in already fragile regions. Mediation initiatives undertaken by regional institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union although their proven record of progress, seem to be limited in their capacity to restore peace due to insufficient resources, interest conflicts, and the lack of popular support sometimes.

Another thing that could be said about coups in West Africa is that they harm the ECOWAS space as they affect the normal course of trade exchange between countries. For instance, a crisis in Togo might have immediate consequences on Niger and Burkina Faso's supplying of products of first necessities. Sanctions applied to countries in the event of coups could as well lead to less desirable situations as observed in the case of the ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States. The withdrawal of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS has the potential to affect travel conditions and immigration of their citizens as they will have to undertake steps for visa obtention to travel in the zone. Although not already effective, this could be materialized in reference to Article 91 of the Revised ECOWAS treaty and such a situation raises concerns about concerned countries' citizens' rights to free movement.

Conclusion

Indeed, the resurgence of coups in West Africa could be seen as proof of the weaknesses in the prevention mechanisms and the need for a concerted approach to reinforce stability in the region. Ensuring coordination between stakeholders (the international community, national governments, civil society, and regional organizations) seems to be essential for restoring sustainable reforms. Without a collective intervention and a political will to strive for the reinforcement of democratic institutions, the region is exposed to the risk of staying trapped in a cycle of coups that continue undermining efforts to achieve sustainable development and effective governance.

Although multiple initiatives aiming to discourage coups have been undertaken, the persistence of chronic instability in some of the region's countries shows limits to the standard approach to mediation. The least that can be said is that coups d'état constitute a serious threat to peace and stability in West Africa, both at the national and regional levels. Although they are usually presented as an immediate response to an internal crisis, their long-term impact seems to display a tendency to worsen internal divisions, reduce individual freedom, and erode democratic institutions. Paul Collier (2009) shows that regimes issued from coups have the propensity to maintain temporary stability without addressing the profound causes of political crises.

Rather, they usually content themselves with dealing with short-term security issues instead of focusing on the consolidation of governance institutions necessary for sustainable democracy. Therefore, if coups have no immediate effects on human development, much can't be said about their impact on long-term economic growth. To the extent that coups compromise the stability and sustainable prosperity of nations, they do not constitute a valid solution to the challenges faced by African countries. As in every democracy, an African country must have a constitution strong enough to give its people the right to choose who will govern it people, to avoid the disasters of a coup through fair elections.

Therefore, peace consolidation in West Africa demands a re-evaluation of governance mechanisms that prefer citizen participation and the building of resilient democratic systems, and the reinforcement of governance institutions able to respond to the profound causes of socio-political conflicts. As highlighted by Cheeseman, (2015), democracy and sustainable peace are linked and dependent on the trust and participation of citizens in political processes.

Regional organizations, particularly ECOWAS and the African Union play an important role in crisis mediation. However, they could strengthen their approach to promoting peace more sustainably. In this perspective, a more effective approach could mean a long-term commitment to local communities as well as more consistent international assistance to support necessary institutional reforms.

As far as multilateral organizations are concerned, their interventions could focus on reinforcing institutional capacities and supporting the process of inclusive transitions that effectively consider local populations. Nevertheless, it remains true that African states must take responsibility for ensuring their own security while respecting citizens' rights and reinforcing trust in democratic institutions. Ultimately, if peace in West Africa is to be sustainable, it must be built on a process of transparent and inclusive governance respectful of fundamental human rights.

Conflict of Interest

Notes on Contributor

Faroukou holds a mastes Degree in African Studies and International Relations from Istanbul Commerce University (Türkiye). He has been advocating for the inclusion of young people in the development of public policies as a cornerstone in the construction of societies that value democratic principles. Actively engaged in community services, Faroukou is passionate about cultivating spaces that enable young people's involvement in decision-making processes. He is the founder of the African Diaspora platform in Türkiye and contributes as an op-ed columnist to several Turkish newspapers. His research interests include postcolonial theory, youth engagement, sustainable development, foreign aid, inclusion, good governance, diaspora studies, Pan-Africanism, and transnational activism.

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