

Democratic Backsliding and Military Coups in West Africa: Strategies to Reverse Erosion and Strengthen Political Stability

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Published 27th January 2025

Abstract

The increased rate of democratic backsliding and military coups within West Africa has defaced two decades of progress in governance and stability in the region. This paper, therefore, looks into democratic backsliding and military coups to identify the underlying factors that have contributed to this trend and the adequacy of regional and international interventions. Drawing on case studies of recent coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the analysis examines how constitutional manipulation, economic hardship, and weakened institutions create environments that are permissive of both democratic erosion and military intervention. Based on a review of academic literature and policy evaluations, the study suggests actionable strategies to reverse democratic erosion, strengthen institutional resilience, and reinforce regional political stability. It argues that addressing underlying socio-economic challenges and developing solid democratic institutions are critical in countering this growing tide of authoritarianism.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, West African Military Coups

I. Introduction

Democratic backsliding and military coups have become increasingly prevalent in West Africa over the past few years, marking a significant reversal of the democratic gains made in the region since the 1990s¹. This trend has been particularly pronounced in French-speaking West African countries, where military takeovers have occurred since 2020. Mali experienced two coups in 2020 and 2021,

followed by Guinea in 2021 and Burkina Faso twice in 2022. Niger joined this list with a military takeover in July 2023, leading to the emergence of what some call the "Coup Belt," stretching across the Sahel region². The coups have often occurred in a context of widespread disregard for political and civil liberties, worsening insecurity, and growing economic difficulties.

¹ ("West Africa Civil Society's Solutions to Reverse Democratic Backsliding in French-speaking Countries," n.d.)

² ("West and Central Africa," n.d.)

Several factors have contributed to this democratic backsliding. These include growing dissatisfaction among citizens with the processes and outcomes of democratic governance, which have failed to meet widespread expectations for economic well-being. The manipulation of constitutions and election results to extend mandates, the threat of violent extremism (particularly in the Sahel), and the emergence of external forces and influences have also played significant roles³. Additionally, weak opposition parties, fragmented political landscapes, and clientelism within political structures have further undermined democratic institutions⁴.

The response from regional organisations, particularly the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has been mixed. While ECOWAS has made efforts to strengthen resilience against these threats, including revising its Regional Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, its effectiveness in preventing coups and restoring democratic order has been limited⁵. The organisation has sometimes imposed economic sanctions and threatened military intervention, but achieving consensus among member states for decisive action has proven challenging⁶.

This trend of democratic backsliding and military coups represents a significant challenge to stability and progress

in West Africa. It has led to a shift in regional dynamics, with some new military regimes severing ties with traditional Western allies, particularly France, and seeking support from other powers like Russia⁷.

The topic of democratic backsliding and military coups in West Africa is timely and crucial, offering deep insights into the region's political, economic, and social landscape. The recent surge in democratic regression threatens hard-won progress, with far-reaching implications for stability, economic growth, and human rights across West Africa. This paper will examine this phenomenon to uncover the underlying factors—such as pervasive corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and persistent socio-economic challenges—that contribute to instability. Additionally, this exploration highlights shifting geopolitical dynamics as some West African nations pivot from traditional Western alliances in search of new partnerships. The rise in authoritarian tendencies also questions the efficacy of regional bodies like ECOWAS in upholding democratic norms. A comprehensive understanding of these issues allows policymakers to devise strategies that not only support democratic resilience but also address the fundamental causes of instability, ultimately promoting lasting peace and prosperity in the region. Given these stakes, strengthening democratic institutions is essential to countering democratic backsliding, reducing the incidence of military coups, and fostering political stability across West Africa. Thus, the thesis of this study posits that *democratic backsliding*

³ Venkataraman, M. 2023. "Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention", by Leonardo R. Arriola, Lise Rakner and Nicolas Van De Walle (Eds.)." *Africa Review* 15 (3): 342–46. [Link](#).

⁴ Ka-Admin, and Ka-Admin. 2023. "Democratic Backsliding in Africa: Understanding the Current Challenges." *Kujenga Amani* (blog). October 24, 2023. [Link](#).

⁵ ("West Africa Civil Society's Solutions to Reverse Democratic Backsliding in French-speaking Countries," n.d.)

⁶ Annor, Ignatius. 2023. "Does Niger's Coup Affirm Democratic Backsliding Theories in West Africa?" *Voice of America*, July 31, 2023. [Link](#).

⁷ Lawal, Shola. 2024. "West Africa's 'Coup Belt': Did Mali's 2020 Army Takeover Change the Region?" *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2024. [Link](#).

significantly heightens the likelihood of military coups in the region but that well-crafted policies reinforcing democratic institutions can reverse this trend and secure stability.

II. Historical context of democracy and coups in West Africa

Following independence from colonial powers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many West African countries adopted Western-style democratic systems. However, this period was short-lived, as the region soon became plagued by military coups and authoritarian regimes, particularly during the Cold War era of the 1960s to 1980s⁸. This tumultuous period saw frequent unconstitutional government changes, with the 1970s being particularly notorious for military takeovers⁹

A significant shift occurred in the 1990s, often called the "third wave of democratisation" in Africa. This period witnessed a resurgence of democratic governance across West Africa, with many countries transitioning to multi-party systems and holding relatively free and fair elections. Regional organisations like ECOWAS were crucial in promoting and safeguarding democratic norms during this time. The early 2000s saw further consolidation of democratic practices, with several peaceful transfers of power and improved electoral processes in countries like Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria.

However, the recent wave of coups since 2020, particularly in francophone West African countries, has raised concerns

⁸ Omilusi, Mike. n.d. "Democratic Rollback in West Africa: Coup Contagion, Sittight Tyrants and Best Options for Regional Organizations." Department of Political Science, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti/NIGERIA. Accessed November 7, 2024. [Link](#).

⁹ Vora, Aman. 2024. "Democracies Are Failing Democracy - Brown Political Review." Brown Political Review. January 27, 2024. [Link](#).

about a reversal of these democratic gains. This new trend echoes the instability of earlier decades. Still, it occurs in a different global context, with factors such as the fight against extremism, changing geopolitical alignments, and persistent socio-economic challenges playing significant roles¹⁰. The current situation reflects the ongoing struggle to establish and maintain stable democratic systems in a region with a complex history of political transitions and military interventions¹¹.

III. Recent instances of coups

In recent years, military coups have resurgent in West Africa, particularly Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso¹². Mali experienced two coups in quick succession, first in August 2020 and then in May 2021. The initial coup ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita amid widespread protests against corruption and the government's inability to address growing insecurity¹³. Colonel Assimi Goita, who led both coups, eventually installed himself as president, repeatedly postponing promised elections¹⁴. In Guinea, a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Mamady Doumbouya overthrew President Alpha Condé on September 5, 2021. This coup was seen as relatively peaceful, with minimal loss of life, and came in the wake of

¹⁰ Omilusi, Mike. n.d. "Democratic Rollback in West Africa: Coup Contagion, Sittight Tyrants and Best Options for Regional Organizations." Department of Political Science, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti/NIGERIA. Accessed November 7, 2024. [Link](#).

¹¹ "West Africa's 'Coup Belt': Did Mali's 2020 Army Takeover Change the Region?" *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2024. [Link](#).

¹² "West Africa's 'Coup Belt': Did Mali's 2020 Army Takeover Change the Region?" *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2024. [Link](#).

¹³ Nsaibia, Héni. 2023. "Fact Sheet: Attacks on Civilians Spike in Mali as Security Deteriorates Across the Sahel." ACLED. September 22, 2023. [Link](#).

¹⁴ "Military Coup on September 5, 2021 in Guinea | Institute for African Studies." n.d. [Link](#).

controversial constitutional changes that allowed Condé to seek a third term¹⁵.

In January and September 2022, Burkina Faso experienced two coups, further destabilising the region¹⁶. These coups have been attributed to various factors, including dissatisfaction with civilian governments' handling of security issues, allegations of corruption, and economic challenges¹⁷. The trend has raised significant concerns about democratic backsliding in the region and has challenged the effectiveness of regional organisations like ECOWAS in maintaining political stability¹⁸.

IV. Manifestations of democratic backsliding

Democratic backsliding in West Africa has manifested in several concerning ways over the past few years¹⁹. One prominent indicator has been the manipulation of constitutions to extend presidential terms, as seen in Guinea, where former President Alpha Condé changed the constitution to run for a third term, sparking widespread protests and ultimately leading to a military coup²⁰. Another manifestation is the erosion of electoral integrity, with several countries experiencing controversial elections marred by irregularities, voter suppression, and politically motivated prosecutions of opposition leaders. For instance, Nigeria saw postponed elections and significant

irregularities in 2019, while Senegal witnessed the jailing of opposition candidates²¹.

The region has also seen a decline in civil liberties and freedom of expression. In Benin, once considered a beacon of democracy in the area, there has been a spate of politically motivated prosecutions against opposition and anti-government leaders, culminating in an internet blackout during elections²². Similarly, Togo experienced a partial internet and communications blackout during its 2020 election²³. The rise of military coups, as seen in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represents perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of democratic backsliding. These coups have often been justified by citing failures of civilian governments to address security threats and economic challenges and have sometimes received public support, indicating a growing disillusionment with democratic governance in the region²⁴.

Furthermore, there has been a noticeable weakening of institutional checks and balances, with executives increasingly capturing legislatures and judiciaries. This trend has been accompanied by a decline in press freedom and the repression of civil society organisations in several countries²⁵. The overall effect has been a significant reversal of the democratic gains made in the region since the 1990s,

¹⁵ ACCORD. 2022. "Implications of Mali's Latest Coup for Sahel and West Africa – ACCORD." February 8, 2022. [Link](#).

¹⁶ GUINEA: POST-COUP ASSESSMENT OF SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC RISKS. (n.d.). [Link](#)

¹⁷ "What Caused the Coup in Burkina Faso? | ISS Africa." n.d. ISS Africa. <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/what-caused-the-coup-in-burkina-faso>.

¹⁸ ACCORD. 2022. "Implications of Mali's Latest Coup for Sahel and West Africa – ACCORD." February 8, 2022. [Link](#).

¹⁹ "Democracies Are Failing Democracy - Brown Political Review." Brown Political Review. January 27, 2024. [Link](#).

²⁰ Claudia, Bonney Amamoo. 2022. "Democratic Backsliding in West Africa." 2022. [Link](#).

²¹ "GCSP Publication | Understanding the Crisis of Democracy in West Africa and the Sahel," n.d.

²² Solace Global. 2024. "West African Democracy Part 2: Backsliding in the Region - Solace Global." April 18, 2024. [Link](#).

²³ Omilusi, Mike. n.d. "Democratic Rollback in West Africa: Coup Contagion, Sittight Tyrants and Best Options for Regional Organizations." Department of Political Science, Ekiti State University, Ado Ekiti/NIGERIA. Accessed November 7, 2024. [Link](#).

²⁴ "West Africa's 'Coup Belt': Did Mali's 2020 Army Takeover Change the Region?" *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2024. [Link](#).

²⁵ Stocker, Santiago. 2023. "West Africa's Grim Trajectory." *Just Security*. August 11, 2023. [Link](#).

with Freedom House reclassifying several West African countries from "Free" to "Partly Free" status in recent years²⁶.

V. Literature Review

Nancy Bermeo's theoretical framework on democratic backsliding emphasises the concept of "executive aggrandisement," whereby elected leaders gradually erode democratic norms and institutions to consolidate their authority. Unlike overt power seizures through coups, executive aggrandisement is often more subtle and insidious, as leaders weaken checks and balances, manipulate electoral processes, and curtail civil liberties under the guise of legitimate governance. This concept is increasingly relevant to understanding contemporary forms of democratic erosion, where democratic institutions are hollowed out from within rather than abruptly overthrown.

In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt focus on the critical role of informal democratic norms and the dangers posed by intense political polarisation²⁷. They argue that the stability of democratic systems relies not only on formal institutions but also on unwritten norms of mutual tolerance and political restraint. When political actors disregard these norms, viewing opponents as existential threats, democratic systems are at greater risk of destabilisation. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, polarisation fosters an environment

where anti-democratic actions are rationalised as necessary to protect the state from perceived adversaries.

Bermeo's concept of executive aggrandisement is especially pertinent to understanding the political trajectory leading up to recent coups in West Africa. In several instances, democratically elected leaders gradually eroded vital democratic institutions, setting the stage for military intervention. For example, in Mali, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's administration faced accusations of corruption, mismanagement, and executive overreach before his removal in the 2020 coup. Similarly, in Niger, President Mohamed Bazoum's government was criticised for consolidating power and failing to address pressing security and economic concerns, culminating in his ouster in 2023. These cases illustrate how sustained democratic backsliding, marked by the erosion of institutional checks, can create a political vacuum in which military actors feel compelled—or justified—to intervene.

Levitsky and Ziblatt's emphasis on political polarisation and the breakdown of democratic norms also holds relevance for West Africa, where economic hardship has intensified social and political divisions. Financial crises, marked by high unemployment, inflation, and widespread inequality, have fueled public discontent and made citizens more susceptible to anti-democratic rhetoric. Leaders of recent coups have often portrayed themselves as saviours of the nation, framing their actions as necessary responses to corrupt elites who, they claim, threaten the survival of the state. This rhetoric aligns with Levitsky and Ziblatt's argument that extreme polarisation can foster a political

²⁶"Democracies Are Failing Democracy - Brown Political Review." Brown Political Review. January 27, 2024. [Link](#).

²⁷ ("How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future" by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, n.d.)

climate where leaders justify anti-democratic measures as essential for national survival.

The importance of informal democratic norms, as outlined by Levitsky and Ziblatt, is evident in the persistent challenges West African nations face. While many of these countries possess the formal structures of democracy, the absence of deep-rooted democratic norms and a culture of tolerance weakens the resilience of their institutions. The frequent intervention of military forces in the political sphere underscores a lack of commitment to the norm of civilian control over the armed forces, reflecting the fragility of democratic culture in the region.

Economic hardship plays a dual role in democratic backsliding in West Africa. On the one hand, economic instability erodes public trust in democratic governance, leading some to support authoritarian alternatives that promise stability and rapid development. On the other hand, political elites' pursuit of wealth and resources often accompanies democratic erosion, as leaders who aim to consolidate power undermine democratic institutions to protect their interests. This cycle of economic instability and political authoritarianism not only weakens democratic structures but also deepens economic inequalities, further fueling the conditions for backsliding.

VI. Quantitative Analysis

Democratic backsliding often precedes and increases the likelihood of coups. A 2022 analysis by Dahl and Gleditsch found that the probability of both democratic and autocratic changes increases substantially in the aftermath

of a coup, highlighting the destabilising effect of coups on political systems²⁸. This suggests that coups can accelerate or exacerbate existing trends of democratic erosion. The same study found that coups in the context of popular mobilisation are more likely to spur democratic change, with the impact of popular mobilisation on democratic change almost doubling in the presence of a coup. Conversely, in the absence of popular mobilisation, successful coups are likelier to foster autocratic change.

Data from a comprehensive study by Miller (2016) examining coups from 1950 to 2008 provides further insights. The research found that coups against dictatorships rarely lead to democratisation. In the post-Cold War period, only about 14% of coups against dictatorships resulted in a transition to democracy within two years. Instead, coups were more likely to lead to the establishment of new dictatorships, with a 27% increase in the likelihood of transition from one autocracy to another in the post-Cold War era²⁹.

The impact of coups on democratic quality is also evident in repression levels. Using an annual latent measure of repression, Miller's study found that coups that launch new dictatorships are followed by an increase in repression in the calendar year after the coup compared to the year before it. In contrast, the rare coups that lead to democracy are associated with decreased repression³⁰.

²⁸ Kallmer, Brent. 2024. "On Democratic Backsliding | Journal of Democracy." *Journal of Democracy*. May 2, 2024. [Link](#).

²⁹ Dahl, Marianne. 2023. "Clouds With Silver Linings: How Mobilization Shapes the Impact of Coups on Democratization." *European Journal of International Relations*. [Link](#).

³⁰ Derpanopoulos, George, Erica Frantz, Barbara Geddes, and Joseph Wright. 2016. "Are Coups Good for Democracy?" *Research & Politics* 3 (1). [Link](#).

Recent research has also examined the role of populism in democratic backsliding and its relationship to coups. A 2018 analysis by Mounk and Kyle showed that since 1990, out of 13 right-wing populist governments elected, five have brought about significant democratic backsliding. Similarly, out of 15 left-wing populist governments elected, five have led to substantial democratic backsliding. This suggests a correlation between populist governance and an increased risk of democratic erosion, which can create conditions conducive to coups.

A study by Albrecht et al. (2021) using the Coup Agency and Mechanisms (CAM) dataset found that the position of coup plotters in the military and political hierarchy is a significant predictor of coup outcomes. They differentiated between "combat officer" and "elite officer" coups, finding that successful combat officer coups in autocracies were more likely to result in regime breakdown and potential democratic openings than elite officer coups, which tended to lead to regime recalibration³¹.

Miller (2016) analysed coups from 1950 to 2008, finding that in the post-Cold War period, only about 14% of coups against dictatorships resulted in a transition to democracy within two years. However, coups were associated with a 27% increase in the likelihood of transition from one autocracy to another in the post-Cold War era. The study also found that coups launching new dictatorships were followed by increased repression, while the rare coups

leading to democracy were associated with decreased repression³².

Gassebner et al. (2016) performed an extreme bounds analysis testing over 66 factors across more than 3 million model permutations. They found slow economic growth rates, previous coup experiences, and other forms of political violence particularly robust predictors of coups. Their analysis used monthly data from 1952 to 2011 for 164 countries, employing region- and country-fixed effects models.

The International Monetary Fund (2024) used machine learning techniques to identify coup predictors, finding that economic stressors (low growth, high inflation, weak external positions), political instability, and conflict increased coup likelihood. They noted that these factors had non-linear effects and interacted in complex ways with structural weaknesses like poverty, exclusion, and weak governance. Their model performed well in predicting out-of-sample coups, including recent coups in the Sahel region³³.

A logistic regression analysis of survey data from Latin America and the Caribbean, reported by Vanderbilt University (2022), found that age, wealth, education level, and gender significantly influenced attitudes towards executive coups. Older, wealthier, and more educated individuals were less likely to find executive coups justifiable, with education having the most substantial

³¹ "Coup Agency and Prospects for Democracy." 2021. *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (4): 1052–63. [Link](#).

³² 2016. "Are Coups Good for Democracy?" *Research & Politics* 3 (1). [Link](#).

³³ Gassebner, Martin, Jerg Gutmann, and Stefan Voigt. 2016. "When to Expect a Coup D'état? An Extreme Bounds Analysis of Coup Determinants." 2016. [Link](#).

effect (10 percentage point decrease in justification likelihood for the highest education level compared to the lowest)³⁴.

VII. Qualitative Analysis

7.1 Mali

Mali's democratic trajectory has significantly deteriorated recently, particularly since 2020. Once considered a model of democratisation in West Africa following its transition to multi-party democracy in 1991, Mali has experienced a series of setbacks that have severely undermined its democratic institutions and processes.

The country's democratic backsliding became particularly pronounced with the military coup in August 2020, which ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. This coup was preceded by months of protests against alleged corruption, economic woes, and the government's inability to address growing insecurity, especially in the northern and central regions. The coup was followed by another in May 2021, further consolidating military control over the country's governance.

According to data from the Varieties of Democracy Institute, Mali's polyarchy and liberal democracy scores plummeted following these coups. The country's 2022 liberal democracy score was lower than in 1991, indicating a severe regression in democratic norms and practices. This decline corresponded with international sanctions and the withdrawal of several foreign interventions, including

Mali's suspension from ECOWAS and the African Union³⁵.

The military junta that took power has been accused of increasingly authoritarian practices. Human Rights Watch reports that the human rights situation in Mali significantly deteriorated in 2023, with the government cracking down on media and opposition voices, narrowing civic space. The junta has used coercive means to suppress dissent, including arbitrary detention, judicial harassment, and criminal prosecution against media, religious leaders, and civil society³⁶.

Mali's democratic erosion is also evident in its institutional weaknesses. The International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Indices show Mali performs poorly in Representation, Rights, and Rule of Law. While the country maintains high Participation and Civic Engagement performance, it ranks among the bottom 25% globally in multiple factors of Representation, the rule of law, basic Welfare, and electoral participation.

The junta's actions have further undermined democratic processes. In April 2023, it indefinitely suspended the activities of all political parties and associations, justifying this move as related to an ongoing national peace dialogue. This suspension responded to political parties' demands to return to constitutional order and presidential elections.

³⁴ Orbay, Deniz. 2022. "Who Finds Executive Coups Justifiable?" Vanderbilt University. Accessed November 30, 2024. [Link](#).

³⁵ UNU-WIDER : Report : Mali: desk study on aid and democracy. (n.d.). UNU WIDER.

<https://www.wider.unu.edu/publication/mali-desk-study-aid-and-democracy>

³⁶ "Mali | Global State of Democracy." n.d. The Global State of Democracy. [Link](#).

The legitimacy of democratic processes has also been questioned. In June 2023, a referendum to approve constitutional amendments, including changes granting more powers to the president, saw only 39% of eligible voters participate, with some regions not holding the referendum. This low turnout raises concerns about the fairness and validity of the process. Ongoing security challenges compound Mali's democratic backsliding. The state's monopoly on force is challenged in certain regions, with Islamist armed groups and ethnic militias increasing their influence, particularly in central and northern Mali. This instability has led to a humanitarian crisis, with millions requiring assistance and hundreds of thousands displaced. The withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) in December 2023, at the request of the Malian government, has raised further concerns about civilian protection and human rights monitoring in the country³⁷.

7.2 Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's democratic trajectory has been marked by significant upheaval and regression in recent years. The country had made notable strides towards democracy following the 2014 popular uprising that ousted long-time president Blaise Compaoré. This uprising, known as the "Black Spring," was a powerful example of transformative popular mobilisation that thwarted Compaoré's attempt to extend his 27-year rule by altering constitutional term limits.

The 2014 uprising led to a transition period that initially showed promise. The United States Institute of Peace³⁸ reported that the transition benefited from a culture of dialogue and consensus and a vast, resilient network across negotiating groups. This period saw the passage of crucial legislation on issues such as corruption and judicial independence. The transition culminated in free and fair elections in November 2015, widely regarded as a success for Burkina Faso's democratic aspirations.

Since 2020, Burkina Faso's democratic progress has faced severe setbacks, marked by two military coups in 2022 that have significantly eroded the gains made in previous years. In January 2022, the first coup ousted democratically elected President Roch Kaboré, while a second in September installed Captain Ibrahim Traoré as the head of the interim military government. Several factors have contributed to this democratic backsliding. Since 2015, the country has struggled with a growing jihadist insurgency that has severely impacted national security and led to widespread public dissatisfaction, with Burkina Faso ranking second globally in terms of terrorism impact by 2023. Public support for democracy has also declined sharply, with Afrobarometer surveys indicating a drop from 80% in 2015 to around 50% in 2022, while support for military rule has risen. Persistent economic hardships have further fueled public frustration with democratic governance, and the democratic institutions established after 2014 have proven fragile in the face of these mounting security and financial challenges.

³⁷"Mali." 2024. Human Rights Watch. January 11, 2024. [Link](#)

³⁸Mobilization, negotiation, and transition in Burkina Faso. (n.d.). United States Institute of Peace. [Link](#)

The current military junta, led by Captain Traoré, has taken steps that further undermine democratic norms. In May 2024, the junta extended military rule for five more years until July 2029, reneging on previous commitments to hold elections and restore civilian rule. Traoré has stated that elections are "not a priority" and that security must come first.

The regime has also become increasingly repressive. There are reports of a "calculated assault on civil society," including curbs on media freedom and the expulsion of foreign journalists critical of the regime. The human rights situation has deteriorated considerably, with both Islamist armed groups and military forces committing abuses. Internationally, Burkina Faso has shifted its alliances. The country has cut ties with traditional Western partners like France and established more robust relations with countries like Russia. In January 2024, Burkina Faso withdrew from ECOWAS, further isolating itself from regional democratic norms and oversight.

7.3 *Niger*

Niger's recent democratic backsliding is most notably marked by the military coup that occurred on July 26, 2023. Before the coup, Niger had been making strides in democratic governance. President Mohamed Bazoum, who was ousted in the coup, had come to power through a democratic election in 2021, marking the country's first peaceful transfer of power since independence. Under Bazoum's leadership, Niger had been seen as a critical ally for Western nations in the fight against extremism in the

Sahel region. However, the coup revealed underlying tensions and vulnerabilities in Niger's democratic system. The country has a history of military interventions, with this being the fifth successful coup since independence in 1960. This suggests a persistent fragility in Niger's democratic institutions and civil-military relations.

The coup leaders, calling themselves the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP), justified their actions by citing a "deteriorating security situation" and "poor economic and social governance." However, experts suggest that personal political motivations, notably President Bazoum's plan to remove General Omar Tiani, the head of the presidential guard, may have precipitated the coup.³⁹

In the aftermath of the coup, Niger has experienced a rapid erosion of democratic norms and civil liberties. According to Amnesty International⁴⁰, the military authorities have cracked down on opposition, media, and peaceful dissent. This includes arbitrary arrests, restrictions on freedom of expression, and the suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations. The coup has also had significant regional and international implications. It has been broadly condemned by the international community, including critical stakeholders like the United States, France, the European Union, and ECOWAS. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) even

³⁹ 2016. "Are Coups Good for Democracy?" *Research & Politics* 3 (1).

⁴⁰ Amnesty International. 2024. "Niger: Rights in Free Fall a Year After Coup." July 26, 2024. [Link](#).

considered military intervention and imposed sanctions to pressure the junta to reinstate Bazoum⁴¹.

The coup has also raised concerns about the fight against extremism in the Sahel. While the coup leaders cited security concerns as a justification, past experiences in Mali and Burkina Faso suggest that military takeovers often lead to a deterioration in security conditions and an increase in terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the coup has led to shifts in Niger's international alignments. There have been indications of growing anti-French sentiment and potential closer ties with Russia, mirroring trends seen in other coup-affected countries in the region.

7.4 A Case of Stable Democracies

Ghana is a bastion of democracy in West Africa, with a history of nearly three decades of peaceful power transitions. Since emerging from a one-party state, Ghana has institutionalised democratic practices and good governance. The country's leaders have consistently prioritised democratic norms over personal power, demonstrating a commitment to cultivating the next generation of leaders. This adherence to democratic principles has helped Ghana maintain stability despite facing challenges such as rising public debt, inflationary pressures, and concerns over human rights issues.

Ghana's democratic success offers several lessons for the region. It shows that a country can transition from instability to becoming a multi-party bastion of stability

with consistent effort and commitment from political elites. Ghana's experience underscores the importance of institutionalising democratic practices and prioritising good governance for long-term stability and economic development⁴². The country's leaders have demonstrated that believing in democracy more than individual power can create a resilient political system.

Senegal, like Ghana, has been admired as a cornerstone of democratic stability in West Africa. The country has a strong reputation for the solidity of its governing institutions. This was recently demonstrated during a constitutional crisis in March 2024, when the Constitutional Council ruled against President Macky Sall's attempt to postpone elections. The president's immediate compliance with this ruling showcased the strength of Senegal's democratic institutions and the respect for the rule of law⁴³.

Senegal's recent crisis and resolution highlight the importance of strong, independent institutions in maintaining democratic stability. The Constitutional Council's firm stance in upholding democratic principles, even under political pressure, demonstrates how robust institutions can safeguard democracy during times of tension. This event has not only strengthened Senegal's

⁴¹Annor, Ignatius. 2023. "Does Niger's Coup Affirm Democratic Backsliding Theories in West Africa?" Voice of America, July 31, 2023. [Link](#).

⁴²Amid a Region Rife with Coups and Instability, Ghana is a Democratic Bulwark. (n.d.). United States Institute of Peace. [Link](#)

⁴³Senegal just saved its democracy. That helps all West Africa. (n.d.). United States Institute of Peace. [Link](#)

democratic credentials but has also provided a positive example for the entire region.⁴⁴

Ghana and Senegal demonstrate that democracy can work effectively in Africa with a genuine commitment to democratic principles and strong institutions. These countries serve as counterexamples to the narrative of democratic backsliding in the region, showing that peaceful transitions of power and respect for constitutional norms are achievable and sustainable in West Africa.

VIII. Policy Evaluation

Current policies to prevent democratic erosion focus on several key areas, but their effectiveness has been mixed. One primary approach has been supporting pro-democracy political parties to resist erosion. The International Republican Institute (IRI) research highlights strategies such as blocking nominations of anti-democratic candidates, emphasising opponents' autocratic intentions, forming cross-party alliances, and avoiding electoral boycotts. These strategies aim to strengthen democratic institutions within the political system⁴⁵.

However, the effectiveness of these party-focused approaches has been limited in cases where autocratic leaders have already consolidated power. In such situations, external pressure and support for civil society become more critical. The European Parliament's recent call for

action against the erosion of EU values in member states demonstrates a shift towards more assertive policies at the supranational level. This includes monitoring justice systems, corruption levels, media freedom, and protecting civil society and vulnerable groups.⁴⁶

International diplomatic pressure has shown some success in specific cases. The quick and coordinated response from the international community during Senegal's recent constitutional crisis helped reinforce democratic norms and institutions. This suggests that well-calibrated diplomatic interventions can be effective when timed correctly and aligned with local democratic forces.

However, current policies often fail to address the root causes of democratic backsliding. Recent research has challenged the assumption that socioeconomic failures drive citizens to embrace anti-democratic leaders. Instead, the failure to constrain predatory political ambitions appears to be a more significant factor. This insight suggests that policies should focus more on strengthening checks and balances and supporting institutions that can limit executive overreach⁴⁷.

There is also growing recognition of the need for regional approaches to preventing democratic erosion. Senegal's success in preserving its democracy, contrasted with the failures in neighbouring countries like Mali and Burkina

⁴⁴ Melly, P. (2024, March 21). Democracy in West Africa: Why Senegal's election crisis matters. Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank. [Link](#)

⁴⁵ 2024. "Enabling Pro-Democracy Parties to Resist Democratic Erosion." International Republican Institute. October 31, 2024. [Link](#).

⁴⁶ "Parliament Calls for Action Against the Erosion of EU Values in Member States | News | European Parliament." n.d. [Link](#).

⁴⁷ Godfrey, Mary Kate. 2024. "Misunderstanding Democratic Backsliding | Journal of Democracy." Journal of Democracy. November 20, 2024. [Link](#).

Faso, highlights the importance of supporting and leveraging regional democratic alliances. Policies that promote cooperation and mutual support among democratic countries in regions facing backsliding pressures could be more effective than isolated interventions. Economic policies creating opportunities, particularly for youth, are increasingly crucial for long-term democratic stability. However, these policies must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing patronage networks or exacerbating inequalities that can fuel anti-democratic sentiments.⁴⁸

VIII.I Effectiveness of Regional and International Interventions

Regional organisations have shown varying effectiveness in intervening to prevent or resolve conflicts. One of the most successful examples of regional intervention was ECOWAS's involvement in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the 1990s. The Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) played a crucial role in ending the civil wars in these countries and paving the way for democratic transitions. This intervention demonstrated that regional organisations can effectively address complex conflicts when they have sufficient political will and resources⁴⁹.

The European Union has also shown effectiveness in its interventions, particularly in the Balkans. For instance, the EU's involvement in Kosovo provided crucial technical

assistance and resources that helped reshape domestic politics and enforce peace. This success highlights the potential of well-resourced regional organisations to make significant contributions to post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation.⁵⁰

However, not all regional interventions have been as successful. While important, the African Union's efforts in Somalia have been hampered by limited resources and reliance on external funding. This case illustrates that regional organisations' effectiveness can be constrained by their financial and logistical capabilities⁵¹. International interventions, often led by the United Nations, have also shown mixed results. UN peacekeeping missions have been crucial in stabilising many conflict zones, but their effectiveness has varied widely. Successful cases like the UN mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) contrast with less effective interventions like the UN mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) during the 1994 genocide⁵².

The effectiveness of both regional and international interventions often depends on the level of coordination between different actors. The case of Sierra Leone, where ECOWAS, the UN, and the UK worked together, demonstrates how complementary efforts can lead to more successful outcomes. Conversely, a lack of coordination or

⁴⁸ Carothers, Thomas, and Benjamin Press. 2022. "Understanding and Responding to Global Democratic Backsliding." [Link](#).

⁴⁹ Nathan, Laurie. 2010. "THE PEACEMAKING EFFECTIVENESS OF REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS." [Link](#).

⁵⁰ Guest Blogger for the Internationalist. 2013. "Regional Organizations and Humanitarian Intervention." Council on Foreign Relations, July 22, 2013. [Link](#).

⁵¹ Cha, Kiho. 2022. "Humanitarian Intervention by Regional Organizations Under the Charter of the United Nations." [Link](#).

⁵² "As Geopolitical Tensions Escalate, United Nations, Regional Organizations Must Strengthen Cooperation, Preventive Diplomacy, Speakers Tell Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." 2023. October 20, 2023. [Link](#).

conflicting approaches can undermine the effectiveness of interventions.

IX. Policy Recommendations

One effective strategy is to support and empower pro-democracy political parties to resist democratic erosion. Research by the International Republican Institute (IRI) highlights several successful tactics, including blocking nominations of anti-democratic candidates, emphasising the autocratic intentions of opponents, forming cross-party alliances, and avoiding electoral boycotts.⁵³ Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) funders can support parties in implementing these strategies through capacity building, data analysis, and fostering inter-party dialogue. Investing in civil society organisations and independent media has proven crucial in countries like Senegal, where a vibrant civic space was vital in preserving democracy during recent constitutional crises⁵⁴.

The European Union's approach, as outlined in its European Democracy Action Plan, provides a comprehensive framework for upholding constitutional norms and the rule of law. Key measures include promoting free and fair elections, strengthening media freedom, and countering disinformation (1). The EU has implemented legislation to ensure greater transparency in political advertising and revised regulations on funding

European political parties. They have also established a joint operational mechanism for electoral resilience to address risks to elections, particularly regarding disinformation and cyber-related threats. These measures demonstrate the importance of a multi-faceted approach that addresses the legal framework and the broader information ecosystem.

Digital technologies have emerged as powerful tools for promoting transparency and accountability in democratic processes. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights several successful digital initiatives. For example, the iReport system, developed by UNDP in collaboration with the United Nations International Computing Centre, empowers national actors to strengthen early warning and response systems during elections. It has been used to monitor electoral violence, human rights violations, and other critical issues⁵⁵. Another example is the "Your Rights on the Internet" digital campaign, which educates citizens about content moderation policies on major social media platforms and their impact on freedom of expression online. These initiatives demonstrate how digital tools can be leveraged to increase citizen participation, promote transparency, and improve accountability in democratic processes⁵⁶.

Implementing these strategies, measures, and approaches requires a holistic approach considering each country or

⁵³ "Protecting Democracy." 2021. European Commission. November 25, 2021. [Link](#).

⁵⁴ Senegal just saved its democracy. That helps all West Africa. (n.d.). United States Institute of Peace. [Link](#)

⁵⁵ "UNDP Digital Guides - Strengthening Democratic Institutions and Processes." n.d. [Link](#).

⁵⁶ BJensen. 2024. "Enabling Pro-Democracy Parties to Resist Democratic Erosion." International Republican Institute. October 31, 2024. [Link](#).

region's unique context. As seen in the contrast between Senegal and its coup-affected neighbours, investing in long-term democratic institution-building, including support for civil society and independent media, can significantly affect a country's ability to withstand democratic crises. Furthermore, addressing underlying economic and social issues, particularly youth unemployment and inequality, is essential for sustaining democratic gains and preventing backsliding.

X. Conclusion

The recent rise of military coups and the decline of democracy in West Africa highlight the fragility of political institutions in the region. Although regional and international interventions, such as those led by ECOWAS and the African Union, aim to restore stability, their effectiveness has often been limited due to inconsistent enforcement and insufficient resources. To reverse these troubling trends, a comprehensive approach is crucial. This approach should focus on strengthening democratic norms, addressing socio-economic inequalities, and supporting civil society. Successful examples, such as the resilience of democratic institutions in Ghana and Senegal, illustrate that a commitment to constitutional integrity and public accountability can foster stability even under challenging circumstances. Moving forward, policies should prioritize long-term institution-building, inclusive governance, and regional cooperation to reduce the risks of authoritarianism and ensure sustainable political development in West Africa.

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