

The Rise of Populist Narratives and Military Coups in Africa: A Pan-African Perspective on People's Power and Democratic Reversals

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, Africa has experienced a troubling comeback of military coups and the rise of populist narratives that threaten to reverse decades of democratic advancement. This paper investigates the structural and political conditions encouraging this drift, focusing on countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where military actors have justified unconstitutional takeovers by invoking "people's power." The paper aims to explore how populist rhetoric is used to legitimize anti-democratic actions and assess the responses of regional bodies like ECOWAS and the African Union. Adopting a qualitative, comparative case study approach, the research draws on content analysis of policy documents, speeches, and media reports, guided by a framework combining democratic theory and populism studies. Findings reveal that weak institutions, poor governance, corruption, and socioeconomic discontent have created fertile ground for populist-military alliances. Military leaders often portray themselves as corrective agents of the people's will, blurring the line between democratic restoration and authoritarian consolidation. Meanwhile, regional bodies have shown normative commitment to democracy but limited enforcement capacity. The paper concludes that the manipulation of populist narratives undermines constitutionalism and legitimizes undemocratic rule. It underscores the need for stronger democratic institutions, inclusive governance, and more effective regional enforcement mechanisms. These findings have significant implications for democratic resilience in Africa and highlight the urgency of rethinking how "people's power" is defined and safeguarded in transitional societies.

Keywords: Pan-African, Military Coups, People's power, Democratic reversals, Populist narratives

INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the 21st century, Africa has witnessed a paradoxical evolution in its political landscape. On one hand, the continent experienced a wave of democratization in the late 1990s and early 2000s, characterized by multiparty elections, constitutional reforms, and increased political participation (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2021). On the other hand, the post-2000 era has seen a resurgence of populist narratives and a troubling spike in military coups and unlawful power grabs (Bach & Cheeseman, 2022). These two dynamics, though seemingly contradictory, have increasingly converged, raising profound questions about the nature of political legitimacy, the role of the military, and the expression of "people's power" in contemporary

Africa (ISS, 2023). From Mali and Guinea to Burkina Faso and Niger, military interventions have increasingly been justified in the name of restoring order and addressing popular discontent with corrupt civilian regimes (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2021). These developments reflect a broader trend in which populist narratives, emphasizing anti-elitism, nationalism, and direct appeals to "the people", are being employed by both civilian and military actors to legitimize authoritarian power grabs (Bach & Cheeseman, 2022). Populism in Africa has often emerged as a response to widespread dissatisfaction with entrenched elites, perceived corruption, and the failure of democratic governments to deliver on socio-economic promises (van de Walle, 2012). Populist leaders, both civilian and military, frequently claim to act in the name of the people, portraying themselves as anti-establishment champions committed to restoring justice, sovereignty, and national dignity (Bøås, 2022). This has created fertile ground for military actors to exploit popular disenchantment and defend coups as a form of necessary "correction" to failing democracies (LSE, 2024).

While the post-Cold War era saw considerable democratic progress in Africa, recent events suggest a worrying reversal. Populist and military actors often claim to embody "people's power," but their actions frequently undermine democratic norms and institutions (UNDP, 2022). The convergence of populism and military interventionism raises critical questions about the meaning of legitimacy, the role of state institutions, and the future of governance on the continent. From Guinea (2021) to Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), recent coups have been met with mixed reactions. In many instances, segments of the population have celebrated the military as saviors, revealing deep-rooted frustrations with democratic stagnation and governance crises (UNDP, 2022). This phenomenon suggests a reconfiguration of the traditional understanding of "people's power", not as peaceful civic resistance, but as a force that can be co-opted to legitimize undemocratic means (Joseph, 2023).

At the same time, this new wave of military interventions and populist appeals has triggered concern across the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and other continental and international bodies. The region's long struggle to consolidate democracy is at risk of reversal, with the normalization of coups and the erosion of democratic norms posing serious challenges to stability, development, and human rights (AU Commission, 2023). A pan-African perspective is crucial to understanding this phenomenon. Each country's experience reflects broader patterns: youth unemployment, insecurity (for example, jihadist insurgencies in the Sahel), weak state institutions, and historical legacies of military involvement in politics (Mwai, 2023). As these trends unfold, they compel a reevaluation of what constitutes legitimate governance, the limits of electoral democracy, and the true meaning of "people's power" in Africa today. This study therefore seeks to critically analyze the intersection of populist rhetoric, military takeovers, and popular support or resistance, situating these within a broader historical and continental framework. It aims to understand not only the immediate causes and consequences of recent coups but also the underlying structural forces driving democratic reversals in the 21st-century African context.

Statement of the Problem

Despite significant advances toward democratization in Africa since the 1990s, recent years have seen a troubling resurgence of military coups and the rise of populist narratives that threaten to reverse democratic gains. These trends are particularly evident in countries like Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where military actors have seized power while

presenting themselves as saviors of the people and protectors of national sovereignty (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2021). In many cases, these interventions have been accompanied by widespread public support, revealing deep-seated dissatisfaction with elected governments perceived as corrupt, inept, or unresponsive to the needs of their citizens (UNDP, 2022).

This growing alignment between populist rhetoric and military intervention poses a serious challenge to democratic consolidation in Africa. Populist leaders, whether civilian or military, often undermine democratic institutions by centralizing power, weakening checks and balances, and delegitimizing opposition voices under the guise of representing "the people" (Bach & Cheeseman, 2022). The invocation of "people's power" in support of unconstitutional regime changes raises critical concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and the increasing normalization of authoritarian practices. Moreover, regional and continental institutions such as ECOWAS and the African Union have struggled to respond effectively to this new wave of anti-democratic activity, revealing institutional weaknesses and limited enforcement capacity (ISS, 2023). If left unchecked, this trend threatens not only the political stability of individual countries but also the broader prospects for democratic governance across the continent. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the interplay between populism, military coups, and citizen support within a pan-African framework, in order to understand the structural and ideological drivers of democratic reversals and to explore strategies for reinforcing democratic resilience in the region.

Research Questions

1. What are the structural and political factors contributing to the rise of populist narratives and military coups in Africa since the early 2000s?
2. How do military actors and populist leaders use the concept of "people's power" to legitimize unconstitutional regime changes in countries like Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger?
3. What roles have regional and continental bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union played in responding to democratic reversals, and how effective have these interventions been in restoring constitutional order

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

In terms of scope, the paper is focused on examining the intersection between populist narratives, military coups, and democratic reversals in Africa from a pan-African perspective. The temporal scope of the research spans from the year 2000 to the present, a period marked by both intensified democratization efforts and a resurgence of undemocratic changes of government. Geographically, the study covers selected African countries that have recently experienced military coups with notable populist undertones, specifically Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These cases are chosen due to their regional significance, frequency of coups, and the evident use of "people's power" rhetoric by military and political actors to justify power seizures. Thematically, the study investigates three key areas: the political and socio-economic conditions that fuel populist sentiments and public discontent with democratic governance; the use of populist rhetoric by military and political elites to legitimize coups and undermine democratic institutions; and the response mechanisms of regional and continental bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union to democratic backsliding and unconstitutional transitions.

Regarding methodology, the article adopts a comparative approach across multiple countries and it is limited to qualitative analysis using secondary data sources including academic literature, policy reports, media analysis, and institutional documents. The study does not focus on individual political personalities or delve into exhaustive country-specific histories but rather emphasizes broader trends and patterns observable across the African continent. This qualitative approach is suitable for exploring the nuanced and context-specific dynamics of populist narratives, military coups, and democratic reversals across different African countries. The comparative research design enables a systematic analysis of similarities and differences among selected case studies, helping to identify cross-cutting patterns and divergent trajectories in political developments across the continent. The paper focuses on four African countries that have recently experienced military coups alongside strong populist rhetoric: Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These cases are purposefully selected based on the following criteria: occurrence of military coups between 2020 and 2023, evident use of populist or anti-elite rhetoric by military or political actors, public reactions indicating significant levels of support or dissent and geographic and political relevance within West Africa and the Sahel region. This purposive sampling strategy ensures the inclusion of cases that are information-rich and contextually relevant to the study's objectives.

In terms of methods of data collection, the paper relies on secondary data sources, including: academic journal articles and books on African politics, populism, and coups, policy reports and statements from regional bodies such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and the United Nations, news media content and press releases to capture real-time reactions and narratives and reports and opinion polls from international organizations such as Afrobarometer and UNDP. Document analysis was used to extract recurring themes, political justifications, and public perceptions related to each coup event and associated populist rhetoric. Data collected were analysed thematically and interpreted across the selected cases. Key themes included: justifications for military interventions, language and symbols used in populist narratives, public support or resistance framed as "people's power", institutional responses by continental or regional bodies and effects on democratic institutions and norms. Finally, a cross-case comparative analysis was conducted to assess commonalities and divergences across the four countries. This helped in identifying structural and ideological drivers of democratic reversals and the role of populism in shaping contemporary political discourse in Africa.

As this research is based solely on publicly available secondary sources, there are minimal ethical risks. However, care was taken to ensure accuracy in representation of sources, Acknowledging potential bias in media or political discourse and upholding academic integrity in citation and data interpretation. This paper is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture the on-the-ground complexity of political events. Additionally, the focus on four countries may not represent all variations of military-populist dynamics across the African continent. However, the chosen cases offer valuable insight into broader continental trends.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL REVIEWS

Populism in Africa has historically been associated with anti-elite sentiments and the framing of political power as residing directly with "the people" (Usman, 2024). In recent cases, military regimes have adopted similar rhetoric to legitimise their takeovers, portraying themselves as protectors of national sovereignty and executors of public will. Scholars such as Usman (2024)

argue that this form of military populism is increasingly undermining democratic institutions by fostering authoritarian practices under a democratic guise.

Empirical data indicates a decline in support for democracy across the continent. Afrobarometer surveys from 2021 and 2023 revealed that while two-thirds of Africans still preferred democracy, this figure had decreased by seven percentage points over the past decade (The Guardian, 2024). Factors contributing to this decline include perceived corruption, economic hardships, and the failure of elected leaders to meet public expectations (AP News, 2023; The Times, 2024). This Afrobarometer surveys further indicates that significant portions of African citizens are expressing support for military intervention under certain conditions (Afrobarometer, 2023). This trend challenges traditional interpretations of “people’s power” as peaceful, democratic mobilization, instead revealing how frustration and marginalization can be co-opted to support anti-democratic actions (The Guardian, 2024). Yet, most empirical studies have focused on elite political behavior or regional responses, leaving a gap in understanding the nuanced relationship between popular sentiment and military legitimacy.

Mathebula, N. (2025) in *“Democratic Deficit and Resurgence of Military Coups: An Assessment of Regional Insecurity in Africa”*, investigated the resurgence of military coups in Africa, focusing on the role of democratic deficits and the concept of inverted legitimacy in fostering political instability. The study identified a correlation between weak democratic institutions and the occurrence of military coups. The study further established that military leaders often gain popular support by capitalising on the failures of civilian governments. The research underscores the importance of strengthening democratic institutions to prevent military interventions and concluded that the resurgence of military coups in Africa is closely linked to democratic deficits and the erosion of political norms.

Usman, A. (2024) in *“Military Populism Is the Primary Threat to Democracy in Africa”*, examines the rise of military populism in Africa and its implications for democratic governance and found out that military juntas have increasingly adopted populist rhetoric to justify their actions and consolidate power. The study demonstrated that public support for military interventions is often driven by dissatisfaction with civilian governments perceived as corrupt or ineffective and concluded that military populism poses a significant threat to democracy in Africa by undermining civilian control and promoting authoritarian practices. Usman emphasized that military leaders have strategically employed populist narratives to justify their actions and consolidate power. For example, Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya of Guinea framed the 2021 coup as a restoration of “people’s power,” criticizing long-standing political elites and positioning the military as a force for national renewal (AP News, 2022). Similarly, Burkina Faso’s Captain Ibrahim Traoré emphasized anti-colonial sentiments and national sovereignty in his justification for the 2022 coup, resonating with widespread public frustrations.

Taruvunga, G. (2023) in *“The Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa: The Case of West Africa and the Sahel”*, explores the causes and consequences of the resurgence of military coups in West Africa and the Sahel region. Findings indicated that socio-economic factors, political instability, and governance failures as key drivers of military interventions. The study concluded that the resurgence of military coups in West Africa and the Sahel is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple factors. The African Union (AU) and regional blocs like ECOWAS have been criticized for inconsistent and often ineffective responses to military coups. While these bodies typically denounce unconstitutional changes of government, their ability to deter or reverse

such interventions remains weak (Mohammed, 2022). The literature has extensively documented these institutional limitations, yet few studies critically analyze how such responses intersect with shifting narratives around populism and legitimacy on the ground. Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have faced challenges in responding to the wave of military coups. While both institutions have condemned unconstitutional changes of government, their efforts to restore democratic order have often been met with limited success. For instance, ECOWAS's sanctions and diplomatic interventions have had varying degrees of effectiveness, reflecting the complexities of enforcing democratic norms in a diverse political landscape (Mathebula, 2025). Mathebula further holds that several structural factors are contributing to democratic backsliding in Africa, including weak state institutions, economic inequalities, and the erosion of political norms. The concept of "inverted legitimacy," where military regimes gain popular support by capitalizing on the failures of democratic governments, has been used to explain the recurrence of coups in the region.

Despite the growing attention to democratic backsliding and military interventions in Africa, several critical gaps remain such as the limited integration of populist theory and military analysis. Most works treat populism and military coups as separate phenomena rather than examining how they converge in African political contexts. There are also insufficient pan-African comparative studies. Existing literature often focuses on individual countries, lacking a broader, continental analysis of shared structural drivers such as economic precarity, youth disenfranchisement, and regional insecurity. Also, existing literature neglect public's role in legitimizing coups. While some studies acknowledge public dissatisfaction, there is insufficient exploration of how the narrative of "people's power" is redefined and mobilized in support of anti-democratic outcomes. This paper addresses the above gaps by adopting a pan-African comparative lens to explore the intersection of populist rhetoric, military takeovers, and the evolving notion of people's power. It contributes to both the populism literature and coup studies by analyzing how public sentiment is harnessed to justify undemocratic change. Moreover, by synthesizing case studies from across the continent, it offers insights into structural and ideological patterns threatening Africa's democratic consolidation. In doing so, it provides much-needed context to guide policy, institutional reform, and civic education.

Theoretical Reviews

To critically analyse the rise of populist narratives and military coups in Africa from a Pan-African perspective, this paper adopts the Populism Theory, Democratic Consolidation Theory and Postcolonial State Theory as its framework for analysis. These theories together help explain the ideological appeal, structural conditions, and political dynamics that underpin democratic reversals on the continent.

Populism Theory:

Populism Theory, particularly as articulated by scholars like Cas Mudde (2004) and Ernesto Laclau (2005), conceptualizes populism as a political strategy that divides society into two antagonistic groups: "*the pure people*" and "*the corrupt elite*." In the African context, populist discourse is often mobilized by military actors and charismatic leaders who claim to represent the will of the masses while discrediting formal democratic institutions. Military leaders in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger invoke populist rhetoric to justify unconstitutional power grabs as necessary corrections to elite failure. Populism, in this sense,

is not only rhetorical but instrumental, used to forge a moral legitimacy that supersedes legal legitimacy. This theory explains why populist coups can gain public support despite violating democratic norms; they resonate with genuine popular frustrations.

Democratic Consolidation Theory:

Drawing from Linz and Stepan (1996) and Diamond (1999), Democratic Consolidation Theory explores the process by which democratic systems become “the only game in town.” In many African states, this process remains incomplete due to: Weak institutions, Electoral manipulation, Corruption, Military entrenchment in politics. These structural weaknesses make democratic systems vulnerable to populist and military subversion. This theory helps to analyze why democratic institutions in Africa fail to withstand populist pressures and why democratic backsliding occurs.

Postcolonial State Theory:

African political structures still bear the imprint of colonial rule, as highlighted by scholars like Mamdani (1996) and Ake (1996). Postcolonial State Theory argues that many African states function with a legacy of authoritarianism, weak civil societies, and an over-reliance on coercive institutions like the military. This legacy allows the military to retain sociopolitical authority and intervene in civilian politics when governance falters. This lens explains the enduring political centrality of the military and why citizens may view coups as more legitimate than elections.

By integrating these theories, the study offers a multi-dimensional explanation of democratic reversals- Populism Theory explains the narratives and legitimacy tactics; Democratic Consolidation Theory explains the institutional fragility and public disillusionment and Postcolonial State Theory contextualizes the historical and structural conditions that normalize military involvement in politics. Together, these frameworks provide the analytical tools to interrogate how “people’s power” is co-opted, how military populism undermines democratic norms, and why regional and continental institutions struggle to reverse such trends.

FINDINGS**Structural and Political Factors Contributing to the Rise of Populist Narratives and Military Coups in Africa Since the Early 2000s**

The rise of populist narratives and military coups in Africa since the early 2000s is the result of intersecting structural and political crises: institutional weakness, socio-economic exclusion, corruption, insecurity, and disillusionment with formal democracy. These dynamics have empowered military and populist actors to claim legitimacy not through elections, but through the rhetoric of national salvation and “people’s will.” Below is a detail analysis of each of these factors.

Democratic Deficits and Institutional Weaknesses:

One of the most consistent structural drivers behind military coups and populist rhetoric is the fragility of democratic institutions. Across several African countries, especially in West Africa, institutions meant to enforce accountability, such as electoral commissions, judicial bodies, and anti-corruption agencies, are often politicized or under-resourced (Mathebula, 2025). When citizens perceive that elections do not yield responsive governance, faith in democratic mechanisms diminishes, creating space for anti-establishment narratives and support for

extra-constitutional change. Weak institutions reduce the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and erode public trust in political processes. This enables populist actors, both civilian and military, to claim that formal democracy has failed and that they alone can restore "people's power."

Economic Hardship and Youth Disenfranchisement:

High levels of youth unemployment, poverty, and income inequality have fueled dissatisfaction with political elites. Africa has the youngest population in the world, yet governments have largely failed to address youth economic needs (Afrobarometer, 2023). Populist leaders exploit this economic frustration by presenting themselves as the voice of the "forgotten majority," often blaming foreign influence, corruption, or economic mismanagement by elites for national decline. This socioeconomic marginalization provides fertile ground for populist narratives, which simplify complex policy issues and channel anger into support for radical political change, including military takeovers.

Corruption and Governance Failures:

Widespread corruption among elected officials has deepened public resentment. In countries like Guinea and Mali, leaders overstayed their mandates or amended constitutions to extend their rule, leading to protests and eventual coups (AP News, 2023). Military leaders framed their interventions as a necessary "cleansing" of the political system, tapping into populist distrust of corrupt elites. Corruption delegitimizes democratic rule and aligns with populist claims that traditional political systems are irredeemable. Coups, in this narrative, are not anti-democratic but corrective.

Security Crises and State Fragility:

Insecurity, especially from insurgencies in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, has revealed the state's inability to protect its citizens. Military officers often capitalize on this failure, claiming they are better positioned to restore national stability (Taruvunga, 2023). This narrative resonates particularly in conflict zones where democratic governments appear absent or ineffective. Security breakdowns create a context in which military leadership is not only accepted but preferred by some segments of the population. It reinforces the image of the military as more competent than civilian authorities.

Decline in Support for Liberal Democracy:

Surveys show a decline in public support for democracy when it does not deliver tangible benefits (The Guardian, 2024). Populist military leaders, such as Guinea's Mamadi Doumbouya or Burkina Faso's Ibrahim Traoré, have presented themselves as champions of "real democracy" or "people's revolutions," even when suspending constitutions. Populist language blurs the line between authoritarianism and democracy, especially when couched in anti-elite, nationalist, or anti-Western terms. This undermines democratic norms while reinforcing militaristic and majoritarian solutions to political crises.

External Influences and Weak Continental Enforcement:

The African Union and ECOWAS have condemned military takeovers, but their ability to reverse them has been inconsistent. Additionally, rival geopolitical interests, including growing Russian and Turkish influence, have sometimes emboldened military regimes (Mohammed, 2022). Without consistent continental enforcement, the cost of coups remains low, especially when public opinion supports them. This weakens the deterrent effect of regional mechanisms.

Military Actors, Populist Leaders and the Use the Concept of "People's Power" to Legitimize Unconstitutional Regime Changes in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger

Military actors and populist leaders in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger have skillfully used the concept of "people's power" to legitimize unconstitutional regime changes. By aligning themselves with mass frustration, employing anti-elite and nationalist rhetoric, and leveraging public mobilization, they construct a narrative of moral and popular legitimacy. This reframing of coups as democratic interventions, rather than democratic reversals, poses a significant threat to constitutional order and long-term democratic consolidation across Africa. The following paragraph presents them in detail.

Militarisation of Popular Discontent:

Military actors in countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger have strategically aligned themselves with the grievances of the populace, using these sentiments to justify regime changes. Public dissatisfaction—often driven by corruption, insecurity, and economic failure, has created a political vacuum that military elites exploit by presenting themselves as embodiments of the popular will (Usman, 2024; Mathebula, 2025). In Mali (2020 and 2021), Colonel Assimi Goïta justified his coups by citing massive protests against then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and framing military intervention as a "response to the people's call for change" (Taruvina, 2023). Similarly, Guinea's Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya (2021) declared that the military had "no choice" but to intervene due to government dysfunction and the betrayal of the people's trust (AP News, 2022). These actors recast themselves not as usurpers of democracy but as agents of "corrective action," weaponising public frustration to gain legitimacy both domestically and regionally.

Populist Framing and Anti-Elite Narratives:

Populist leaders, military or otherwise, frequently adopt anti-elite rhetoric, claiming to dismantle corrupt and self-serving political classes in the name of "the people." This was especially evident in Burkina Faso, where Captain Ibrahim Traoré (2022) combined populist and anti-colonial narratives, declaring that the sovereignty of the nation had been hijacked by foreign interests and elite collaborators (Usman, 2024). The conflation of "people's power" with anti-elite, anti-Western discourse strengthens military legitimacy by appealing to widespread popular anger, especially among the youth and marginalized groups. It also undermines civil democratic norms by presenting democratic opposition and dissenters as enemies of the people.

Use of Mass Mobilization and Symbolism:

Military regimes often organize or capitalize on public demonstrations to portray themselves as having grassroots support. In several cases, military leaders have staged press conferences flanked by civilian supporters, youth groups, and religious figures to visually reinforce the notion of mass legitimacy. In Niger (2023), General Abdourahamane Tchiani cited widespread public support and the failure of Mohamed Bazoum's government to protect national sovereignty as the basis for military intervention (The Guardian, 2024). Public celebrations following coups, particularly in Bamako, Conakry, and Ouagadougou—were used in state media to reinforce the idea that the military acted in defense of "the people" (AP News, 2023). These symbolic acts serve to simulate democratic legitimacy through performative populism. However, such legitimacy is often superficial and short-lived, lacking institutional or legal basis.

Delegitimisation of Democratic Institutions:

Populist military actors often claim that existing democratic institutions, parliaments, courts, and electoral bodies, are compromised and no longer represent the people. This framing provides a moral rationale for dismantling those institutions and suspending constitutions, often with public approval. In Guinea, Doumbouya stated that “personalization of political life” and “poverty despite wealth” were clear signs that existing institutions had failed, thus necessitating military intervention (AP News, 2022). This strategy allows authoritarian measures to be framed as democratic renewal. However, it paradoxically accelerates democratic backsliding, as it centralizes power in unelected hands while silencing dissent in the name of popular unity.

The of Role Regional and Continental Bodies in Responding to Democratic Reversals, and the Effectiveness of their Interventions in Restoring Constitutional Order

Regional and continental organizations like ECOWAS and the AU have played important but limited roles in responding to democratic reversals in Africa. Their actions- ranging from suspensions and sanctions to transition negotiations underscore a commitment to democratic norms. However, the effectiveness of these interventions has been undermined by: inconsistent enforcement, institutional limitations, lack of political will among member states and the strategic adaptability of military regimes. While these bodies serve as critical guardians of constitutional order, their capacity to enforce democratic governance remains more symbolic than structural. For future effectiveness, there is a need for stronger enforcement mechanisms, unified political commitment, and greater support for institutional democratisation at the grassroots level. The following paragraph shall elaborate on these themes.

Normative Commitments and Initial Responses:

Both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) have adopted clear normative frameworks rejecting unconstitutional changes of government. These are grounded in key protocols namely; the Lomé Declaration (2000) by the AU and the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) assert zero tolerance for coups. Following recent coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), both bodies swiftly condemned the military takeovers and suspended the offending states from membership (AU, 2021; ECOWAS, 2023). These suspensions demonstrate a principled stance and a commitment to upholding democratic norms. However, symbolic condemnations alone have had limited deterrent effects.

Use of Sanctions and Diplomatic Pressure:

ECOWAS has been more proactive than the AU in imposing sanctions and engaging in direct negotiations. In Mali, ECOWAS imposed economic and financial sanctions in 2021 after the second coup and pressured the junta to agree to a transition timeline (Taruvunga, 2023). In Guinea, ECOWAS imposed travel bans on junta members and demanded a return to constitutional rule. In Niger (2023), ECOWAS even threatened military intervention- a significant escalation, though this was never executed. Sanctions have produced mixed results. While they have sometimes forced negotiations (for example, Mali), in other cases (for example, Niger), they have worsened economic hardship without shifting military resolve. The threat of military intervention has also revealed internal divisions among ECOWAS members, weakening its credibility (Mohammed, 2022).

Limited Enforcement Capacity and Internal Fragmentation:

The AU, in particular, has struggled with enforcement. It lacks a standing force and often defers to regional blocs like ECOWAS for action. Moreover, internal divisions and the principle of non-interference hinder unified responses. The AU's Peace and Security Council has issued condemnations but failed to enforce strong punitive measures. In several cases, regional and continental coordination has been weak, with countries like Burkina Faso and Mali forming alliances with each other after their coups, undermining AU/ECOWAS authority (Mathebula, 2025). The lack of enforcement tools, coupled with competing national interests, has led to inconsistent and reactive interventions, reducing the effectiveness of both ECOWAS and the AU in restoring democratic order.

Transition Negotiations and Legitimization Risks:

While ECOWAS and the AU have brokered transition timelines, these often extend well beyond initial promises. In Guinea and Burkina Faso, the juntas proposed long transition periods (up to three years), which ECOWAS reluctantly accepted after negotiations (Usman, 2024). While negotiated timelines help avoid prolonged instability, they can normalise coups by offering military regimes *de facto* legitimacy and time to consolidate power, rather than ensuring a swift return to democratic rule.

CONCLUSION

The resurgence of military coups and the growing influence of populist narratives across Africa, particularly in countries like Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, represent a significant democratic reversal that challenges both the legitimacy and resilience of post-1990s African democracies. This paper found that the structural and political roots of these developments lie in; institutional weaknesses, entrenched corruption, socioeconomic exclusion, and widespread disillusionment with elected governments (Mathebula, 2025; Afrobarometer, 2023). Military actors and populist leaders have capitalised on these vulnerabilities by invoking the rhetoric of "*people's power*", positioning themselves as agents of national salvation and anti-elite resistance. While these narratives often gain initial public support, they undermine democratic institutions, concentrate power, and legitimise authoritarian governance under the guise of popular will (Usman, 2024; Taruvinga, 2023).

The responses by regional and continental bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) have been principled but limited in effectiveness. Sanctions, suspensions, and diplomatic efforts have sometimes delayed transitions, but more often they have failed to prevent or reverse coups, reflecting deeper institutional and political challenges in enforcing democratic norms across diverse member states (Mohammed, 2022; ECOWAS, 2023). As recommendation, African governments should invest in independent electoral commissions, judicial bodies, and anti-corruption agencies to restore public trust and prevent the conditions that fuel populist uprisings and coups. In order to address widespread disenfranchisement, especially among youth, states must implement inclusive economic policies, ensure access to education and employment, and create mechanisms for participatory governance. The AU and ECOWAS should move beyond symbolic condemnation by establishing clear enforcement mechanisms, including automatic sanctions, early warning systems, and a standby rapid diplomatic taskforce to respond swiftly to unconstitutional changes. Civil society organizations, academia, and regional media should play a greater role in educating the public on democratic principles, exposing the risks of military rule, and promoting alternative forms of civic engagement that

do not rely on undemocratic shortcuts. In post-coup contexts, international partners and African institutions should prioritize transitional justice frameworks that emphasize reconciliation, the rule of law, and the rebuilding of legitimate democratic institutions, not just short-term elections.

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