Why Regional Norms Fail. Legitimacy, Structural Conditions and Democratic Divergence in the Sahel

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ABSTRACT

This paper tackles the "coup puzzle" by contrasting Nigeria, which has maintained uninterrupted civilian rule since 1999, with the region's four coup-affected states, especially Mali. Despite enduring similar structural pressures and sharing the same normative regional framework, Nigeria resisted military intervention, whereas neighboring militaries overthrew their civilian governments despite the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Drawing on Weber's legitimacy theory, the study argues that regional normative frameworks are not standalone causes of democratization, but rather serve to amplify pre-existing domestic bases of legitimacy, providing insulation from regional pressures only if civilian rule rests on established rational-legal legitimacy across elite and popular spheres. Conversely, in the absence of robust domestic legitimacy, normative frameworks become inconsequential. Using a qualitative comparative analysis with Mali (and Ghana's experience as secondary support), semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions across the two primary case studies, the study shows that coup resilience in Nigeria's democratic arrangement derives from normative regionalism, elite consensus and popular support for civilian rule. In the Malian case, these three-tiered legitimacy structure had been systematically dismantled prior to the August 2020 military takeover. Further deepening the irrelevance of the ECOWAS normative framework has been the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States as an active counter-legitimacy architecture within the region. Ultimately, the paper recommends uncomfortable but important policy response involving shifting the regional agenda from enforcement of normative guidelines to rebuilding these domestic legitimacy structures both at elite and popular levels.

Keywords: Democratic Resilience; ECOWAS-ECOSOCC; Elite Consensus; Legitimacy Theory; Military Coups; Sahel

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

The resurgence of authoritarian behavior and democratic decline globally has renewed interest among academics and policymakers about the resilience of democracy, especially within fragile nascent democratic systems. No part of Africa has more consistently suffered from democratic backsliding or seen this trend sporadically unfold in a cascading manner as the West African Sahel subregion, which has recently witnessed successful military coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger between 2020-2023. This recent wave of unconstitutional power grab is as acute as any seen on the continent since the 1970s (V-Dem, 2024; Adebajo, 2021). However, these coups were not imposed in a normative vacuum, all the coups occurred within member states bound by ECOWAS's Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. This regional instrument strictly condemns unconstitutional changes of government and imposes sanctions on violating member states (Odubajo & Ishola, 2024). For each of the four coups, ECOWAS issued condemnations, imposed sanctions, and suspended the violating states from its community engagements. Yet, in each instance, military leaders still maintained their hold on power.

Conversely, Nigeria, the most populous democracy in the subregion and hegemon within ECOWAS, has not experienced military coups, even while facing similar structural challenges. With Jihadist insurgency throughout northern territories, rapidly declining living conditions, public dissatisfaction, the mass #EndSARS protests of 2020, contested and violent elections, and a legacy of governance deficits, together weakening civilian

institutional legitimacy (Afrobarometer, 2023; V-Dem, 2024). Having experienced same normative constraints and external pressures as her francophone neighbors, Nigeria has endured a coup d'etat. Ghana also succeeded in completing another peaceful, civilian transfer of power amid similar economic and fiscal pressures coupled with growing internal pressures (Freedom House, 2024). This divergent trend across similarly pressured countries within the same region questions, why do regional norms inhibit the militarization of political power in some member states, yet fail entirely in others under identical normative pressures?

The current wave of coups in the Sahel should not be entirely understood outside the history of colonial rule. Since independence, civilian administrations have been weak, divided, and unstable, and have been unable to foster national cohesion in the face of deep societal cleavages, thus leading to recurring interventions by military actors from the 1960s to 1990s, resuming again in the 2000s amidst, Jihadist insurgencies, declining economic and productive activity, endemic corruption and institutional collapse (Kposowa & Jenkins, 1993; Robert, 2013; Cheeseman, 2015), to reassert some form of social order.

Existing literature has so far focused on three supply-side explanations for the inadequacy of the ECOWAS normative regime: (1) the inadequate enforcement provisions within the protocol (2) the selective and politically driven use of sanctions by dominant states (3) the ability of external powers such as Russia and China to offer alternative forms of economic and security engagement, which effectively nullifies the cost of regional marginalization (Adebajo, 2021; Bello, 2026; Lenshie, 2025). These causal explanations highlight structural gaps within regional architecture but are analytically incomplete because they are unable to account for differences in compliance outcomes between member states which face similar normative frameworks. The study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach and a Weberian concept of legitimacy as its lens to explain why normative regional frameworks fare well or poorly in different domestic contexts. This illustrates that regional norms do not act in their own separate domain, rather they reinforce domestic structures and are inextricably linked to the extent that domestic environment has imbibed rational-legal legitimacy. Relying on new comparative empirical evidence from Nigeria and Mali, supplemented by an examination of how Ghana evolves differently, the study will make a threefold contribution in the literature of democratic resilience in Africa, regionalism and political legitimacy by explaining why one democracy persists and other is brought down in identical structural circumstance.

Paradoxically, the puzzle in focus cannot sufficiently be answered with Civil-Military Relations Theory or Principal-Agent Theory which explain incursion through military professionalism, civilian control and institutional incentives (Huntington, 1957; Finer, 1962; Feaver, 2003; Luckham, 1994), but are not equipped to explain why identical regional norms produce differing compliance across states with similar structures. Hence the reliance on Weberian legitimacy theory as a viable option. As Weber (1978) posited, legitimacy theory exists under three ideal typologies of authority: (1) traditional authority legitimated by tradition's sacred customs; (2) charismatic authority based on the extraordinary qualities of the leader; and (3) rational-legal authority based on the belief in the legality of enacted laws and the rights of authorized individuals to issue commands. These three types are not just descriptive categories, but rather models designed to indicate the basis on which political authority is willingly and not coercively accepted as legitimate. Beetham's (1991) later improved perspective argued that, far from being a property held by an authority, legitimacy is achieved and contested through a continually sustained process amongst political institutions, elite circle, public acceptance and judgment of the rightful authority governing them. With such a procedural conception of legitimacy, the relevance of Weberian perspective becomes analytically fortified to explain our central puzzle, producing a clearly testable proposition: regional norms cannot truly be an independent variable which determines members state' behaviour. Rather, they act as devices reinforcing the existing domestic sources of legitimacy. Where such a legitimization has deteriorated and has transferred into the support for a charismatic leader, such as in Mali since the 2020 coup or; the sovereign resistance of a traditional structure (the anti- western ideology in the AES countries), regional norms cease to be practically relevant even with disciplinary sanctions.

This study contends that democratic resilience in the Sahel is best explained as a system of three-tier legitimacy realignment operating concurrently on different but interconnected political levels. (1) Regional level: member-States indicate acceptance of the ECOWAS normative structures and the cost of sanctions for non-compliant state behavior. (2) Elite level: this agreement holds when the elites conclude that a civilian constitutional order best ensures their individual and factional interest. In classical elitism, this translates into the overlapping, self-

sustaining interest of the ruling stratum in preserving existing framework of legal authority (Mosca, 1939, Pareto, 1935). (3) The citizen level: this takes place during contestation for political legitimacy within what Habermas (1996) terms "the public sphere," arenas for the renewal and maintenance of legitimacy within the system.

This three-tier approach to legitimacy provides three distinct advantages. Firstly, it does a better job explaining variation in compliance to regional norms that institutionists do not, by citing variation in norms: the same ECOWAS protocol is implemented in every case, yet compliance varies in pace with the exact levels and patterns of domestic legitimacy configurations. Secondly, it accounts for the demand side of democratic resilience, absent in the institutionalist explanation. Through popular, civic legitimacy, it demonstrates the part played by citizens, civil society groups and local, communities in giving and denying consent to their constitutional orders. Thirdly, it reframes the military as a rational, political player that can measure and adjust its costs and benefits before intervention in terms of legitimacy, intervening only when costs are low enough, and refraining from intervention when legitimacy costs would be exceedingly high (Schulz, 2023; Wing, 2023). As a limitation, legitimacy theory did not help account for the precise timing of any coups in the States, neither does it fully account for external military partnerships which alter the risk-reward calculation for an intervention.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative comparative case study design, warranted by the central research question (why do otherwise structurally identical states with the same regional normative regime differ so drastically in terms of compliance?), that require exploring institution, relation, and legitimacy which are difficult to measure through quantitative indices (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016). Nigeria and Mali were chosen as the main cases based on a most-similar-systems with divergent outcomes design. Both are postcolonial West African States with inherited militaries possessing colonial coercive function, both were members of ECOWAS governed by the same normative regime, both started the study period with democratic constitutions facing the same structural conditions (jihadist insurgencies, declining economic conditions and governance issues) throughout the study period. Ghana serves as a shadow case, selected from the literature to show that Nigeria's resistance to coups may not be idiosyncratic.

To ensure thematic depth, semi-structured interviews were organized into three clusters by stakeholder expertise. Targeting academics and C.S.O.s, Cluster A centered on structural context, for State and regional actors, Cluster B evaluated regulatory mechanisms, while Cluster C assessed observable shifts in civil-military dynamics from media actors. In addition to the in-depth interviews, four Focus Group Discussions (FGD) two per country, contributed to identifying different analytical levels. FGD 1 and 3 researched macro-level structural change and institutional trust. FGD 2 and 4 apprehended micro-level experience and practitioners' assessment of resilient democracy. The language used at the operational level was English. However, to deepen the evidence base, overcome linguistic and top-down bureaucratic hurdles the two FGDs in Mali were undertaken entirely in French and translated for the analysis. Data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis with Braun & Clarke (2006) six phase process and in tandem with interpretive triangulation. Existing empirical evidence derived from quantitative data sources as Varieties of Democracy Project, Freedom House, Afrobarometer, and World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators were used as the secondary data for interpretation triangulation and to ground thematic findings into more evidence-based analysis.

Triangulation of collected data was further implemented through interrogating the emergent themes drawn from interviews and FGDs with the quantitative data on the time series: V-Dem scores, Afrobarometer surveys, and Freedom House reports. The narrative data presented by study participants to explain shifts in institutional authority, popular legitimacy, and military engagement across time were triangulated with the quantitative data and comparisons across time. This added to the confirmability of the analysis in that the qualitative codes and themes which were produced could not be ascribed solely to the researchers, Braun and Clarke (2006). Data triangulation is a critical validity mechanism that is particularly important in qualitative research by connecting the quantitative and qualitative analyses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The timeframe of the study runs from January 2019 through December 2026.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ECOWAS Democratic Norm, Its Structural Limits and the Rise of AES Counter-Legitimacy

The ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), alongside the 1999 conflict-prevention protocol, prescribes a process of constitutional convergence, strongly condemns the seizure and/or maintenance of power by unconstitutional means, and provides for the suspension and sanctions of violating individuals or regimes (Odubajo & Ishola, 2024). However, while ECOWAS member-states are treated as equal legal entities by the bloc, they differ markedly in the capacity of their states' economic vulnerability, and strength of civilian institutions capable of imposing costs on military actors. The resurgence of coups since 2020 demonstrates the limitations of region-wide norms in areas where their domestic institutions are underdeveloped, particularly since the enforcement of these norms is significantly dependent on the political will of member-States, outside which, the entire idea of ECOWAS sanctions become illusory such as in Nigeria's failed attempt to stop the Niger Coup (Kohnert, 2023; Adu & Mezyaev, 2024).

ECOWAS sanctions as a tool of deterrence is on the decline, especially when the coup regimes are able to establish new partnerships. Analyst opine that Russian military and diplomatic support has likely alleviated the costs of ECOWAS' isolation in Mali. Meanwhile, Chinese investment in the extractive industries and infrastructure sectors, that is generally free of democratic conditionality, seems to further shield the junta from regional pressure (ACLED, 2023; Nadzharov & Entina, 2023). This study conceptualizes this process as "external legitimation substitution", when other international actors replace economic, diplomatic, or political support, thus weakening the negative and preventive effects of ECOWAS' withdrawal of legitimacy. Additionally, ECOWAS suffers from a less studied structural deficit within its framework of legitimacy. According to the ECOWAS Commission (2023), ECOWAS Economic, Social & Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), instituted on the basis of Article 14 of the 1993 Revised Treaty, is supposed to connect the intergovernmental regional organization with civil society, professional associations, trade unions, women's and youth associations, and other stakeholders that comprise the popular level of legitimacy. However, slow and incomplete implementation meant that regional anti-coup decision-making processes have been concentrated mainly on government and diplomatic levels, excluding many grassroots players whose contributions may shape the political process. Consequently, the regional framework aimed to promote democratic governance offers no functional institutional channel for the influence of popular democratic legitimacy on its actions.

Furthermore, the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), formed by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in July 2023 and followed by their formal withdrawal from ECOWAS in January 2024, consequently, represents more than continued non-compliance; it constitutes a challenge to the normative authority of ECOWAS itself (Kufuor, 2025). Whereas earlier coup regimes generally violated ECOWAS rules while continuing to recognize the framework and negotiate transitional arrangements, the AES advances a competing conception of legitimate authority grounded in sovereignty, anti-imperialism and charismatic leadership rather than the rational-legal democratic order assumed by ECOWAS (Wing, 2023; Schulz, 2023). Evidence from Mali and Burkina Faso suggests that this discourse resonates particularly among sections of urban youth who perceive limited material returns from constitutional civilian rule; as one Malian FGD participant put it, "*people were increasingly concerned with making a living and coping with sanctions rather than elections*" (FGD-ML-1). The significance of AES therefore lies not merely in ECOWAS's inability to enforce its rules, but in a deeper process of systemic legitimacy decay, whereby weaknesses in domestic institutions erode popular confidence, weaken the internal validation of regional democratic norms, and create space for alternative sources of legitimacy.

Comparative Analysis. Legitimacy, Divergence and Regional Norm Compliance

Nigeria

Within Weber's distinction between legitimate authority and simply coercive power, the central point is not that Nigerian institutions are necessarily powerful (as empirical evidence points in the contrary), but that each one of the three tiers reproduced the machinery of rational-legal legitimacy simultaneously. With the reinforcement of a common commitment to civilian rule rooted in constitutionalism as the only and valid order of political legitimacy, the application of force in this case becomes irrational, rather than illegal (Weber, 1978; Beetham,

1991). Judging from all three criteria of Beetham's model of legitimacy, Nigeria is markedly flawed. The political institutions don't perform optimally, elite norms are routinely violated through corruption and electoral distortion, and the population's attitudes oscillates between cynicism and total disengagement (without genuine civic support). The comparative empirical evidence shows that the imperfect reproduction of legitimacy is conceptually different from legitimacy failure. It is this distinction that determines the conditions for the existence of a military coup, not the level of performance in institutional quality. At the regional level, Nigeria's notion of rational-legal legitimacy is maintained by its hegemonic role within ECOWAS, and in advancing its regional democratic norms. As a Nigerian focused group participant succinctly commented, "a coup in Nigeria would not just be a Nigerian problem, it would collapse the entire region. Everybody knows that, even the military also" (FGD-NG-1). In Beetham's (1991) views, the regional level is a legitimacy amplifier because Nigeria's elites have internalized the costs of regional norm-breaking as damaging to their national and regional brand-image, rather than as normative requirements externally imposed. This is the empirical core of this study's argument.

At the elite level, Nigeria's political class is, apparently, self-serving and clientelist to a scandalous degree, but Beetham's framework accounts for their continued reproduction of rational-legal legitimacy. Its claim to legitimacy rest on the reiteration of the institutional form in which its authority is embodied and interest permissible. The consensus behind civilian rule among Nigerian political elites is not one of democratic ends, but of constitutional means which maximize the government of, by, and for material interests. The 2015 democratic transition, seen as a key moment in this process of consensus reproduction, proved to the Nigerian elite that competitive elections could result in outcomes detrimental to incumbents without undermining the overall system from which all elite actors benefit. A policy analyst opined "*any open military takeover would be unconstitutional and legally indefensible in today's Nigeria*" (NIG-R19, Policy Analyst, Nigeria). This is the logic of rational-legal legitimacy, reproducing precisely the Weberian pattern, a shared recognition of the legal procedural framework of rule, without regard for outcome.

At the popular tier, the findings show that popular rational-legal legitimacy in Nigeria is reproduced by their remembrance of its absence. Afrobarometer data reflected a steady 70-75% of Nigerians choosing democracy over military rule, even when high levels of economic and security anxiety played out (Afrobarometer, 2023). The October 2020 #EndSARS crisis is equally analytically significant here. As one respondent put it: "*The presence and action of soldiers at the Lekki Tollgate was intimidating and was the reason why we should not revert to military rule. They were trying to get the government to listen to them and not replace the government*" (FGD-NG-2). The popular tier of rational-legal legitimacy was therefore intact even in the face of direct provocation.

Mali

If Nigeria exhibits an imperfectly reproduced (but sustained) rational-legal legitimacy across the three levels, Mali between (2019-2021) shows a steady dismantling of rational-legal legitimacy as described by Beetham's model, which links failure in institutional performance with elite norm violation and popular withdrawal, revealing that legitimation crisis in Mali was a process not an event (Beetham, 1991). The decline began at the first level of Beetham's tripartite legitimation, institutional performance. The civilian government of President Keita entered the study period in already advanced stages of delegitimization due to the 2018 elections that were fraught with fraud, corruption scandals and the failure to improve security as Jihadist groups expanded their control in central and northern parts of Mali. Going by Beetham's framework, the government was failing in its substantive performance, thereby loosing institutional integrity. The 2020 intervention in the distribution of legislative seats in favour of ruling party members made by the Constitutional Court marked the absolute breach of procedural legitimacy (the most dangerous for rational-legal authority). It showed the instrumentalization of the rules, where the instruments supposed to reproduce authority are used to undermine it. Consequently, at the elite level, instead of consensus what existed was fragmentation. In contrast to Nigeria where elites have interest in continuation of the rules of the game, in Mali the civilian elites' struggle for resources fragmented them to the extent where they were unable to unite to protect civilian authority. Indeed, as empirical evidence shows, intra-elite conflict and competition for rent extraction led some political factions to actively court the military rather than consolidate party alliances, destroying in advance any elite consensus that could make a military

intervention costly (Ouedraogo, 2014). Without consensus on civilian rule, the informal boundaries to a military intervention were removed even before the coup took place.

Most analytically decisive for this study's theoretical argument is what transpired at the popular level, the popular transfer of charismatic legitimacy to the military. When asked during the interview to pinpoint the moment when he considered his country to have become a charismatic-authoritarian state, one participant replied, "*at that moment, many people believed only the army could reset the system, the constitutional process was seen as blocked*" (MLI-R14, Academic, Mali). Focus groups in Bamako confirmed this transfer of charismatic legitimacy, "*people did not see it as a coup at first, they saw it as rescuing the country from political collapse*" (FGD-ML-2). The second coup of May 2021 proved that this legitimacy transfer had completed, Goita's replacement of his own appointed civilian authorities demonstrated that even the last residual rational-legal constraint had disappeared at every level of governance. One former civil servant summarized his sentiment, "*after the second coup, we all knew the transition was an illusion, the army no longer needed any civilian cover*" (MLI-R18, Former Civil Servant, Mali). Empirically, this transition is seen to have been completed in the V-Dem indicators, which show a sharp downward trend for Mali in civil liberties, judicial independence, and civilian oversight between 2021-2025 (V-Dem, 2025). Only in the FGDs carried out during the research could the shift be seen to be complete, "*people no longer speak of elections, only about survival and the sanctions*" (FGD-ML-1). As such, this single statement explains succinctly the achievement of Weber's legitimacy transfer, from the rule of law to charismatic-authoritarian rule, which was not seen to be legitimate but just an unavoidable fact.

The conclusion that the Mali case presents for ECOWAS' sanctions modality is also clear cut, directly confirming the paper's central argument, that the failure of ECOWAS sanctions was not due to ECOWAS' weak institutional design, but because ECOWAS arrived as a legitimacy amplifier with nothing to amplify. The three levels of legitimacy were demolished or transferred to other sources long before ECOWAS' actions were necessary. The sanctions from the regional bloc were thus manifestly unsuccessful because they could not replace the domestic legitimacy that had not been built, thus becoming co-opted into external sources of legitimacy (those of China and Russia, which provided redundant recognition and investments), to which the population already readily granted legitimacy (Nadzharov & Entina, 2023).

Ghana

Ghana's experience in the same years provides corroboration from the secondary data that the three-tier legitimacy alignment observed in Nigeria is not an idiosyncratic feature, but a relationship that can generalize across the sub-region. Ghana also faced major challenges in the years under review, its own major structural constraints, a severe economic crisis that required an IMF bailout in 2023, youth unemployment, and governance discontent, yet, Ghana maintain legitimacy at all three levels. At the regional tier, through a history of steady ECOWAS norm adherence and diplomatic leadership; at the elite tier, through a cross-party consensus in favour of electoral competition established through successive peaceful power transitions after the Rawlings experience; and at the popular tier, through Afrobarometer evidence that majorities still preferred democracy even at the height of the economic downturn (Afrobarometer, 2024; Freedom House, 2024; V-Dem, 2024). Following the December 2024 election, a peaceful handover to the opposition, with Mahama's inauguration in January 2025 and despite continued economic turbulence, confirming that institutional outputs can deteriorate markedly, without necessarily inducing legitimacy breakdown, if all three tiers of domestic legitimacy are in alignment.

The Paradox of External Security Partnerships, Legitimacy Substitution and Coup Capacity

The relationship between external security partnerships and the democratization of the Sahel embodies a paradox that the legitimacy framework presented in this study is well-suited to theorize. The paradox follows that while international actors have publicly promoted democracy in West Africa, they, via their security assistance frameworks, have contributed to the structural conditions that create the opportunity for democratic breakdown. This paradox manifests in two forms, one of which informs the other. (1) Western military partnership strategies caused the establishment of coup capacities that were later used to topple the civilian governments of the region's democracies. (2) Russian and Chinese partnership strategies created a legitimacy substitution that alleviated the consequences of resorting to these capacities against normative regional institutions. Summed up, these

mechanisms seem to have changed the domestic calculation of legitimacy such that military coups became rational choices for regional actors.

The Western partnerships paradox was most illustrated in the Mali case. For instance, in the 2010s France, the United States, and the European Union spent substantial funds training the Malian military officers, strengthening counterterrorism units with equipment, and providing logistical support for missions against terrorists in Northern and Central Mali (Chafer et al., 2020; Le Noé, 2022). All these were meant to be a democratizing effort by strengthening the capacity of the security sector, however, the institutional consequences were more effective, better equipped, and more professionalized army at the very moment when its domestic normative legal legitimacy was crumbling. Specifically, Assimi Goïta, who led the 2020 coup, had been trained by the United States army (Paquette, 2020), and the counterterrorism units that participated in the coup had benefited from American and European training and equipping. In Weberian terms, external partners invested in bolstering the coercive capacity, meaning, the technical capacity to impose force, without proportionate investment into the domestic rational-legal legitimacy, that is, social norm that would have made the use of the coercive capacity against the civilian government normatively unthinkable. Developing capacity and legitimacy asymmetrically is bad for civilian governance (Allen & Asamoah, 2024; Diamond, 2019).

In Mali, external security assistance strengthened coercive capacity without sufficiently embedding anti-coup professional norms; in Nigeria, similar partnerships contributed to professional socialization against political intervention. As a security expert puts it: "*Most of the senior officers of the Nigerian army had training somewhere where coup is not a possible solution to conflict. So, socialization is one important factor which we do not seem to notice*" (NIG-R07, Security Expert, Nigeria).

The survival of this norm of anti-coup professionalism in the context of long-term training partnerships shows that the military in Nigeria may have been legitimized in the way Beetham (1991) describes: legitimization rooted in the institutional culture itself rather than contingent on its external regulation. These newly formed anti-coup professional norms became part of the identity of Nigerian officers who undertook training in Western military academies and in ECOWAS peacekeeping missions, which was not the case for the capacity building legacy of Malian training partnerships (Obikaeze et al., 2023). The difference did not stem from the nature of the training programmes but rather the domestic legitimacy environment into which it was embedded. Capacity building reinforced a three-tier legitimacy consensus domestically in Nigeria but did not do so for an institution in Mali that was no longer constrained through norms.

The second paradox (Russian and Chinese legitimacy substitution) offers a theoretically important insight into the institutional weaknesses of the regional normative structure. Weber (1978) notes that legitimate authority requires recognition as a set of the constituting elements. We would therefore expect that an actor that does not possess recognition by relevant audiences would have difficulty maintaining authority over a long period of time. The ECOWAS sanctions mechanism exploits this fact, by systematically denying the regional and international legitimacy afforded to coup governments, they impose legitimacy costs that make maintaining an unconstitutional regime prohibitively expensive. This mechanism remains effective when the sanctioning coalition is the dominant source of international recognition available to the target state. It is ineffective when other sources of recognition are available to substitute for the legitimacy denied by the sanctioning coalition, exemplifying Russia and China's response to Mali's junta government.

From late 2021, Russian Wagner Group contractors not only supplied security capabilities but also supplied the military junta with geostrategic legitimacy; and this likely allowed the junta to withstand the legitimacy vacuum triggered by ECOWAS suspension and Western condemnation. As one interviewee summarized, "*since France left and Russia arrived, soldiers in Mali have no fear of sanctions, because they know that they will have protection. Russia itself has survived with sanctions despite continued Western pressures*" (MLI-R08, Security Observer, Mali)."

From the perspective of legitimacy theory, what united both Russia and China was not a support of the junta but the presence of a legitimacy architecture that served as an alternative to that of ECOWAS which could be used by the junta once ECOWAS legitimacy was lost (Al Jazeera, 2022; SBM Intelligence, 2025). The way in which sovereignty, anti-westernization, and opposition to foreign interference have been subsequently expressed as the

basis of governance legitimacy by Sahelian states is therefore not just a rhetorical device, It is a discursive construction of a charismatic-sovereigntist legitimacy claim as the rival to the rational-legal legitimacy claim of ECOWAS based on its democratic governance foundation (CDD, 2026). An interviewee explained the real-world implication thus, "*New partnerships meant that sanctions had little impact as the military felt much less vulnerable*" (MLI-R13, Civil Society Actor, Mali).

These paradoxes yield an uncomfortable policy conclusion, but one that must be stated, externally acquired security assistance that enhances military capacity but does not align with the domestic structures of rational-legal legitimacy generates a domestic structure that is more likely to experience a coup. The levels of military capacity needed to reach the rational action threshold are higher in a poorly equipped than in a well-equipped military; the latter has a greater capacity to succeed. And when this imbalance is linked to access to substitutes of external legitimacy that offset sanctions costs, there exist the recipe for a coup that is both more feasible and less costly, an outcome that no regional normative program can counter on its own. External security assistance programs are not neutral technical tools, as active variables in the domestic legality calculation, they must be designed with the legitimacy effect in mind as carefully as they are designed to influence the capacity effect.

The Limits of Conventional Recommendations, Rebuilding Legitimacy from the Inside Out

The three-tier legitimacy framework advanced in this study, shows that a regional normative model can sustain local legitimacy, but cannot generate, substitute, or rehabilitate it. Any policy recommendations that do not address the conditions that foster domestic legitimacy will continue to provide technically valid, but pragmatically and institutionally inoperable policy advice. In addition, the case itself provides difficult lessons that must be conceded before specific policy prescriptions can be advanced. Nigeria demonstrates that ultimately democratic durability in fragile regimes depends not on citizens or elites having high principles about democracy as a value, but rather on how the material self-interests of the elite overlap with the material self-interest of the state, as well as whether the population remembers the harsh costs of military rule. Nigerian elites support civilian rule because it is in their material self-interest, not because they believe in it as a value, while Nigerians oppose military intervention because of the institutional memory of the harsh personal costs of the repression of the Abacha-era. That this foundation is lacking in inspiration does not lessen its utility; policy prescriptions resting on a more noble foundation risk overlooking the real problem (Mosca, 1939; Pareto, 1935). The task facing the international community in Nigeria and other Sahelian nations is not convincing citizens and elites that democracy is right, but restructuring the incentive environment so that defending the constitutional order is a sensible action.

Hence, the most structurally consequential policy intervention available to regional institutions and international actors in circumstances where constitutional norms are weak and elite balancing is on-going involves structuring regional economic integration and international assistance relationships, such that the material gains are conferred only and exclusively on civilian-ruled states. In the current ECOWAS structure, member states have access to basic advantages such as preferential trade, development funding and diplomatic recognition. Nevertheless, all of these benefits will largely be based on the non-intervention principle. Hence, the expectation is that elite self-restraint toward coups may be a normative matter rather than a material one. Additionally, scholars have proposed that these arrangements may easily be simulated whereby a fortified integration, preferential trade, multilateral investment, development funding and security assistance are entirely subject to observable improvements in civilian control (Beetham 1991; Bamidele and Ayodele 2016). This recommendation contends that ECOWAS introduce positive conditionality as a complementary tool to its negative sanctions. The African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) of the African Union provides an example of a voluntary system that would likely not adequately incentivize the core issue of civil-military relations.

Operationalizing ECOSOCC as a Civil Society Legitimacy Channel

The ECOWAS Economic, Social, and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) institutionalization may be the most effective reform for the legitimation level of the popular legitimacy tier, which is the most observable component of the three-tiered framework. Focus group discussions lead us to believe that major civil society agents involved in the challenge to democratization threats (community organizers, women leaders, religious figures, journalists, civic organizations, youth groups) do not have a specific manner to align the popular legitimacy tier with regional

organizations in Nigeria and the fragile states of the Sahel. The potential agents do not have the tool to access regional governments and early warning systems and, if the institution is well-constituted, the ECOSOCC could be the institution to satisfy this role (Hartmann & Striebinger, 2015). Priorities for operationalization should include: (1) Civil society liaison desks in each member state, and standardized reporting on community-based measures of democratic stress; (2) Linking ECOSOCC reporting to ECOWAS early warning system will most likely strengthen signals on legitimacy depletion measures. This may include measures such as, trust in institutions, approval of the military, and community acceptance of the military's version of a conflict event. Such measures are likely to feed into preventive diplomatic actions prior to the point where legitimacy of the entity involved is deficient; (3) Modes of open civil society access to ECOWAS mediated constitutional crises should also be explored. This suggests that the dimension of popular legitimacy in any negotiated transition settlement be formally and explicitly recognized together with inter-governmental parties.

Reorienting International Security Assistance Toward Legitimacy Conditionality

The "Western security support has increased the capacity for coups without correspondingly strengthening legitimacy" paradox demands a fundamental shift in how international security relationships are conceived in the region. The current system takes security capacity building and governance conditionality as two parallel components with each measured and governed by separate institutional actors with somewhat different mandates. This structural separation could be counterproductive, capacity and legitimacy cannot be built separately since military capacity used without local legitimacy will generate coups rather than security (Diamond, 2019; Allen & Asamoah, 2024). In practice, a redirection of policy would require a reordering of security assistance agreements to require binding civilian oversight conditions, independent legislative examination of training, civilian oversight of joint assessments of officer promotion standards, and civil society access to conduct standards evaluation. These would be regarded as essential conditions rather than optional governance appendixes. Additionally, all officer training would need to make explicit and assessed references to norms of constitutionality and the professional consequences of political interference.

This would be an extension of the socialization model which, with the case evidence from Nigeria, seems to be the most sustainable informal constraint on military conquest. This straightforward policy recommendation therefore remains an under-explored corollary: Investment in professionalism and values through the region's academies should lead to a more disciplined officer corps more effectively than standard policy-maker oversight. Evidence from the Ecole de Maintien de la Paix Alioune Blondin Beye (EMPABB) in Mali, established in part for this purpose as a regional training body for peace and security, demonstrates both the possibilities and limits of this approach. While EMPABB exists and trains officers from across the sub-region, the courses and normative climate to which its graduates return do not generate the durable socialization observed in the Nigerian case, which results in a more professional officer body in ECOWAS peacekeeping deployments and in Western military academy graduates. Integrating constitutional civilian control into the curricula, ambit and normative agenda of regional training schools, stressing it as an indicator of a professional identity as well as an institutional necessity may assist in inculcating that which Ouedraogo and Feaver suggest is conspicuously lacking in Mali: an officer corps culture. (Ouedraogo, 2014; Feaver, 2003)

CONCLUSION

This study embarked on examining the current understanding of regional democratic governance and the questions that remain unanswered: why does the same ECOWAS normative framework constrain military intervention in some member states while failing to prevent coups in others facing similar structural pressures? Comparative evidence from the cases of Nigeria, Mali and (as a shadow case) Ghana suggest that the explanation does not reside in the so-called formidability or weakness of the norm per se but maybe located in the domestic space within which it is applied. The successful implementation of ECOWAS' normative prohibition on unconstitutional change of government is greatly dependent on the domestic masses, political elites and military institutions consistently viewing the extant civilian authority as legitimate. Where such legitimacy is sustained, as in Nigeria and Ghana, the ECOWAS norms reinforce the available democratic consensus. But where it is lacking considerably, as in Mali, regional sanctions arrive after the legitimacy foundations have crumbled. Consequently, the three-tier legitimacy model advanced in this paper attempts to explain this divergence by situating democratic resilience simultaneously at the regional, elite, and popular levels.

In the resultant analysis, Nigeria exemplifies a relatively incomplete but still ongoing reproduction of rational-legal legitimacy, where political elites see a stake in the constitutional bargain, citizens show a preference for civilian authority in spite of dissatisfaction with its performance, and the professionalism of the military has propagated significant anti-coup norms within the officer corps. On the Malian side by contrast, the outcome demonstrates a trajectory of institutional failure, elite fragmentation, and popular disillusionment that has eroded rational-legal legitimacy and opened-up the space for charismatic and sovereigntist alternatives. Ghana also offers evidence that the Nigerian experience may not be entirely idiosyncratic. These cases thus indicate that regional norms are unlikely to serve as independent variables but instead are more likely to enhance other existing domestic legitimacy sources depending on their respective conditions of operation.

Furthermore, security aid directed solely at military strength without simultaneous support for civilian oversight or anti-coup norm socialization risks deepening the structural conditions for intervention. In addition, the regimes' strategic alliances with foreign actors such as Russia and China inhibit ECOWAS' ability to exert its influence through sanctions, leaving the military juntas protected behind an alternative, sovereignty-centric claim to legitimacy. Policy responses must therefore transcend punitive measures. ECOWAS and international partners need to employ a combination of enforcement and "positive conditionality" for civilian-controlled countries, redefine security assistance so that security providers not only build military capacity but are also socialized against coup-supporting, and transform ECOSOCC into an authentic civil society platform. To make ECOSOCC intervention operational, civil society liaison desks should be deployed in a two-step approach: phase 1 (early-standby) in strategic regional host capitals to open up reporting pathways and validate local security parameters and phase 2 (full operational) in sub-regional cluster nodes, to enable a direct flow of early-warning information and civil society engagement in crisis mediations. Such policies will not necessarily generate domestic legitimacy, but they might even-out the field so that elites, citizens and security agencies have an interest in preserving the constitutional order. Revitalizing internal political and social system that gives regional rules of democracy coherence will be key to functioning democracy in the Sahel. Lastly, while the paper documents the structural conditions that gave rise to the AES, it is limited by the time frame of these infant regimes. Subsequent empirical research should follow through over time whether or not charismatic-sovereigntist legitimacy is able to prop up long-term state viability and output of governance, or whether structural-security and economic concerns will short-circuit these unconstitutional fixes.

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