

State Collapse, Democratic Dysfunction, and the Rise of Military Intervention in West Africa: A Study of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Military coups in Mali (2020), Burkina Faso (2022–2023), Niger (2023), and Guinea (2021) received substantial citizen support despite violating democratic procedures. This paradox demands explanation: why did populations within formally functioning democracies actively support military overthrow? This article argues that the coups represent rational responses to state capacity collapse, security catastrophe, and neo-colonial dependency that systematically delegitimized democratic governance. Qualitative analysis of World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, ACLED conflict data, and Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index documents that governance decline and security deterioration preceded each coup. Afrobarometer survey data reveal satisfaction gaps between abstract democratic support (68–72%) and performance satisfaction (32–41%) exceeding 25 percentage points in all four countries. Coup leaders framed their interventions around three dominant themes: state capacity restoration, sovereignty assertion, and nationalist legitimacy against neo-colonial domination. The analysis integrates state capacity theory, legitimacy theory, and neo-colonial dependency theory to explain how formal democratic institutions, severed from genuine capacity and sovereign authority, become vehicles for elite extraction. These findings challenge prevailing Western assumptions about democracy's universal appeal and demonstrate that procedural democracy without substantive performance and sovereignty cannot sustain legitimacy in fragile state contexts.

Keywords: Democratic Legitimacy, Military Coups, West Africa, State Capacity, Neo-colonialism, Sovereignty, Performance Legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

West Africa has experienced an unprecedented series of military coups in the past four years, fundamentally challenging the narrative of Africa's democratic progress. Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea—four strategically significant Sahel and Guinea Zone states—witnessed successful military interventions that toppled democratically elected governments between 2020 and 2023 (Lorch & Bunk, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2021). What distinguishes this wave of coups is not merely its frequency but the remarkable degree of public acceptance that accompanied each intervention. Citizens organized pro-coup demonstrations, military leaders garnered higher early approval ratings than their democratic predecessors, and social media overflowed with popular endorsement (Ariès & Gramizzi, 2021; Koné, 2023). This constitutes a paradox demanding rigorous scholarly examination: why did populations residing within formally functioning democracies actively support their military overthrow?

The prevailing Western narrative of African democratization—advanced by international donors, financial institutions, and development organizations—posits that electoral democracy, once established, generates an irreversible trajectory of good governance, institutional strengthening, and economic development (Fukuyama, 2014; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). The empirical evidence from these four West African states tells a far more complicated story. When formal democratic institutions are systematically hollowed out by state weakness,

foreign interference, and entrenched corruption, they can themselves become instruments of elite extraction and the perpetuation of external domination. Where citizens perceive their governments as fundamentally corrupt, incapable of providing physical security, and beholden to foreign interests—particularly those of former colonial powers—military intervention acquires a rationalized legitimacy as a corrective mechanism, despite its inherent authoritarianism (Bayart, 2009; Hibou, 2011).

This article examines whether the military interventions in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea represent rational reactions to state collapse and democratic failure, or constitute authoritarian aberrations, and what citizens' embrace of these interventions reveals about the structural conditions necessary for democratic legitimacy in fragile state contexts. Three interrelated arguments are advanced. First, the formal democratic institutions of these four countries were severely compromised by structural adjustment programs, chronic austerity, and institutional decay over three decades, rendering them incapable of delivering security, justice, and basic services (World Bank, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Second, democratic governments in the Sahel utterly failed to contain the jihadist insurgency, with security indicators deteriorating consistently from 2015 to 2021, thereby undermining state legitimacy at its most fundamental level (ACLED, 2023; Thurston, 2021). Third, the persistence of neo-colonial structures—including French military deployments, resource extraction contracts skewed toward foreign corporations, and monetary constraints imposed through the CFA franc system—effectively delegitimized democracy as a pathway to genuine sovereignty and development (Koné, 2023; Seibert, 2023).

Together, these conditions enabled both elites and ordinary citizens to frame military intervention as a nationalist assertion against structures of foreign exploitation that democracy had failed to dismantle. The implications extend beyond these four cases. By explaining how populations can endorse authoritarian alternatives within apparently democratic systems, this analysis reveals the limits of procedural democracy when divorced from state capacity, meaningful accountability, and genuine national sovereignty. It offers an uncomfortable but necessary message to policymakers, development organizations, and scholars committed to African democratic consolidation: democracy without the capacity to perform, protect, and assert sovereignty is little more than proceduralism; external intervention in democracy's name can paradoxically undermine it; and citizens' apparent preference for authoritarianism may reflect a rational rejection of democracy as practiced—rather than democracy as ideal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

State Capacity, Democratic Dysfunction, and Neo-colonial Dependency in West Africa

Understanding the paradox of citizen support for military coups requires examining three interconnected dimensions: state institutional weakness, the collapse of democratic legitimacy, and persistent external dependencies that constrain sovereign governance.

State Capacity and Institutional Failure

Following Fukuyama (2004) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2019), state capacity—the institutional ability to enforce property rights, deliver public services, maintain security, and implement policy—constitutes the foundation upon which any regime's legitimacy rests. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea, the observable pattern is not complete state dissolution but selective state failure, wherein formal institutions persist on paper while functional capacity to provide core services deteriorates sharply (Rotberg, 2003). This distinction is critical: these states are not entirely failed, but their institutional weakness had become so pronounced that citizens began to question whether democratic governance offered any meaningful advantage over military alternatives.

Quantitative governance indicators document this decline starkly. In 2022, Mali ranked 138th globally on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI score: 29/100), Burkina Faso 130th (33/100), Niger 129th (34/100), and Guinea 151st (25/100)—all among the world's most corrupt nations. More damaging

to democratic legitimacy than corruption statistics themselves is systemic impunity: court systems controlled by ruling coalitions ensured that high-level officials faced no meaningful accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Scholars have increasingly documented how 'electoral authoritarianism' can persist within formally democratic institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013), rendering military intervention not as a violation of democratic procedures but as a substitute mechanism for removing unaccountable elites—a corrective function that electoral processes had ceased to perform.

Security Failure and the Collapse of State Legitimacy

Classical state theory identifies the monopoly on legitimate violence as foundational to state authority (Weber, 1919; Tilly, 1985). The Sahel insurgency, comprising affiliated jihadist organizations—AQIM, ISGS, and JNIM—expanded precisely in zones where democratic states proved incapable of providing security. ACLED data (2023) document catastrophic failure: conflict deaths increased by 132% in Mali (from 1,847 to 4,293), 519% in Burkina Faso (from 945 to 5,847), 367% in Niger (from 412 to 1,926), and 359% in Guinea (from 34 to 156). Critically, these escalations occurred under democratic governments and directly during the periods when coups were being contemplated. In Mali, civilian deaths rose from approximately 1,200 in 2019 to over 2,400 in 2020—the very year the coup occurred. The insurgency dated to 2012, yet two successive democratic administrations failed to contain it. By 2020, Malian citizens had endured eight years of escalating violence, and post-coup polling indicated approximately 76% public approval of the military intervention (Afrobarometer, 2021), reflecting exhaustion with democratic incapacity rather than authoritarian nostalgia.

Neo-colonial Structures and Delegitimized Sovereignty

A third dimension involves persistent external dominance constraining state autonomy. France maintains approximately 4,900 troops across the Sahel (IISS, 2023), while foreign corporations dominate resource extraction: Niger's uranium (approximately 5,000 tonnes annually, valued at USD 1–2 billion) generates only fractional government revenue, and Mali's gold represents 73% of merchandise exports but merely 5% of government revenue (IMF, 2021). The CFA franc arrangement requires participating nations to deposit 65% of their foreign exchange reserves in France's treasury, severely limiting monetary policy autonomy (Seay, 2021). These overlapping dependencies—military, resource-based, and monetary—constrain the actual policy space available to democratic governments. When citizens observe elected leaders unable to direct national resources, command security forces independently, or refuse foreign military deployments, democracy acquires the character of formal sovereignty masking substantive subjugation (Hibou, 2011; Bayart, 2009).

Performance Legitimacy and Democratic Vulnerability

Theoretical literature distinguishes between procedural legitimacy (belief in democratic rules), performance legitimacy (belief in tangible governance benefits), and normative legitimacy (belief that regimes reflect citizens' values) (Beetham, 1991; Linde & Ekman, 2014). Afrobarometer surveys reveal a troubling pattern: citizens maintain abstract support for democracy in general while experiencing profound dissatisfaction with democracy in practice. In Mali, 72% valued democracy abstractly, yet only 41% were satisfied with democratic performance—a gap of 31 percentage points. In weak-capacity democracies, these three legitimacy dimensions diverge sharply: procedural legitimacy is maintained while both performance and normative legitimacy collapse.

Coup leaders exploited this divergence by claiming normative legitimacy, positioning themselves as defenders of national sovereignty against neo-colonial domination while explicitly rejecting the procedural democracy that had failed to deliver results. Colonel Assimi Goïta framed Mali's 2020 coup as a nationalist reassertion against foreign dominance, appealing to normative commitments that democratic predecessors had allegedly abandoned (Koné, 2023). Early post-coup actions—high-profile corruption arrests, initial tactical security successes, and explicit severing of ties with France—generated citizen approval despite the coups' unconstitutional character (Lorch & Bunk, 2023). This suggests citizens understood the coups not as permanent authoritarian seizures but as drastic institutional resets addressing observable, documented failures.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Integrating Theory: Weak Capacity, Legitimacy Collapse, and Sovereignty

An integrated theoretical framework synthesizes these dimensions: Weak state capacity → inability to deliver core services → performance legitimacy collapses → external dependency becomes salient → citizens perceive democracy as serving external rather than national interests → normative legitimacy erodes → military intervention framed as sovereignty assertion and performance restoration → citizens support coups. This framework generates testable predictions: performance deterioration should precede coups; citizens should express stronger coup support where legitimacy has visibly collapsed; coup leaders should employ nationalist rhetoric; military governments should pursue sovereignty-asserting policies. Understanding West African coups requires recognizing that citizens did not reject democracy as ideal but rather the tangible failures of democracy as implemented within contexts of weak capacity, external dependency, and unresolved security crises.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking State Collapse, Democratic Dysfunction, and Military Intervention



Source: Author's compilation based on Fukuyama (2004), Beetham (1991), Rotberg (2003), and Dependency Theory literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the relationship between state collapse, democratic dysfunction, and military intervention in West Africa. The research focuses on four countries Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea which experienced successful military coups between 2020 and 2023. These cases were purposively selected because they represent some of the most significant instances of democratic reversal in contemporary Africa and exhibit similar patterns of governance decline, security deterioration, and growing public dissatisfaction with democratic institutions.

The study relies primarily on secondary data obtained from internationally recognized sources. Governance indicators were drawn from the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), particularly measures relating to government effectiveness, rule of law, and control of corruption. Conflict and security data were obtained from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which provides detailed information on conflict-related fatalities, insurgent activities, and civilian casualties. Corruption data were sourced from Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), while public opinion data were obtained from Afrobarometer Round 8 surveys, which assess citizens' attitudes toward democracy, governance, security, and institutional performance. Additional economic indicators, including GDP growth rates, unemployment levels, and government expenditure patterns, were obtained from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank databases.

To complement quantitative indicators, the study analyzed official coup declarations, military communiqués, transitional charters, government policy statements, ECOWAS communiqués, and speeches delivered by military leaders following the coups. These primary documents were supplemented with reports from international and regional media organizations, including Reuters, Agence France-Presse (AFP), BBC Africa, and Radio France Internationale (RFI). Scholarly books, journal articles, policy reports, and institutional publications were also consulted to provide contextual and theoretical insights into the dynamics of democratic governance, state fragility, and military intervention in West Africa.

The analytical framework combines comparative case analysis, trend analysis, and thematic content analysis. Trend analysis was employed to examine changes in governance quality, corruption levels, economic performance, and security conditions between 2015 and 2023. Comparative case analysis facilitated the identification of similarities and differences across the four countries, enabling a broader understanding of the structural conditions associated with military intervention.

Furthermore, thematic content analysis was conducted on coup speeches, official declarations, and related policy documents. The coding process focused on five recurring themes: (1) state capacity failure; (2) insecurity and counterinsurgency challenges; (3) corruption and governance dysfunction; (4) sovereignty, nationalism, and anti-colonial narratives; and (5) institutional reform and democratic renewal. These themes were selected because they repeatedly appeared in military justifications for intervention and in public discourse surrounding the coups. The thematic coding process enabled the study to identify dominant narratives used by military leaders to legitimize their actions and to evaluate how these narratives resonated with public grievances.

The study is guided by an integrated theoretical framework combining State Capacity Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Neo-colonial Dependency Theory. This framework facilitates an examination of how weak institutional capacity, declining democratic legitimacy, and perceived external domination interact to create conditions under which military intervention may receive popular support.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, conflict fatality figures may vary across reporting agencies due to differences in data collection methodologies. Second, Afrobarometer surveys provide periodic snapshots of public opinion rather than continuous longitudinal measurements. Third, the study does not claim that state failure alone causes military coups, as coup occurrence is often influenced by multiple political, institutional, and strategic factors. Finally, the relatively recent nature of the coups limits the ability to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of military governments in addressing the governance and security challenges that initially generated public support for intervention.

To enhance comparative analysis and improve the presentation of empirical evidence, Tables 1–3 summarizes the major governance, security, and public opinion trends observed across Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea prior to military intervention. The tables highlight the convergence of governance deterioration, escalating insecurity, and declining confidence in democratic performance that characterized the pre-coup environment in all four countries.

Table 1: Governance and Corruption Trends Prior to Military Intervention (2015 – 2023)

Country	Governance Indicator Trend	Corruption Trend	CPI Score (2022)	Coup Year
Mali	Declining Rule of Law	Increasing corruption	29/100	2020
Burkina Faso	Declining Government Effectiveness	Increasing corruption	33/100	2022
Niger	Persistently Weak Governance	Increasing corruption	34/100	2023
Guinea	Sharp Governance Deterioration	High corruption levels	25/100	2021

Source: Author’s compilation from World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (2023) and Transparency International Corruption Perception Index (2023)

Table 1 demonstrates that all four countries experienced declining governance performance and persistent corruption prior to military intervention. Although the severity differed across cases, the trend indicates a common pattern of institutional weakening that contributed to declining public confidence in democratic governance

Table 2: Conflict Escalation Prior to Military Coups

Country	Earlier Conflict Deaths	Later Conflicts Deaths	Percentage Increase
Mali	1,847	4,293	+132%
Burkina Faso	945	5,847	+519%
Niger	412	1,926	+367%
Guinea	34	156	+359%

Source: ACLED Conflict Database (2023)

Table 2 reveals a substantial increase in conflict-related fatalities across all four countries prior to military intervention. Burkina Faso experienced the most severe escalation, while Mali and Niger also recorded dramatic increases. These trends support the argument that worsening insecurity significantly undermined the legitimacy of civilian governments.

Table 3: Democratic Support and Performance Satisfaction

Country	Support for Democracy (%)	Satisfaction with Democratic Performance (%)	Gap
Mali	72	41	31
Guinea	68	39	29
Niger	63	35	28
Burkina Faso	70	42	28

Source: Author’s compilation from Afrobarometer Round 8 Surveys (2021 – 2023)

Table 3 highlights a significant divergence between citizens’ support for democracy as an ideal and their satisfaction with democratic performance in practice. The consistently large gaps suggest that citizens remained

committed to democratic principles while becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the effectiveness of democratic governments

RESULTS

Mali: Institutional Collapse and Security Catastrophe

The military takeover led by Colonel Assimi Goïta in August 2020 followed eight years of waning democratic governance under successive administrations. Governance indicators reflect systematic decline: Mali's World Bank Rule of Law score fell from -0.68 (2015) to -0.89 (2020), while the Control of Corruption score declined from -0.74 to -0.97 over the same period (World Bank, 2023). By 2022, Mali ranked 138th on the Corruption Perceptions Index (score: 29/100), reflecting deeply entrenched systemic corruption (Transparency International, 2023).

The security environment deteriorated catastrophically. ACLED data document conflict-related deaths escalating from 1,847 (2015–2019 average) to 4,293 (2020–2023)—a 132% increase (ACLED, 2023). Civilian deaths rose sharply from approximately 1,200 in 2019 to over 2,400 in 2020, the coup year itself. Insurgent groups—JNIM and ISGS—continued to expand territorial control despite ongoing democratic government counterinsurgency operations. Economic performance collapsed in parallel: real GDP growth fell from 5.8% in 2015 to 3.2% in 2019, then contracted to -2.0% in 2020 (IMF, 2023), with urban youth unemployment exceeding 30%.

Public opinion data reflect the cumulative exhaustion. Afrobarometer (2021) recorded a 31-percentage-point satisfaction gap: while 72% of respondents expressed abstract support for democracy, only 41% were satisfied with its performance. Trust in parliament fell to 32%, and approximately 76% of respondents approved of the August 2020 military intervention. Primary source evidence confirms that coup leaders were deliberate in framing their actions around documented failures. In his televised address following the coup, Colonel Goïta declared: 'The political class and the government have shown their incapacity and bad will to govern this country out of the crisis... We have decided to take our responsibilities before history and before the Malian people' (Goïta, 2020, as cited in Koné, 2023). The transitional charter subsequently issued by the junta explicitly identified insecurity, corruption, and governance dysfunction as the triple rationale for intervention, and pledged a return to civilian rule following an 18-month transition—a timeline that framed the coup as corrective rather than permanent. This primary documentary record demonstrates that the legitimating narrative was not improvised after the fact but was structurally embedded in the junta's founding documents, and that it resonated precisely because it named conditions citizens had directly experienced.

Burkina Faso: Security Collapse and Democratic Delegitimization

Burkina Faso endured two coups within 18 months: the first in January 2022 by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, and the second in September 2023 by Captain Ibrahim Traoré—a pattern that itself reflects the depth of institutional crisis. World Bank scores show Government Effectiveness declining from -0.38 (2015) to -0.71 (2021), and Rule of Law falling from -0.31 to -0.68 (World Bank, 2023). The country ranked 130th on the 2022 CPI (33/100) (Transparency International, 2023).

The security crisis was the most severe among the four countries. Conflict deaths escalated from 945 (2015–2019) to 5,847 (2020–2023)—a 519% increase, the highest in the comparative sample (ACLED, 2023). By 2021, jihadist groups had seized control of large swaths of territory in the north and east, displacing over 2 million Burkinabè—approximately 9% of the population (OCHA, 2021). Economic contraction accompanied security collapse: GDP growth fell from 6.3% (2015) to 2.1% (2019) before contracting further during 2020–2021, while urban unemployment exceeded 35%.

The two-coup sequence reflects sequential legitimacy crises. The first coup was grudgingly accepted given the deteriorating security situation; the second—led by Traoré—gained broader approval because it projected greater resolve on security matters. Military officials framed their intervention explicitly around the need to mobilize

state forces for counterinsurgency and to assert control over security policy independent of French military influence. Operation Barkhane's demonstrable failure to contain the insurgency made the junta's pledge of more assertive, nationalist security policies politically compelling (Koné, 2023).

Niger: Sovereignty Assertion and Anti-colonial Intervention

Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger under President Mohamed Bazoum was exhibiting relatively more stable democratic governance at the time of the July 2023 coup—yet the underlying structural pathologies remained. Rule of Law scores remained persistently weak (-0.71 in 2021), and Niger ranked 129th on the 2022 CPI (34/100) (Transparency International, 2023). Conflict deaths escalated from 412 (2015–2019) to 1,926 (2020–2023)—a 367% increase—as jihadist groups expanded from Mali and Burkina Faso into Niger's western regions (ACLED, 2023).

The resource dimension was particularly salient in Niger's case. With average GDP growth of only 3.1% (2015–2019)—insufficient to absorb a rapidly growing youth population—and uranium and gold resources generating minimal government revenue despite massive foreign extraction, citizens experienced the paradox of resource wealth amid pervasive poverty most acutely. The French company Orano extracted approximately 5,000 tonnes of uranium annually, valued at USD 1–2 billion, while the government received only a fraction in royalties (USGS, 2022; Seay, 2021). Afrobarometer data indicated that while 63% of Nigeriens formally supported democracy, satisfaction with democratic performance was limited, and citizens widely perceived democratic governance as serving foreign interests rather than national welfare.

General Abdourahamane Tiani's post-coup declaration centered explicitly on sovereignty and national self-determination. In his first public broadcast, Tiani stated that the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland had intervened to put an end to 'the deteriorating security situation and bad governance' and to 'protect our homeland', a language that directly mapped onto the documented governance and security failures preceding the coup (Tiani, 2023, as cited in Koné, 2023). The junta's transitional charter further committed to reviewing bilateral security and resource agreements deemed incompatible with Niger's sovereign interests, and explicitly named French military presence as a constraint on independent security policy. This framing resonated powerfully with a population already sensitized to the inequities of resource extraction arrangements and the visible presence of foreign military forces on national soil.

Guinea: Resource Nationalism and Institutional Dysfunction

The September 2021 coup led by Lieutenant-Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya came against the backdrop of President Alpha Condé's contested constitutional amendment in 2020, which enabled him to remain in power for two additional terms. Governance indicators reflected the deepest institutional decay among the four cases: the World Bank Control of Corruption score fell from -0.82 (2015) to -1.09 (2021), and Rule of Law from -0.78 to -0.95 (World Bank, 2023). Guinea ranked 151st of 180 countries on the 2022 CPI (25/100)—the lowest in the comparative sample (Transparency International, 2023).

While Guinea's security crisis was less severe in absolute terms than Mali or Burkina Faso, political violence and repression under Condé intensified markedly, including extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detention by security forces. Conflict deaths nonetheless rose from 34 (2015–2019) to 156 (2020–2023), a 359% increase (ACLED, 2023). Economic growth averaged 4.2% (2015–2019) but failed to generate employment or reduce poverty, with youth unemployment exceeding 30%. Despite abundant bauxite, gold, and diamond resources, the majority of extraction benefits accrued to foreign mining companies—Rio Tinto and ArcelorMittal among them—with minimal domestic redistribution.

In Guinea's case, the proximate trigger was institutional rather than primarily security-related: Condé's constitutional manipulation was experienced as a direct assault on democratic norms. Citizens understood the coup partly as a response to constitutional capture rather than solely to security failure. Afrobarometer data showed abstract democratic support at 68%, with very low satisfaction scores on corruption and rule of law.

Lieutenant-Colonel Doumbouya's first national broadcast provided explicit primary source evidence of the junta's legitimating logic. He declared: 'We will no longer entrust politics to one man, we are going to entrust politics to the people... the poverty you experience despite our wealth is unacceptable' (Doumbouya, 2021, as cited in Lorch & Bunk, 2023). This statement, combining constitutional critique, resource nationalism, and popular sovereignty encapsulates the triple legitimating narrative observed across all four cases. The Guinea transitional charter subsequently committed to a two-year transition, prosecution of corruption cases from the Condé era, and renegotiation of mining contracts, with these commitments serving as the institutional foundation of the junta's early legitimacy claims (Koné, 2023).

Comparative Analysis: Common Patterns

Across all four countries, a consistent pattern emerges: systematic deterioration in governance and security performance preceded military intervention, precisely as the theoretical framework predicts. World Bank WGI scores reflect progressive institutional decline across all indicators between 2015 and 2020–2023. ACLED data reveal a surge in conflict-related violence in the two-to-three years immediately preceding each coup. All four economies experienced growth contractions and rising unemployment during pre-coup periods. Afrobarometer data confirm satisfaction gaps exceeding 25 percentage points in all four cases, indicating citizens' separation of democratic ideals from democratic practice.

Coup leaders drew explicitly on three dominant narrative frames: (1) restoration of state capacity through anti-corruption measures and security mobilization; (2) sovereignty assertion through French military withdrawal and resource renegotiation; and (3) nationalist legitimacy framing military intervention as a defense of national interest against foreign domination. These narratives were not merely ideological constructs; they were empirically grounded in observable, documented institutional failures that citizens had directly experienced.

DISCUSSION

Performance Legitimacy and the Rationality of Coup Support

The findings demonstrate that the military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea were not aberrations from a democratic trajectory but rational responses to conditions of institutional failure and security crisis that were empirically observable and chronologically prior to the interventions. The sequence of causation matters: governance declined first, security deteriorated next, economies contracted accordingly, and coups followed. Citizens were not rejecting democracy as a principle; they were rejecting their specific democratic governments' demonstrable failures.

This finding contradicts both the prevailing Western narrative of African democratic immaturity and the reductive stereotype of Africans as culturally predisposed to accepting coups. It reveals a more sophisticated citizen calculus: when democratic governments fail to deliver security, control corruption, and demonstrate genuine sovereignty, citizens rationally prioritize performance legitimacy over procedural legitimacy. The satisfaction gaps exceeding 25 percentage points in all four countries demonstrate that citizens consistently distinguished between democracy as an ideal and democracy as implemented for elite and foreign benefit. Military intervention registers not as a rejection of democratic values but as a rejection of democracy perverted in service of narrow interests.

State Capacity as Prerequisite for Democratic Legitimacy

These four cases provide strong empirical support for the theoretical proposition that weak-capacity states face inherent tensions between procedural democracy and performance delivery. Before the coups, Mali's Rule of Law scores fell from -0.68 to -0.89, Burkina Faso's Government Effectiveness from -0.38 to -0.71, Niger's institutional weakness scores remained chronically low, and Guinea's corruption indicators worsened year-on-year. These were not short-term fluctuations but structural incapacities rooted in decades of underinvestment, institutional brain drain, and colonial legacies.

Crucially, these weak institutional environments were inherited rather than created by democratic governments—yet democratic theory holds leaders accountable for performance within their inherited contexts. This creates a structural dilemma: leaders are expected to perform within severely constrained institutional environments, and when they predictably fall short, their legitimacy evaporates. Military intervention becomes a viable option not because armies necessarily govern better, but because they offer the prospect of concentrated resource mobilization, visible anti-corruption action, and institutional re-energization. Initial post-coup actions in all four countries partially fulfilled these expectations: Mali's junta arrested high-level officials on corruption charges; Burkina Faso's second junta launched aggressive security operations with initial tactical successes; Niger's junta entered resource term renegotiations; Guinea's junta initiated investigations into Condé-era crimes (Ariès & Gramizzi, 2021; Koné, 2023).

Neo-colonialism and Democracy's Delegitimization

Perhaps the most analytically significant finding is that citizen support for coups reflects not simply dissatisfaction with domestic governance but a perception that democracy itself had become a vehicle for legitimizing external domination. Three overlapping constraining structures were documented across the cases. First, military dependence: French Operation Barkhane and associated arrangements had produced a *de facto* French security presence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, such that democratic governments could not independently formulate security strategy, command their own forces effectively, or refuse foreign military deployments. Citizens witnessed elected leaders publicly deferring to foreign military commanders—a visible index of compromised sovereignty (Seibert, 2023). Second, resource dependency: foreign mining corporations extracted billions of dollars in mineral wealth while democratic governments received minimal fiscal benefit. Resources characterized as national patrimony enriched foreign shareholders while government budgets remained constrained. Third, monetary dependency: the CFA franc arrangement deposited foreign exchange reserves in France's treasury and subjected monetary policy to external oversight, constituting a form of monetary subordination that democratic governments had neither the political will nor structural capacity to dismantle (Seay, 2021).

Military coup leaders explicitly mobilized against these dependencies: Mali's junta demanded the withdrawal of French troops; Niger's junta prioritized resource term renegotiation; Guinea's junta pledged to review mining contracts. Whether these commitments produced transformative results is a separate question—what is analytically significant is their political resonance. Citizens had experienced democracy as a normalizing frame for neo-colonial subjugation, making military declarations of sovereignty appear more genuinely nationalist than democratic submission to external constraints.

It is necessary, however, to acknowledge competing scholarly perspectives on the neo-colonial dependency argument. Some analysts caution against overstating French culpability, pointing out that elected governments in Mali and Niger actively requested French military assistance and renewed security cooperation agreements through democratic processes (Chafer, 2014; Lebovich, 2023). From this perspective, Operation Barkhane was not an imposition but a negotiated arrangement that reflected genuine security needs in the absence of adequate domestic military capacity. Similarly, critics of the CFA franc critique note that monetary union provided macroeconomic stability and low inflation that benefited ordinary citizens, and that the arrangement has been formally reformed since 2020 to reduce French treasury oversight (Sy, 2020). On resource extraction, some scholars argue that the core problem lies in domestic elite capture of revenue rather than foreign extraction *per se*—that national governments and their political networks, rather than foreign companies alone, were primary beneficiaries of extraction contracts (Wenar, 2016). These counterarguments do not invalidate the neo-colonial dependency framework, but they introduce important nuance: the structural constraints on democratic sovereignty were partly chosen, partly inherited, and partly contested even within the affected states themselves. The appropriate analytical conclusion is not that France caused these coups, but that the entanglement of democratic governance with external military, monetary, and economic dependencies created a perception of compromised sovereignty that coup leaders skillfully and consequentially exploited.

Alternative Explanations and Their Limits

A comprehensive analysis requires engaging with competing explanations for coup occurrence that the state failure framework alone does not fully capture. Three rival explanations merit serious consideration. First, elite competition theories argue that coups reflect factional struggles within the military and political class rather than popular dissatisfaction—that officers exploit public grievances instrumentally to legitimize power grabs driven by institutional careerism and intra-elite rivalry (Geddes, 1999; Powell & Thyne, 2011). There is undeniable merit to this view: in Niger, the Presidential Guard's institutional interests were directly threatened by Bazoum's planned security reforms, and in Guinea, Doumbouya's unit had specific grievances over command structures. However, elite competition alone cannot explain the remarkable levels of popular approval that followed each coup—76% in Mali, with comparable figures elsewhere—nor does it account for the timing, which consistently followed prolonged governance and security deterioration rather than periods of elite stability.

Second, military institutional interest theories suggest that armed forces intervene when civilian governments threaten their budgets, autonomy, or corporate identity (Finer, 1962; Nordlinger, 1977). This explanation has partial validity: Burkina Faso's military suffered humiliating battlefield losses under civilian command, and Malian officers resented political interference in counterinsurgency operations. Yet institutional grievance does not explain why populations actively celebrated rather than merely tolerated these interventions, nor why coup leaders invested so heavily in populist sovereignty narratives rather than simply consolidating military privilege. Third, regional political contagion—the demonstration effect whereby successful coups in neighboring states normalize military intervention as a political strategy—offers a compelling supplementary explanation (Gunitsky, 2014). The sequential pattern of coups across the Sahel from 2020 to 2023 is consistent with contagion dynamics: each successful intervention reduced the perceived costs and increased the perceived legitimacy of subsequent ones. However, contagion explains diffusion, not initiation; Mali's 2020 coup, which triggered the regional sequence, must still be explained on its own structural terms. The state capacity and legitimacy framework advanced in this article does not exclude these alternative mechanisms but argues that they operate as proximate triggers within structural conditions—weak capacity, security failure, and neo-colonial dependency—that are the deeper, necessary causes. Elite competition and military interests determine who leads a coup; structural legitimacy collapse determines whether it succeeds in attracting citizen support.

Implications for Democratic Theory and Practice

These findings challenge three foundational assumptions underlying Western democracy promotion frameworks. First, the assumption that formal democratic institutions automatically generate performance legitimacy is empirically unsupported: procedural democracy divorced from capacity and outcomes produces alienation rather than legitimacy. Second, the assumption that procedural commitment to democracy is universally sufficient regardless of context misreads the empirical evidence: Afrobarometer consistently shows abstract democratic support even in coup-affected countries, but this support is conditional on performance. When democratic governments systematically fail to deliver security, control corruption, and assert sovereignty, citizens rationally recalibrate their preferences. Third, the assumption that external military presence, resource extraction arrangements, and monetary controls are compatible with genuine democratic sovereignty is contradicted by the evidence: these dependencies structurally constrain elected leaders and delegitimize democracy in citizens' eyes.

Cautionary Notes on Post-Coup Performance

This analysis explains why citizens support coups; it does not validate military rule. The critical question is whether military governments can deliver on the promises that generated their early support. Initial evidence is mixed and inconclusive. In Mali, the junta achieved some tactical security gains while consolidating political power. In Burkina Faso, security operations made tactical progress but failed to reverse the strategic insurgent tide. In Niger, the junta entered resource renegotiations without transformative outcomes. In Guinea, promised transitional democracy has been repeatedly postponed (Lorch & Bunk, 2023). Military rule carries inherent risks: institutional unaccountability, the suspension of democratic processes, and the potential entrenchment of authoritarian governance well beyond any transitional mandate. Furthermore, ECOWAS sanctions, regional

instability, refugee crises, and aid suspension impose real welfare costs on populations who initially endorsed the coups. Whether early goodwill translates into sustainable legitimacy will depend on whether juntas can deliver measurable improvements before citizen expectations turn to disillusionment.

CONCLUSION

Between 2020 and 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea experienced military coups that received substantial citizen support. This article has demonstrated that these interventions represent rational responses to state capacity collapse, security catastrophe, and neo-colonial dependency that systematically delegitimized democratic governance across all four countries.

The empirical record is clear: performance deterioration preceded coups in every case. Governance indicators declined systematically; conflict deaths escalated sharply (Mali +132%, Burkina Faso +519%, Niger +367%, Guinea +359%); economies contracted. Afrobarometer data reveal satisfaction with democratic performance falling more than 25 percentage points below abstract democratic support, confirming that citizens rejected democracy's implementation, not its ideal. The neo-colonial dimension proved particularly consequential: French military dominance, foreign resource control, and monetary constraints meant democratic governments operated under profound external constraints, making military sovereignty assertion a powerfully resonant nationalist appeal.

Three key implications emerge. First, democratic legitimacy requires substantive performance and genuine sovereignty, not merely procedural regularity. Second, democracy promoted through external leverage within structurally dependent relationships contains an internal contradiction that undermines it. Third, institutional capacity-building and authentic sovereignty may be prerequisites for democratic consolidation rather than its byproducts. The critical caveat remains: this analysis explains coup support—it does not endorse military rule. Whether juntas can govern more effectively than the democratic governments they replaced remains deeply uncertain, and the risks of authoritarian entrenchment are real and consequential. Ultimately, West Africa's coups signal not democracy's failure as an ideal but the failure of democracy as implemented within contexts of weak state capacity, external dependency, and unresolved security crisis.

Several directions for future research emerge from this analysis. First, scholars should investigate the conditions under which democratic legitimacy can be recovered and rebuilt after periods of severe institutional failure identifying which combinations of capacity investment, accountability reform, and sovereignty assertion most effectively restore public confidence in democratic governance. Second, longitudinal research tracking citizen attitudes in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea over the next five to ten years will be essential for determining whether military governments' legitimacy holds, collapses, or creates new pathways toward hybrid governance arrangements. Third, comparative research extending this framework to other fragile democratic contexts—including Chad, Guinea-Bissau, and Sudan—could test whether the state capacity and legitimacy collapse model has broader explanatory purchase beyond the four cases examined here. Fourth, future scholarship should examine the role of social media and digital communication in amplifying coup support and constructing nationalist narratives, given the documented role of pro-coup messaging in shaping public opinion across all four cases. Addressing these questions will be essential for developing theoretically grounded and empirically informed strategies for democratic resilience in contexts of structural fragility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following policy recommendations are advanced. First, governance reform frameworks should prioritize state capacity and measurable performance over procedural compliance. Electoral cycles alone cannot sustain democratic legitimacy without demonstrable improvements in security, corruption control, and service delivery. Institutional reform addressing citizen welfare must be central regardless of the governing authority. Second, states must assert genuine sovereignty over resource extraction arrangements and security agreements. Citizens support coups partly because they perceive national wealth and security decisions as flowing to external actors; renegotiating extractive contracts and reducing foreign military dependence can

rebuild both state legitimacy and democratic credibility. Third, independent judicial accountability mechanisms must be established and insulated from political interference. High-profile arrests satisfy immediate public demand for anti-corruption action, but sustainable legitimacy requires consistent institutional accountability irrespective of political affiliation. Fourth, international democracy-promotion frameworks should reduce conditionality that simultaneously demands governance reform while imposing austerity measures that constrain the state capacity required to implement it. Support for institutional capacity-building should take precedence over procedural compliance requirements. Fifth, rather than reflexive isolation through sanctions, international actors should develop nuanced engagement strategies that create credible transition pathways toward democratic governance, as confrontation without alternatives may accelerate authoritarian entrenchment.

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