

Military Government and Regional Cooperation in the Sahel Region of West Africa: An Overview

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Abstract

This study examined the evolving waves of military rules, governance and creation of alliances among Sahel states with particular reference to Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from 2020-2025. The Sahel region witnessed a resurgence of military coups from 2020 to 2025, raising questions about the effectiveness of control of the military in a democratic setting in West African states. A look at history reveals the stress that has always characterised the civilian-military relations, especially in the light of politicised military officers with ambition to rule the state. The military juntas often justify their intervention in the affairs on corrective measures against insecurity, bad governance, weak institutions, and corruption. The theory applied in this study was the modernisation theory, which is used to explain the interest of the military in a developing state. The study adopted secondary sources of information to ascertain the extent of military influence in the Sahel states. The study revealed that war against terrorism had increased military influence in the Sahel states before 2020, as the civilian leaders depended on the military for both domestic and external aggression. The study recommended that workable stability can be achieved in the Sahel states through effective governance approaches with emphasis on democratic accountability and inclusive participation in order to strengthen civilian rule in the region.

Keywords: Military, government, regional cooperation, Sahel region, West Africa.

Introduction

The Sahel region is semi-arid in Africa, stretching across the Southern edge of the Sahara Desert. The area is characterised by its porous boundaries. The population is estimated to be above 150 million, with about 64.5 per cent of the population falling below the age of 25 (Adama, 2022).

This area encompasses a wide range of ethnicities, including the Fulani, Tuareg, Hausa, Kanuri, Songhai, Bambara, Zarma, Mossi, Dogon, and Arab societies (Adama, 2022). These numerous ethnic groups with their characteristic squabbles have naturally given rise to non-state actors who have taken advantage of these ethnic tensions to gain support among aggrieved people and agitate for control of the state in the form of succession. This is particularly so with regard to the Tuareg in northern Mali, who fought for the sovereignty of their region. For this reason, perhaps, the Sahel region has experienced more terrorist attacks and military interventions than any other part of the world.

The current regimes in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, which mostly came into power through coup d'états, have attributed their intervention to insecurity leading to wastage of lives, as the Sahel is a hot spot for armed insurgencies, violent extremism and humanitarian crises, with terrorist groups like Al-Mourabitoune, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and other violent extremist organizations (VEOs) transforming the region into a terrorist hideout (Lyammouri, 2017). Jareb (2021) notes that “between May 2019 and May 2020, ISGS orchestrated eighteen (18) attacks that killed more than 400 soldiers in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Additionally, ISGS regularly clashes with militias like the Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defence Group (GATIA) and the Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA)...” In the same vein, Krienke (2023) argues that the Sahel region has seen an increase in violent conflicts. He writes that in 2023, the number of people killed by acts of political violence doubled in Burkina Faso and across the central Sahel, conflict fatalities from political violence increased by a staggering 38%, and civilian deaths by over 18% from 2017 to 2023.

The unexpected resurgence of military government in West Africa compelled ECOWAS members to condemn the coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, arguing that the constitution of each state specifies the role of the military as defender of territorial integrity. The prompt response of this regional body was to issue sanctions ranging from travel restrictions, trade restriction and military threats. Surprisingly, rather than solve the problem, this singular act of the ECOWAS provoked the military governments of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to form the Alliance of Sahel Region Cooperation.

Various sources have been emphatic on the crisis that is surely brewing in the area. Commenting on the military rule in place in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, in July 2025, the UNDP report reads that there is a persistent governance crisis in the Sahel region, amounting to protest, criminality, extremism and military coups in the region. Mahmoud & Taifouri (2023) argue that the Sahel region gained attention due to the recurrent and multiple military coups and counter coups, often disrupting democratic processes in the region.

Statement of Problem

Military takeovers in some states in Africa from 1960s to 1990s eventually petered off, with all these countries returning to civil rule during the wave of democratisation in the developing countries in the mid-1990s. However, this 21st century has witnessed a new wave of military resurgence and forceful removal of civil presidents in some francophone countries in West Africa. This development raises the question of the suitability of military rules in running the affairs of the state. The coup plotters brought up issues of insecurity and the inability of the ousted regimes to combat this despite the presence of foreign troops like French troops and MINUSA led by the United Nations.

Looking at the development pattern in the three Sahel states - Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the military juntas rejected France, which was their former colonial master, accusing the European

country of not being fair in their bilateral relations with their countries. Additionally, the military junta also accused the ousted civilian regimes of giving France the liberty to influence them. They transferred allegiance to Russia, another foreign country, for the purpose of economic development, military assistance and aid.

The actions, interests and plans of the praetorian soldiers in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are to stay in power and implement some developmental plans to alleviate poverty by adopting “alternative moderniser” as proposed by the United Nations in the 1960s to improve the economy (Adeshina, 1999). Alternative moderniser, according to Adeshina (1999), is a role the military claims to accept whenever they take over the affairs of the state during a period of political crisis.

Objectives of this Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the peculiarity of the resurgence of the military government in the Sahel Region of West Africa, particularly in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The specific objectives are:

- i. To examine the causes of the resurgence of military rule in the Sahel region in West Africa.
- ii. To investigate the reasons behind the Alliance of Sahel Regional Cooperation of West Africa under military arrangements.
- iii. To determine governance in a military rule in the Sahel region of West Africa.

Research Questions

The underlisted questions would be provided with answers in the study. The questions are:

- i. What causes military resurgence in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso?
- ii. How important are the reasons advanced for the formation of the Alliance of Sahel regional cooperation?
- iii. How do we determine governance under military rule in the Sahel region of West Africa?

Conceptual Analysis

The conceptual analysis of this study focuses on military, governance, civil-military relations and regional cooperation. Thus, it is used in this paper to examine the extent to which the military intervention is judged positively or negatively using governance indicators.

Military

The military, by its professional training and organisation, is a regimental and disciplined force. As an organisation, it has a centralised command and a hierarchical structure which emphasises total loyalty and obedience to superiors (Okechukwu, 1997). The military is set up to protect the state and its citizens from external and internal aggression. As the guard of society, it is argued that this group should be separated from party politics, as they are professionals. According to Jeff & Douglas (2012: 57), “military professionalism broadly refers to the construction of vocational or occupational identities and structures within the armed forces”. The source stresses that professionalism as adduced to the military “presumes acting in a morally professional manner comprising judgment, communication and (behavioural) reaction, in addition to taking full responsibility for decisions and consequences”(Jeff & Douglas, 2012: 60).

African Centre for Strategic Studies (2025) refers to military professionalism as a standard of conduct exercised by members of the armed forces to effectively provide security for citizens while upholding the values of service to the public, subordination to democratic civilian authority, allegiance to the constitution, political neutrality, and respect for the rule of law and human rights.

Military professionalism is not the result of a single event, but a culture that must be constantly reinforced, refined, and perpetuated.

One is tempted to ask, why are the military referred to as praetorian? This means a military government that is politically ambitious to administer the state. What is the classification of praetorian rulers? Based on this, Ering (2005) mentions three levels of military praetorian – i. praetorian as moderator; meaning that they act as highly politicised and powerful pressure groups, like Argentina during the reign of President Frondizis (1959-1962); ii. praetorian as guardian: that is, retaining governmental power usually after military intervention; and iii. praetorian as rulers: meaning, the control of large slices of political, economic and social life through the creation of mobilisation structures (Ering, 2005).

Tables 1: Coups in West Africa from 1963 to 2025

S/n	Name of Country	Year of Coup	Causes of Coup
1.	Benin	1963, 1972, 1977, 2025.	i. Economic downturn ii. To forestall civil war
2.	Burkina Faso	1966,1974,1980, 1982,1983, 1983, 1987. 1989 coup d'état attempt, 2023	i. to guard against austerity, ii. Economic decline iii revolution, introducing a leftist regime. iv. Officers' personal grudges.
3.	Gambia	1981, 1994, 2014 coup d'état attempt	i. gradual loss of government legitimacy.
4.	Ghana	1966,1972,1975, 1978,1981	i. Economic sabotage due to high foreign debt ii. Ethnic and class differences iii corruption iv mal-administration v.. Military attitudinal divisiveness.
5.	Guinea	1984, 2008, 2021	i. Internal wrangles between Conte and members of his party.
6.	Guinea Bissau	1980, 2003, 2012, 2025	i. Internal wrangles between Viera and members of his cabinet.
7.	Ivory coast	9	i. Soldier demand for an increase in salary ii. Protest against the long stay in office by President <u>Henri Konan Bédié</u> .
8.	Liberia	1980	i. Corruption ii. economic decline.
9.	Mali	1968, 1991. 2012, 2020, 2021	i Economic downturn ii. Domestic problem.
10.	Niger	1974,1996.1999, 2010, 2023	1974- i. party problems, ii. Civilian protest iii. Misappropriation of resources 1995- i. social and economic crisis ii. Conflict between the president and the prime minister.
11.	Mauritania	1977, 1979,1980, 1984, 2005, 2008	i. Protest against President Daddah's dabbling in the Western Sahara war ii. Economic downturn.
12.	Nigeria	1966,1967,1976, 1983,1985,Nov 1990, 1993. 2025 coup attempt	i. the <i>Wetie</i> crisis of western Nigeria ii. Marginalization iii. As a counter coup due to the first coup tagged Igbo officers coup ii Economic downturn iv. Domestic/political crises v. Officers' personal grievances vi. Corruption.
13.	Senegal	None	None

14.	Sierra Leone	1967, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997, attempted coup	2023	i. armed forces dissatisfaction with their low wages ii. Officers' personal grudges iii. widespread corruption, conspiracy leading to arrest of officers.
15.	Togo	1963, 1967, 1973, 2005		i. Officers' personal grievances, President Olympio rejected the plea of Sergeant Eyadema Etieme from the French army to join the Togolese army ii. Military attitudinal divisiveness.
16.	Cape Verde	1980,		i. Guinea-Bissau coup led to the abandonment of the unification with Cape Verde.

Source: Column 2 and 3 were adopted from Adeshina (1999), Africanews, Feb.2022 and Abang (2022).

Why are African countries' military always intervening in politics? In providing an answer to this, Wordu (2023), in an interview on Atlantic Television Network, stressed the following points: i. These African leaders have failed to provide democracy. ii. Many of the leaders operate from a failed state syndrome, meaning that there is abject poverty, lack of infrastructure, insecurity, election sabotage, instability, corruption, lack of respect for the rules of law, weak institutions and poor governance. Wordu further argues that this instability has its roots in external manipulation of African resources, which pushes these leaders not to be able to organise the state structure properly in a civilian regime. Ake (1993) postulates that politics, more than anything else, is the cause of underdevelopment in the developing world, thereby paving the way for a coup whenever there is a political crisis.

The Psychological Perspective of Coups

Persuad (2016), in a study assessing the psychology of political coup, posits that dictators are more likely to be faced with coup attempts following elections characterised by increased support for the opposition party by the citizens or due to mass protests arising from election results. Persuad (2016) admits that politicians are removed by 'regime elites' to avoid revolution and to guide the personality and privileges of the politicians in their post-coup administration.

Importantly, in the nexus between the psychology of risk and risk aversion, the psychology of coup repression and civilian-military relations is noted to elucidate how coup d'état reoccurs in Africa (Mathebula, 2024). Similarly, Asher (2023) notes that the psychology of risk is seen as the mental processing that people undergo in perceiving, evaluating and responding to risk situations. Asher notes that risk involves a cognitive process, with people's decisions significantly affected by their culture and social factors. He further expresses the fact that people do not, all the time, make rational or objective decisions when confronted with assessing risk, and concludes that people's perceptions and judgments are influenced by a number of factors related to their previous experiences, emotions, values and beliefs. Therefore, whenever resurgence of coup in Africa is discussed, repression and risk of aversion resurface. In addition, these facts result from unstable, ungovernable dimensions of coups and the manner for which they were achieved (Mathebula, 2024)

Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations is the study of how the military conforms and respects the authority of the civilian population in the midst of their control of weapon of mass destruction. As armed men to the state, the civilian government would call out the military whenever there is chaos in the state

that goes beyond the paramilitary forces' control. According to Ering (2005) the modern parlance of the state's affairs should be left in the hands of the politicians whose responsibility is to manage the affairs of the state. Given this, therefore, the military officers exist in subordinate positions to the politicians.

Huntington's book, *The Soldier and the State*, published in 1957, explains that "the professional officer class arises from those who both bear responsibility and possess the requisite expertise coupled with the crucial dedication to service". In the same vein, Finer (1962) argues that a government could be rated as speedy to keep the civil-military relationship in check whenever they reduce the need for the armed forces to intervene in politics in society.

Going further, Finer (1962) proposes four classifications of military influence, providing a useful framework for understanding the relationship between the civilian and military. In the first method, the military seeks to protect its own interests by pushing for advantages like higher funding, similar to how other organised groups advocate for their needs. In this case, the military lobbies for its request to influence government decisions but still respects the ultimate authority of civilian leadership. The second method happens when the military tries to apply pressure through indirect threats or coercion to achieve specific aims. The third method involves situations where the military removes a civilian government and hands over power to another civilian group, whenever the former leaders are seen as having failed in their responsibilities. The final method is when the military completely takes over the government, removes the civilian leaders and assumes direct control of the state, as in the case of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Using the Nigerian 1999 constitution as an example, Section 218 explains the civil-military relationship thus:

- i. The power of the president as the Commander-in- Chief of the armed forces of the federation shall include the power to determine the operational use of the armed forces of the federation.
- ii. The power conferred on the president by sub-section (1). This section shall include the power to appoint the Chief of Army, the Chief of Air force and the Chief of Navy.
- iii. The president may, by directions in writing and subject to such conditions as he may think fit, delegate to any member of the Armed Forces of the Federation his powers relating to the operational use of the armed forces of the Federation.
- iv. The National Assembly shall have power to make laws for the regulation of the power exercisable by the president as commander in chief of the armed forces (Olorunfemi, 2006: 24).

Governance

The term 'governance' is about how power is distributed and shared, how policies are formulated, and how stakeholders are made to be accountable (Ndehfru, 2007). Governance refers to the structures and processes that are designed to ensure accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and rule of law, stability, inclusiveness, empowerment and broad-based participation (UN, 2012). Governance is a concept that has global acceptability for the purpose of assessing those who are in government or running the affairs of the state. In a broad sense, governance is about the culture and institutional environment in which citizens and stakeholders interact among themselves and participate in public affairs (Ndehfru 2007). According to Jega (2021: 4), "Governance in the context of a modern nation-state, is first and foremost providing for the fundamental needs and aspirations of citizens, through government institutions and processes, steered, driven and guided by chosen representatives of the people"

In summary, Fukuyama (2013), cited in Ademiluyi & Abang (2022), defines governance as the government's ability to make and enforce rules and to deliver services regardless of whether

that government is democratic or not. He stresses that governance is about the performance of agents in carrying out the wishes of a principal and not the rules that he sets.

Patterns of Military Governance in the Sahel Region

Notably, at independence, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso became formidable forces majorly to protect the state. Then, how well have these three countries scaled the governance indicators? The authority that controls the country plays a key role in the growth and development of the place. The Sahel region is particularly prone to coups due to its fragile institutions and persistent economic deterioration. Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), in 1999, published six indicators for assessment: voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. Similarly, all these governance indicators are so weak in the three countries. Despite claims by military leaders that their interventions would restore order and stability. Thus, Thurston (2024) points out that insurgent attacks have actually increased in the Sahel regions following these takeovers, especially in rural areas where governance remains the weakest.

This supports the ‘praetorian state’ theory of Samuel P. Huntington, where the military or other non-elected groups exert excessive political influence due to institutional or structural failure in the state. According to Decalo (1990), military regimes often concentrate power in the executive, limiting checks and balances. Therefore, the military regimes are known for ruling by decree and dissolving legislative bodies. For example, Mali’s government created a transitional charter and sidelined civilian political actors while Burkina Faso appointed military officers to key administrative roles (Decalo, 1990).

The patterns of military administration are driven, however, by coercion rather than consensus when taking over the affairs of the state. While there is no single explanation for this trend, the military regimes in the Sahel region, particularly Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, are usually justified to have emerged based on structural issues like insecurity, ineffective governance, ethnic tensions and deteriorated economy, which has become the order of the day in the system. Moreover, it can be ascertained that the militarisation of governance has not yielded desired outcomes, particularly in tackling the inherent structural deficiencies. Instead, they rule by coercion, displace democratic institution and weaken efforts toward regional cooperation. This is, however, complicated by the recent withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) on the basis that ECOWAS is responsive to external powers who are only after their own interest.

Regional Cooperation

Regional cooperations are classified into different forms ranging from “preferential trade agreements, free trade agreements, customs unions, common markets, economic unions, economic and monetary unions, full economic integration, and political unions” (Eduard, 2015: 24). It means that countries within a particular region with common interest can come together to form an alliance to promote their national interest, through cooperation and dialogue.

Regional cooperation in West Africa has long been regarded as a mechanism for promoting integration among African States, especially in achieving political stability, ensuring states' sovereignty and fostering economic collaboration and collective security. This is not unconnected to the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through the Treaty of Lagos in 1975, aimed to promote unity among member states, eliminate trade barriers, and support regional development (Adetula, 2011). However, despite the ambition, ECOWAS has often faced internal tensions, particularly in balancing national sovereignty and enforcing regional

decisions. The introduction of the Alliance for Sahel Cooperation, which comprised Mali, Niger and Burkina, raised a critical question on the future of ECOWAS and its effectiveness in ensuring regional cooperation. The reason for the withdrawal is multifaceted, as Osuchukwu et al. (2025) note that countries often make decisions regarding regional cooperation based on a mix of geopolitical interests, economic factors, and ideological positions, which not only takes a toll on the countries withdrawing but also on the overall progress of the organisation as a whole.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts ‘modernisation theory’ as a lens to understand the patterns of military government in the Sahel region of West Africa. The modernisation theory emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War and was widely used in the 1950s and 1960s. Modernisation theory posits that “development follows a linear path, with Western industrialised nations serving as models for developing countries” (Yeboah, 2023). It assumes that the key to development is economic advancement, particularly through industrialisation and technological progress (Mbembe, 2022). In the context of Africa, this means that economic policies should aim to stimulate growth through various mechanisms, including investment in infrastructure, education, and industry (Osei, 2023).

They believed that developing countries could follow a similar pattern towards development by adopting western style of economic growth and political institutions (Schech & Haggis, 2000). As Lewis (1955) and Rostow (1960) identified, the idea shows that non-Western societies, including Africa, possessed traits that hinder growth and development.

More so, the concept of modernisation has been viewed from different perspectives. One school of thought views modernisation primarily as a process of social transformation (Levy, 1966; Huntington, 1967). Another perspective sees it not only as a form of change but also as a society’s response to evolving circumstances (Eisenstadt, 1966). Some scholars, like Talcott Parsons, see the United States as a model of modern development. In the same vein, Huntington (1967) views modernisation as a multidimensional process that influences both human behaviour and societal structures.

Lewis (1955) also identified that economic progress depends on people’s attitude towards developmental initiative. These reflect a long-standing dichotomy between the Western social thought, often called ‘primitive’ and the ‘advanced’ societies, which has appeared consistently over the years (Huntington, 1968).

Also, one of the notable contributions to this theory was Walt Rostow, who, in his book “*The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*”, outlined the prerequisite stages of development in a society that all nations must pass through to achieve economic development similar to that of Western countries. This includes the traditional society, the precondition for take-off, the take-off stage, the drive to maturity and the stage of mass consumption.

The first coups in West Africa started in Francophone countries (Togo on January 13, 1963, then Benin on October 28, 1963) and gradually spread to Anglophone nations that share a border with them (Nigeria on January 15, 1966, then Ghana on February 24, 1966). The three countries in focus in this study, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso had independence from France. Arguably, the civilian regime between the 20th century and 21st century tied most developmental steps to their colonial master, even when they combined the traditional and modern approaches of development. Obviously, many Sahelian states suffer from the sit-tight syndrome of leaders, corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, which all hinder democratic consolidation and development. While modernisation theory offers a useful insight, it has been criticised for being too Eurocentric.

In the past, the military as a modernisation agent transforms the state from traditional setting to a modernised state in the 1970s and 1980s. Based on this, Hussain (1984) writes that modernizing military oligarchies in general are not ideologically based, they are mostly concerned with running a country without politicians, depend on advanced technology and hence emphasize order and progress.

Brief History of Armed Forces and Interventions in Africa

In this section, the historical-analytical method was employed to examine the history of armed forces and their intervention in politics. Cluter & Gaub (2016) trace the historical background of the armed forces in African countries through trial-and-error, citing the example of the precolonial period when wars were common in some areas through the application of a ritualised method called “black power or juju” to fight tribal war. That does not mean Africa did not have an army before the arrival of colonial masters; they were warriors who participated in local wars. During the colonial period, local people were recruited to keep order in the community as constabulary; for example, the local forces were used to repress social movements. In this direction, Senegalese and Algerian-Moroccan troops were sent by the French to brutally repress the Madagascar rebellion in 1947, and there was no single military model during the colonial period (Cluter & Gaub 2016). Also, colonial masters introduced sophisticated weapons into the military to protect their interests and, at the same time, defend their colonised territories.

During the British penetration of West Africa, the army troops were under the umbrella of the Royal West African Frontier Force (R.W.A.F.F.), in which an Inspector General of African Colonial Forces was overseeing their training and acted as military adviser to the colonial government (Rae, Ed Keazor & Ojo, 2020). The creation of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) in 1897 marked an important stage in the development of the British colonial army, which was used to complete the conquest of the Anglophone West African countries - Ghana, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. It was on 7 July 1940 that Military Forces West Africa was formed with the arrival of Lieutenant General Giffard. At that time, the headquarters was in Accra, comprised of four countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Gambia). The role of the armed forces was purely internal security, and they had few artillery, engineer, signals and support services (Rae, Ed Keazor & Ojo, 2020).

According to Rae, Ed Keazor & Ojo (2020), West African soldiers from the former British colonies of Nigeria, Gold Coast (now Ghana), Sierra Leone and Gambia were crucial in winning the jungle war in Burma, fighting in appalling conditions to defend India from being overrun by Japan in World War II. 165,000 West Africans served, including 126,000 Nigerians. Over 15,000 died and 30,000 were injured, many suffering permanent disabilities. Yet official histories erased African combatants from this forgotten war

The scramble for Africa further introduced security challenges and a naked show of power, and France entered the race to pursue and conquer large inland territories in West Africa and at first, ruled them as either a part of the Senegal colony or as independent entities. These conquered areas were usually governed by French Army officers and dubbed military territories. The establishment of the Franco-African Community in 1958 introduced a new dimension to their relationship in West Africa. In fact, after the end of French colonial rule in sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1960s, the French army intervened forty-eight times in various conflicts and crises on the continent (Saka, 2024)

Meanwhile, Welch (1986) writes that at independence, Nkrumah noted that the thought of soldiers in newly independent African states had been divorced from the political process. Therefore, the establishment of the armed forces was to defend the state from external aggression

and internal insurrection. In the same drive, Western liberal democratic states like the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France's armed forces' defence function constitute their core assignments. (Olurunfemi, 2006).

Research Method

This study employed a content analysis method to assess military government and regional cooperation in the Sahel region with particular interest in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. The study mainly focused on the Francophone countries in the Sahel region, which have recently experienced military coups and have withdrawn from regional bodies like ECOWAS

The study made use of data drawn from secondary sources, including scholarly articles, policy briefs, and regional reports. These materials were chosen because they are relevant, reliable and provide meaningful insights into military government and regional cooperation and a shift from a democratic regime in the Sahel region. The study made use of a systematic review to analyse the literature published. Also, to look into past events and current trends of military intervention in the region.

Thematic content analysis is used to identify key patterns and recurring issues within the literature, with each source looking into military, the influence of external powers, and the dynamics of regional integration. While the study is rooted in existing literature, it is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the constantly evolving nature of the situation in the Sahel region.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the data of the study with a focus on military government and regional cooperation in the Sahel region of West Africa, with particular emphasis on Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali. The first question focused on what caused the military resurgence in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The causes of military intervention are centred on institutional weaknesses under the civilian rulers in the three countries that started from independence, manifesting in a high rate of poverty and corruption.

The second question bordered on regional cooperation in the Sahel Region, West Africa - how important are the reasons advanced for the formation of Sahel regional cooperation? This section examines the Sahel region's political realignment, focusing on the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). ECOWAS imposed sanctions such as trade and financial restrictions, leading to a massive unemployment rate, food shortages and inflation in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. These coup plotters viewed the sanctions and planned military action against them to return power to civilians as not acceptable. Therefore, to guard against these pressures from internal and external, the only option was to form a new alliance known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), to ensure regional cooperation outside ECOWAS. On 16 September 2023, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter – a mutual defence pact establishing the Alliance of Sahel States.”(Marko, 2024: 1). However, Shinn (2023) and Olander (2023) have noted that since the formation of Alliance of the Sahel States (AES), there has been a major shift as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali began to change their geopolitical direction particularly strengthening ties with global powers such as China, Russia, and Turkey, which challenges the role and power of ECOWAS. As a reply to the statement of the leaders of the Alliance of Sahel Region, ECOWAS declared that “Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali remained important members of the Community and that the Authority remained committed to finding a negotiated solution to the political impasse” (Aljazeera, 2024). When the alliance did not work out for the three countries, they pulled out of

the ECOWAS bloc. However, this action further weakened the collaborative effort to fight terrorist and jihadist groups.

Consequent upon this, commentators observed that ECOWAS remained silent when Côte d'Ivoire changed its constitution in 2020, allowing President Alassane Ouattara to extend his time in office beyond the original term limits (Al Jazeera, 2025). Moreover, Ndiaye (2023) noted that the imposition of sanctions and suspensions on Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali further increased tensions and raised their perception of external interference in domestic affairs (Ndiaye, 2023).

The third question is, how do we determine governance under military rule in the Sahel region of West Africa? Governance refers to governing the affairs of a state. Also, it entails the administration and management of a country. Fukuyama (2013) claims that, in governance, many times the rule of law overlaps with state quality since citizens want the state to operate by general transparency, impartial and predictable rules. Meanwhile, the World Justice project rule of law index ranking of 2020 and 2023, using the following indices - constraint on government power, absence of corruption, open government, fundamental human right, order and security, regulatory enforcement, civil justice and criminal justice, ranked Burkina Faso 82 out of 142 countries, while regionally, the country is ranked 9th out of 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Mali was rated 121 out of 142 countries, while regionally, it is ranked 24 out of 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Niger was rated 105 out of 128 countries, while regionally, the country ranked 19 out of 31 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Alejandro, 2023).

According to Immenuble (2020: 1-19):

More recently, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor study has shown that high illiteracy rates, rising unemployment and inadequate social support are major contributors to the marginalisation of young people, particularly young women, in the Sahel. When poverty and marginalisation exacerbate other forms of inequality, young people are likely to fall prey to violence in all its forms. According to this report, “between 40 and 60 per cent of these young people are excluded from training schemes” World Bank estimates of the percentage of people considered to be living in extreme poverty (i.e. on less than PPP \$1.90 per day) are very similar. Poverty is not only monetary; it also covers various deprivations in access to health, education, and sanitation, as well as to decent housing. ... Mali and Niger were among the 10 countries with the highest gender inequalities, followed by Burkina Faso ... “temptation is even greater when, in the opinion of these groups, bad governance is prevalent, accentuating so-called horizontal inequalities.

Opposite to this are the Jihadist insurgencies, which have significantly contributed to widespread instability and humanitarian crises across the Sahel region, displacing more than three million people within Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (OECD/SWAC 2024). For instance, Jama'at *Nusrat al-Islam wa-l-Muslimin* (JNIM), established in 2017 and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara* (ISGS) emerged in 2015 from a breakaway faction of Al Qaeda. Both JNIM and ISGS share origins in Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which remains the parent organisation of JNIM. Another notable jihadist actor is Burkina Faso's *Ansar al-Islam* (Defenders of Islam), which appeared around 2016 and has operated, at least partially, under the influence of JNIM (Thurston,

2024). All these terrorist groups have continuously destabilised the region and killed many local people.

Hence, between 2020 and 2023, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali all had military takeovers that resulted in their expulsion from ECOWAS because member states are legally obligated to censure coup-led administrations in accordance with the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which commits them to upholding constitutional governance (Hartmann, 2017). The governance issues in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali are treated below

Mali

In Mali, it has been reported that previous governments failed to successfully develop the country economically, following the recession in the country due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. All these culminated in the military coups that occurred in 2020 (Taruvunga, 2023). For example, the August 6, 2025 report of Transparency International on Defence and Security reads thus :

As Mali's military expenditure continues to grow, a new report from Transparency International Defence & Security (TI-DS) reveals institutional weaknesses in the country's external auditing framework—undermining efforts to ensure democratic accountability in the defence and security sectors. Drawing on data from a desk review and the Government Defence Integrity Index (GDI), the report finds that audit institutions in Mali suffer from performance challenges that manifest across their public sector mandate, as well as in specific failures related to defence and security. The report stresses that while Mali has institutions with the legal mandate to conduct audits, their ability to operate effectively depends on access to reliable and timely information (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2025: 1).

The apparent failure of the democratic institutions to stabilise the state from growing discontent over the manipulation of elections by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta who was the President of Mali from 2013 to 2020 and promised to restore Mali's honour as a model for democracy in West Africa as he campaigned as a unifying figure in his fractured country, pledging "zero tolerance" for corruption, led to his being tainted by allegations of corruption and nepotism, and the months leading to his overthrow were marked by burgeoning protests over a parliamentary election he was accused of rigging.

In Mali, the junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta removed the civilian leader in May 2021, effectively abandoning the civilian-led transition. The military juntas pledged to ensure transitions into civilian rule; however, in reality, they entrenched authoritarian regimes while maintaining deliberately flexible and often ambiguous timelines, making the transition unclear (Thurston, 2024).

Niger

Niger certainly stands out as the country with the most successful military coups in the region. Since her independence in 1960, the military has been seen to shape the country's political landscape. Niger has witnessed several military coups in 1974 and 1996. The 1996 coup led to the restoration of military rule; the 1999 and 2010 coups ushered in democratic multi-party elections; the most recent was in 2023. However, while there are no definite reasons identified, there was a

coup in 2023, a coup to which both local and international sources concur that Brigadier General Abdourahamane Tiani was the key figure behind it.

The Mo Ibrahim Africa Governance Index for 2024 report lists Niger among the ten (10) countries with the most deteriorating institutional weaknesses. Transparency International-Corruption Perceptions Index 2024 states that:

...Corruption remains a significant issue, with Niger's score stagnating at 32 after a decade-long downward trend. In Niger, as in most countries, public procurement of equipment, supplies and services, when they concern national defence and security needs, are frequently not subject to standard public procurement rules. Audits of the security sector in 2020 found USD 20 million in unaccounted procurement spending (40 per cent of budgeted expenditures between 2017 and 2019). Under the new government, concerns have arisen that there may be increased levels of secrecy around defense planning and spending. Specifically, on February 26, 2024, a presidential decree was issued to exclude contracts related to public defense and security from the scope of application of the legislation on public procurement and public accounting.

Commentators observe that the breakdown of the public realm, creeping decay from petty corruption by low-level bureaucrats to big corruption by many leaders in Niger, including the military, led to coups.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, originally known as Upper Volta, has witnessed coups from 1966, 1974, 1980, 1982, 1983, 1987, and when the name was changed to Burkina Faso, they still witnessed coups in January 2022 and September 2022. In January 2022, the coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was partly fueled by the Burkinabè government's inability to contain the growing jihadist insurgency that had plagued the region, as well as weak civilian oversight of the military. Despite international support and initiatives aimed at stabilising the country, the government's efforts faltered, leaving the population increasingly vulnerable to extremist violence. This continued failure eroded public trust in the government's leadership. Figures from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project show that 1,985 civilians were killed in Burkina Faso during the two years of violence leading to the second coup (from September 30, 2020, to September 30, 2022). Thus, despite the leaders of both coups claiming they would improve the security situation, 4,843 civilians were killed in the two years after September 30, 2022. Similarly, corruption within the country's defence and security sector diverted resources away from critical security needs, weakening the military's operational capabilities while eroding the trust between the armed forces and the civilian government. This was highlighted in 2021 when, in June, jihadists killed more than 100 people in Solhan, a village in the north of the country. Therefore, in November of the same year, 49 police officers and four civilians were killed near Inata, in the same region (Transparency International Defence & Security, 2026)

Findings

The study found that the effectiveness of sanctions as a regional enforcement mechanism is not too strong in West Africa due to the national interests of ECOWAS members. It is important to note that the first finding centres on the alliance leaders- Abdourahamane Tchiani of Niger,

Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso and Assimi Goita of Mali, who nurtured the idea of cooperation and at the same time were backed by Russian mercenaries to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023. In doing this, they inaugurated a new Sahel Investment and Development Bank meant to finance infrastructure projects without reliance on Western lenders; a new television channel to present the voice to the people of the Sahel; and a joint military force intended to operate across borders against armed groups (Al Jazeera, 2025)

With the Sahelian states now outside ECOWAS, enforcing transhumance regulations will become even more challenging as specified in the ECOWAS Protocol. More importantly, noting the withdrawal of the Sahelian countries from ECOWAS poses significant security risks as they are all at the epicentre of terrorism, banditry, and organised crime in West Africa (Dengiyega, 2025). In this layered terrain of fracture and identity, armed groups have found room not only to manoeuvre but to grow. Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an al-Qaeda affiliate, has expanded from rural Mali, launching attacks across the region and reaching the coast of Benin, exploiting weak state presence and long-unresolved grievances.

The second finding is that ECOWAS is seen not as a neutral body but as supporting the political class or ousted presidents, thus supporting Melly's (2012) position on coups and ECOWAS. This perception makes it harder for the organisation to play a trusted role in resolving conflicts or restoring democratic rule.

The third finding is that sending France away to accept Russia and China is not the issue; it is all about reassigning their resources to another foreign partner of the military junta's interest.

Conclusion

The study focused on military government and regional cooperation in the Sahel region of West Africa. As a result of the resurgence of military coups in Mali in 2021, ECOWAS imposed sanctions such as travel bans, economic and financial restrictions, which demand a quick transition to civilian rule. Similar actions followed in Burkina Faso and Niger. Despite these sanctions, it only had limited success; instead of retreating, the military juntas stood firm. As a result, instead of restoring democracy, the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS appeared to strengthen these countries' anti-Western posture in consonance with other external powers (Zoubir, 2022). Hence, in 2024, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger jointly withdrew from ECOWAS and formed a new alliance known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

Arguably, ECOWAS as a regional organisation is saddled with the responsibility of promoting economic integration, ensuring political stability and maintaining peace and order in Africa. Its key roles involve enhancing economic integration, free mobility of goods and people, as well as, respond to political and security issues. Over the years, it has been active in preventing conflicts, mediating crises, and deploying peacekeeping missions (Osuchukwu et al., 2025). This decision marked a major turning point in regional politics, highlighting a broader perspective on how regional bodies respond to political crises of member states while also raising questions about the future possibility of regional cooperation and security by regional bodies in Africa. While organisations like ECOWAS and AU have condemned military coups, they often failed to speak out when elected members amend constitutions to stay in power (Ani, 2021).

Recommendations

Thus, in addressing military intervention in the Sahel region, there should be an appropriate approach or strategy adopted that is beyond just condemning the coups. The required efforts should be to strengthen democratic institutions, ensure popular representation in governance and address

structural issues that fuel political instability in the region. In the same vein, the regional government, international organizations and regional bodies should work collaboratively to strengthen civil-military relations while building long-term governance strategies to prioritise the needs of the masses.

The government officials in charge of running the state in the Sahel region should look into the structural root causes of military takeovers, such as poverty, ethnic rivalries, and corruption, among others. Additionally, developmental initiatives and innovative activities that seek to benefit the masses should be put in place in order to address structural inequalities. Finally, going forward, ECOWAS and other regional groups may need to adopt a more balanced approach, one that holds all leaders accountable, whether military or civilian

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