



## Why is Democracy Crumbling in Africa? An insight from West Africa

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### Abstract

Despite assurances by the African leaders that military coups have come and gone forever in the continent, Africa continues to experience military coups more than any other continent in the world. Between August 2020 and January 2022, Africa has witnessed six coups: Mali in August 2020, Chad in April 2021, Mali again in May 2021, Guinea in September 2021, Sudan in October 2021, and Burkina Faso in January 2022. Except for Sudan, five of these coups occurred in the West African Sub-region. Assuming that democracy is the most acceptable system of governance that guarantees security, welfare, and fundamental freedom, there is a need to interrogate why the system is crumbling in the West African sub-region. Relying on secondary sources and expert interview with 35 key informants selected purposively, this article uses elite theory as a theoretical guide and a thematic method of data analysis to investigate the rising wave of military coups across West Africa. The findings of the article reveal that democracy has been manipulated by the West African political elites to serve personal interests leaving the general populace in poverty, perpetual insecurity, and despair. Consequently, there is rising support for military takeovers across the sub-region and a belief that the military coups will eventually give birth to genuine democracy. As a solution, the article recommends that West African democracy must be reformed to promote human rights, security, and the welfare of the majority.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Military Regimes; Military Coup; West Africa

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### Introduction

Democracy is commonly interpreted as a system in which the political branch of government is elected by adult suffrage. Theoretically, it refers to a political system in which people retain the sovereign authority of the state. In other words, is a system that allows people to govern themselves directly or through their elected representatives (Anifowose & Francis, 2010; Kolln, 2015). Democracy enables the citizens to determine the direction of government policies and programs. It makes elected public officials responsible, responsive, and accountable to the general populace. It's

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the most popular and desirable system of governance that guarantees freedom of expression, conciseness, religion, and political association (Hernández, 2016). Democracy incorporates natural and social features that aid socio-economic and political development (Richard, 1983; Elahi, & Danopoulos, 2004; Iwanek, 2014). Accordingly, is perceived as not just the most acceptable system of government but a way of life that guarantees freedom, security, welfare, and human dignity (Jones, 2021).

Consequently, countries all over the world are competing to democratize (Hyden, & Leslie, 2017). Those that refuse to democratize are labelled as authoritarian regimes and threats to international peace and security. Often, they are either sanctioned or isolated from the international community. Proponents of democracy argue that full democratization ensures peace, security, and welfare while lack of democratization promotes underdevelopment. Liberals argue that states only engage in wars with non-democracies (Lucca, David & Baliga, & Sandeep, 2011). This implies that democracies do not go to war with one another (Rosato, 2003). By implication, democracy laid the foundation of development in the democracies in Europe and America. By extension, lack of democracy is the major cause of underdevelopment in Third World Countries (TWC) such as West African states.

Thus, from the 1960s to the 2020s, the African continent witnessed a massive rebellion against military dictatorships and regimes. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the wave of democratization process swept military dictatorship in the African continent. From the North, East, South, and West Africa, African states were competing to democratize by challenging the legality of the military. At a point in African political history, every African country claims to be democratic, and every African leader no matter how dictatorial wants to be described as a true democrat (Anifowose & Francis, 2010).

However, in the two years, Africa has witnessed the return of military regimes like never before. African states of Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, and Burkina Faso all witnessed military coups in the last two years. Furthermore, in March 2021, Niger authorities have foiled a coup attempt days before the incumbent president's inauguration. The 2021 inauguration was the first time in Niger's history that a democratically elected president transferred power to another since the country's independence in 1960 (BBC, 2021).

Out of the six latest coups that happened in Africa over the last three years, five occurred in the West African sub-region. Assuming that democracy is the best and only acceptable political model for the existing world order, the intriguing system needs to be investigated in Africa, particularly West Africa. Thus, this article relying on primary and secondary sources of data and a thematic method of data analysis investigates the declining wave of democracy and the rising wave of military coups and support for military dictatorship by the majority of West African citizens, particularly where these military take over occurs.

### **Methodology**

As mentioned in the introduction, this article employs a qualitative research approach combining primary and secondary sources of data. The secondary sources were used to collect and analyze data from books, journals, special reports, newspapers, and traditional media. Using the primary sources of data, the article relies on expert interview to analyze the data collected from 35 key informants



such as electorates, academics, members of civil society organizations, diplomats, and retired and serving military personnel. The respondents were purposively selected based on their knowledge, expertise, and interest in African democracy. To balance the data, respondents were selected from Mali, Chad, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and the Republic of Niger.

Theoretically, the elite theory was adopted as a theoretical framework to guide this study. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elite theory became a well-known aspect of political philosophy. Two Italian intellectuals, Vilfredo Pareto (sociologist) and Gaetano Mosca (psychologist), as well as a Swiss-German thinker, Roberto Michels, are among its major proponents. According to the theory, every society is divided into two; those who govern and those who are ruled. The theory argues that every society is dominated by a small group of people who possess three key qualities: consciousness, coherence, and conspiracy, all of which are necessary for gaining absolute socio-political power (Onah, 2010). According to Pareto, society is divided into two strata: non-elites and elites, which are further classified into ruling elites and non-governing elites. He goes on to say that the ruling elites use a combination of force and deception to dominate the masses and stay in power. Consequently, governing institutions are controlled and dominated by a selected few, which Michels refers to as the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" (Varma, 1975).

In the context of this study, leaders in Africa today are the political elites, and they are made up of a small minority while the majority constitutes the followership. African political and economic power is centralized in the hands of the elites who enjoy the benefits that come with it to the detriment of the majority. They have control over the state's vital sociopolitical institutions and resources and are not often accountable to the people. As part of the strategy to gain and retain political power, political elites use every means necessary, including manipulation of democracy, force, and conspiracy, to keep the majority of Africans out of the political landscape and enrich themselves. Manipulation of democracy by the political elite has rendered African democracy an "elite affair" that requires no input from the masses. Thus, the majority of African electorates are interrogating the ownership of democracy by deconstructing democracy as the government of the elites, by the elites, and for the political elites. Consequently, a group of African military officers and soldiers known as military elites, who are chosen for their special ability and capacity and assigned to special elite units as heads or commanders of military formations with some advantages over others, most notably higher status, pay, and better equipment, use their influence and opportunity to seize power from the political elites and constitute military ruling elites.

Thematic method of data analysis was deployed to analyze the raw qualitative data generated through in-depth interviews with stakeholders using the Braun and Clarke's 6-step technique which included familiarity with research data, production of codes, search for themes, evaluation of themes, the definition of themes, and write-up (Braun & Clarkes, 2006). For a clear understanding of the raw data in a condensed manner, the raw data were analyzed using a descriptive coding strategy. Furthermore, the material gleaned from the in-depth interview was logically presented and evaluated to provide first-hand data that provides analytic support for the relevant literature studied. This approach was selected because it allows the researchers to apply their judgment when interpreting and analyzing the findings of the study. The responses were summed up tabularized and classified in phases according to the research questions and objectives. The key informants' interviews were



conducted From January 2022 to April 2022. While the study anonymized and protects the identity of the respondents, their areas of expertise and affiliations were utilized sparingly for clarity.

### **Why democracy is desirable? An overview of the literature**

Democracy is a highly contested concept that defies a single definition. Although there are differences among democracies around the world, it's by far the most popular system of governance in the world. Democracies is a form of governance in which citizens directly or indirectly choose representatives that exercise power and implement policies and govern on their behalf. Democracy is the most desirable because it institutionalizes human freedom, defends human liberty, freedom, and dignity, and promotes rule of law, as well as individual and minority rights. It guarantees the majority's will and fiercely preserves the basic rights of minority groups (Carr, 2006).

Democracy protects citizens against dictatorial regimes by decentralizing government powers to national, regional, and local levels. It recognized that local government must be open and responsive to the demand and aspirations of the citizens (Skidmore-Hess, Ellison, & Sherrod, 2017). Democracy primarily safeguards and protects the lives and property of the people, and guarantees fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, religion, the right to equal protection under the law, and the right to organize and participate freely in society's socio-economic, and political and cultural life. It promotes rule of law and ensures that all citizens are afforded equal legal protection and that their rights are respected (Dahl, 2020).

Periodic elections are the hallmark of democracy. Elections are open to all citizens; they have the right to vote and to be voted for in an election. Elections must be genuine not masks for tyrants or a single political party. In other words, electoral empires must provide a level playing ground for political parties and individuals by ensuring that elections for public offices are free, fair, and credible (Post, 2011).

Democracy recognizes that one of its most important responsibilities is to defend minorities' rights to maintain cultural identity, social traditions, individual consciences, and religious rights. Lack of ethnic and cultural tolerance appears strange, if not alien to democracy. Though one of the most daunting challenges any democratic government faces is maintaining unity in diversity. However, democracy, on the other hand, acknowledged that diversity can be of huge value. It views identity, beliefs, and cultural differences as challenges that can be properly handled to enhance unity rather than division. Although there can be no single answer to how minority group differences are resolved, democratic societies reach agreements through the democratic process such as debates, dialogue, consensus, and willingness to compromise. These democratic processes are considered the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights (Carr, 2006).

However, while the world is racing to institutionalize democratic norms and values, 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa is witnessing a reversal from democracy to military regimes. In other words, why is democracy crumbling in Africa despite the commitment and claim by African and world leaders that democracy has no alternative and it has come to stay in the continent (SaharaReporters, 2022).



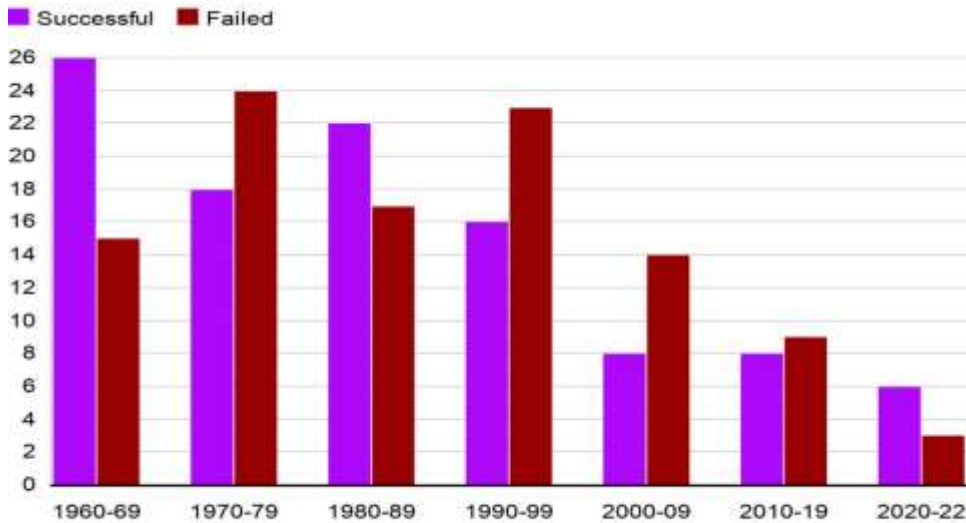
**Why do coups persist in Africa?**

Why has Africa experienced more coups than any other continent in the world? For instance, all but one (Myanmar in February 2021), the 13 coups that happened worldwide since 2017 have occurred in Africa (Mucahid, 2021). Military coups were popular throughout Africa in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have become a conventional way of altering the existing political order. There were an average of four coups and coup attempts every year between the 1960s and 2000s.

Sudan has seen the most coups and attempted military takeovers, with 17 in total, six of which were successful. In 2019, following months of mass protests, the long-serving President of Sudan Omar Al-Bashir who took power in 1989 was overthrown by the military junta. Sudan's military jailed civilian leaders and took control in October. Almost a month after, officials said they had thwarted a coup attempt blamed on former ruler Omar Al Bashir's loyalists (Vhumbunu, 2019).

In the years after independence, Nigeria had a reputation for military coups, with eight occurring between January 1966 and Gen Sani Abacha's takeover in 1993, although, since 1999, political power has been transferred through democratic elections. Eleven coups have occurred in Burundi's history, most of which were fueled by tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi groups. Between 1967 and 1968, Sierra Leone saw three coups, with a fourth in 1971. Similarly, there were five further coup attempts between 1992 and 1997. Ghana has had eight military coups in the last two decades. The first was in 1966, when Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown, followed by a failed attempt by junior army commanders the following year (Peter, 2022).

**Military coups in Africa over the decades**



\*2022 up to 1 February

Source: Research by Central Florida and Kentucky Universities





As calls for democratic reforms and constitutionalism intensified in the continent, military coups reduced from an average of four to two per year until 2019 (Marshall, 2019). However, between 2020 and 2022, the wave of military coups returns sweeping five democratically elected governments and the emergence of military rule.

The UN has described the year 2021 as the year of military coups in Africa. Between 2020 and 2021 alone, there were four successful military takeovers in Chad, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan and another unsuccessful coup in Mali (Emmanuel, 2022). Consequently, in September 2021, the UN raises an alarm that military regimes are returning to Africa, blaming a lack of commitment and international unity among the international community (Peter, 2022). What is most worrisome is the support the military junta enjoys from the citizens of these countries. While scholars and other stakeholders condemned the coups, they are divided on the causes of military coups in Africa, West Africa inclusive.

Successful coups, coup attempts, and counter-coups are related to internal contradictions and socio-economic conditions in African countries. Lack of tolerance for the opposition and total disregard for rule of law escalate governance and legitimacy crises in many African countries. The seat-tight syndrome in which African leaders manipulate the constitution to retain power after serving constitutional terms has fueled stability crises and the collapse of democratic republics and subsequently military regimes. The incumbents intimidate the opposition and use the state's authority to sway the election in their favour (Abiodun, Nwannennaya, Ochei, & Ayo-Adeyekun, 2018). Constitutional coups appear to be the new tactic used by incumbents particularly in East and Central and West Africa, to avoid term limitations. They accomplish this by altering the terms of a national constitution to extend tenure. Despite periodic elections, over the last ten years, the presidents of 15 African nations have remained in office through fraudulent elections. These include Angola, Burundi, Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Liberia, Rwanda, Sudan Togo, and Uganda, among others. Apart from Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, 14 leaders were elected before 2006 (Abdulateef & Modestus, 2017).

The inability of African democratic leaders to provide citizens with adequate welfare and security has prompted military coups and citizens' support for military regimes. As African leaders failed to provide democratic dividends, loot, and embezzle scarce resources, citizens become pessimistic about democracy. This failure of African leaders to meet the basic needs and aspirations of their people creates an optimism among African supporters of the military coups that the military junta would provide an adequate groundwork for a genuine democratic rebirth (Mucahid, 2021).

Insecurity, poverty, unemployment, starvation, deadly diseases, poor education, and lack of constitutionalism, among others have individually and in combination affected the democratization process in Africa. Political leaders in most African countries devote themselves to primitive accumulation of wealth and perverse corruption and ignored the provision of security and welfare to improve the living standard of their citizens. Nationals of most African states believed that democracy and indeed the African leaders have done nothing or little to improve their standard of living (Agulanna, 2006; Joseph, 2014). Hence, the majority of Africans developed democratic apathy and seeks alternatives to democratic governance (Norris, 2011; Afrobarometer, 2002).



Persistent military coups d'état imply that the current political systems in Africa are characterized by political instability, while the military seizes the opportunity to take over power in the name of restoring normalcy. Regardless of how enticing the announcement of each coup leader appears, its occurrence has always been a sign of political instability and economic turmoil. The military had been in the barracks for a long time, but it appears that their tamed lions have been unleashed on the political climate, with coups unfolding at an alarming rate throughout the continent (Toyin, 2022). Moreover, successful military intervention in one country inspires a feeling of legitimacy for the military in other countries with similar challenges to consider it as a solution to their problem. This notion has not only made coups a persistent phenomenon in West Africa but may be partly responsible for the support and rise in the number of military dictatorships across the sub-region.

### **Military coups in Africa: The West African experience**

West Africa is made up of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Except for Senegal, all the countries have experienced one form of a military coup or another. However, this section would only focus on the recent waves of military coups in Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Burkina Faso, to examine the upsurge of military coups in the sub-region (Ojakorotu, & Olajide, 2021).

#### ***The Mali experience***

Mali is not an exception to military incursion in political governance. Since its independence from France in 1960, Mali's armed forces routinely intervened in its politics. Mali has had four successful military coups in 1968, 1991, 2012, and 2020. Poor state formation, the relationship between the military and state institutions, colonial legacies, the dynamics of political and security context in northern Mali, precarious state governance, and ineffective international aid and assistance are just a few of the factors that have contributed to Mali's coups. It could be argued that Mali's military involvement in politics has impacted both positively and negatively. While the military ousted the non-responsive democratically elected government, they also replaced the authoritarian government with a democratic system that promotes Mali's democratic consolidation (Adetuyi, 2021). For instance, while the 1991 coup resulted in democratization, the 2012 and 2020 coups halted the democratic process in Mali. Successive military juntas in Mali often capitalize on security deteriorating situation and poor economy to justify their involvement in governance.

However, after many years of military involvement in governance, military interventions neither significantly improve security nor the economy in the country. Consequently, Mali's political institutions remain weak, corrupt, and incapable of managing the grave security situation in the country. Thus, Mali's economic and political unrest, the rising wave of insecurity, governance, and humanitarian crises have aggravated the August 2020 military intervention (Matei, 2021).

As Islamist terrorists pushed from northern to central Mali in recent years, the security situation has continued to deteriorate exponentially. A 2015 peace agreement with northern separatists has mainly gone unfulfilled. While Bamako is mostly safe, it has been the target of large-scale terrorist assaults, including a hotel siege in 2015 that killed 19 people (Arieff, 2020; Zeigler, 2021).



Furthermore, as a landlocked country with little arable land, compounded by complex security dynamics, illiteracy among others has individually or in combination hampered Mali's socio-economic growth and humanitarian relief operations. According to the UN, more than 287,000 Malians were internally displaced in July 2020 and over 142,000 Malians were refugees in neighbouring countries in early 2020. Since 2013, foreign and UN forces have been operating in Mali in an attempt to improve security and combat terrorism. The UN peacekeeping mission alone has a total of 15,209 personnel. Under Operation Barkhane, a French-led counterterrorism effort has roughly 5,100 troops stationed in West Africa's Sahel region. This is in addition to G5 Sahel "joint force" formed by Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad in 2017 to coordinate military operations in border regions (Birikorang & Salihu, 2020).

In the spate of uncertainties and rising instability, Mali's president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, was elected in 2013. As a jihadist insurgency seized the nation, Kaita began to assign family members to critical posts despite widespread allegations of corruption. He pushed through skewed parliamentary elections in which many Malians were unable to vote, igniting a nationwide protest (Morgan, 2020). Popular resistance to Kéita, who was re-elected to a second term in 2018, continues to build for over a year, fueled by allegations of meddling in early 2020 parliamentary elections, corruption scandals, growing insecurity, militia violence, and economic woes. A loose coalition of politicians, civil society activists, and Bamako religious leaders called for the ousting of Kéita in June 2020. On August 18, 2020, following months of persistent anti-government protests, a group of military officers led by Col. Assimi Gota, a member of Mali's elite special forces overthrew Kaita and took over the control of the country.

### *The experience of Chad*

In April 2021, the Chadian military quickly seized control following the death of President Idriss Deby. Déby, a former chief of the military and an army commander by training, ascended to power in 1990 in an armed rebellion. He had faced multiple challenges including coup plots in the years that followed (BBC, 2021). Déby, a 68-year-old, had been in control for three decades until he was shot in 2021 at the frontline while fighting rebels. The rebels have also expressed their displeasure over the military coup by claiming that Chad is not a monarchy. Following his death, his 37-year-old son Mahamat, a military officer, was promptly installed as interim president of the country. He is currently in charge of a Transitional Military Council at least for the next 18 months. According to the constitution, the president's responsibilities are to be temporarily carried out by the president of the National Assembly in the event of death or resignation. These constitutional provisions have been disregarded by the military. Mahamat is essentially supervising an unconstitutional change of government by suspending the constitution and dissolving the parliament and government (Hansen, 2021). General Kaka, also known as Mahamat Idriss Déby, was in charge of the presidential guard before taking over as new interim president.

### *The Guinea coup experience*

In September 2021, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya appeared on television surrounded by soldiers and told his fellow citizens, using a crude analogy to indicate a military taking over, and announced his vision for the country's future. "We don't need to rape her any longer, all we have to do is to make love to her." Alpha Conde, the country's first democratically elected president, whose election win





in 2010 was previously considered a new beginning after decades of authoritarian control, was held hostage by Doumbouya's elite Special Forces. The 83-year-old president appeared lounging on a dirty sofa, barefooted with his shirt buttons open and surrounded by highly armed guards who spectacularly ended his stint as the West African country's leader (Oxford Analytica, 2021).

The coups in Guinea were fueled by public discontent with democratically elected presidents who had overstayed their constitution tenures. Guineans welcomed the coups d'états because they believed that democracy has failed to develop the country or improve their living conditions. The coups reflected a growing perception that elections, democracy, and by extension Guinean political elites failed to deliver on their promises. In other words, democracy in Guinea does not reflect popular desires and aspirations. Guinea's population stands at 13.1 million, 47% of the people live below the poverty line while life expectancy is 53 years and the rule of law is severely lacking (Economic Freedom Index, 2022).

Political stability index for Guinea (-2.5 poor; 2.5 strong), 1996-2020: Guinea's average score throughout that period was -1.23 points, with a low of -2.4 in 2007 and a high of -0.39 in 2015. -0.64 points are the most recent number from 2020. Political instability will remain in the aftermath of the military September 2021 coup, which ousted President Alpha Condé who had won a dubious third term in the presidential election in October 2020 (Economist Intelligence, 2022).

#### ***The Burkina Faso experience***

Three weeks after leading a coup that overthrew democratically elected President Roch Marc Christian Kabore, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was sworn in as Burkina Faso's president. Damiba took the oath of office in February 2022, promising to preserve, respect, support, and defend the constitution and the people of Burkina Faso against internal and external aggression. During the swearing-in ceremony, Damiba appeared in military camouflage with a red beret. There were no international officials present for the event, which took place in a modest room at the Constitutional Council's headquarters in the capital, Ouagadougou (Aljazeera, 2022).

President Kabore was elected in 2015 following the overthrow of long-time monarch Blaise Compaore by a popular uprising. In 2020, he was re-elected, but the following year, he faced a backlash over the rising toll of a violent war that had spilt over from neighbouring Mali. In the face of attacks by armed organizations linked with ISIL (ISIS) and al-Qaeda, warfare has killed thousands of people and pushed millions from their homes across West Africa's Sahel area. Consequently, on the 24th of January, Damiba, 41, led a group of disgruntled military officers and forcefully overthrew Kabore out of office amid public condemnation over his poor handling of the deteriorating security situation (Eizenga, 2021).

Burkina Faso is not only one of the poorest countries in the world but one of Africa's most violent states. Since its independence from France in 1960, the landlocked Sahel state has been subjected to a series of coups and is currently fighting one of the most horrific armed operations in Africa that led to the deaths of more than 2,000 and the displacement of over 1.5 million people (Aljazeera, 2022). Thus, the military regime has enjoyed considerable support within Burkina Faso, though the coup has been criticized by the international community. Subsequently, Burkina Faso has been



suspended from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU).

### **Why is democracy crumbling in West Africa?**

Despite assurances by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) that military coups have gone and never will return in the sub-region, West Africa is currently witnessing the resurgence of military regimes. Between the years 2020 and 2022 alone, Sudan and four other West African States (Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Burkina Faso) have experienced military coups and have since made a reversal to military governments. The Republic of Niger, one of the world's poorest nations, has been the victim of multiple coups attempt in recent times. In 2021, the authorities of the Republic of Niger foiled military coups two days before the swearing-in ceremony of the incumbent President Bazoum (Aljazeera, 2021). In March 2021, President Umaro Sissoco Embalo of Guinea-Bissau also survived an attempted coup that claims the lives of several members of the country's security forces (Aljazeera, 2021).

Although there are diverse opinions among scholars and other stakeholders on why democracy is crumbling in Africa, particularly in West Africa, scholars and other stakeholders argue that persistent military incursion in West African politics has historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political undertones (McGowan, 2005). This section relies on both documented evidence and expert interview to interrogate the persistence of military coups in Africa.

Historically, without regard for the integrity of existing cultural groupings or political institutions, European powers partitioned and scramble West Africa among the Western colonial powers using its map. As a result, a substantial number of ethnic groups who hitherto lived together as one was divided into different nations by mere artificial boundaries created by Western colonialists (Interview with a senior academic at University of Abuja, Nigeria, January 2022). Other ethnic nationalities that have nothing in common in terms of cultural affinities were forcefully amalgamated to form new nation-states. This forceful amalgamation of ethnic nationalities has made state and nation-building almost an impossible task. Consequently, bloodshed characterized the politics of many African post-colonial states created by the Western colonialists (Interview with one of the executives of the Civil Society Organization in Lagos, Nigeria, March 2022).

Thus, the modern states established by the colonial powers become ethnic-based nation-states where leadership is based on ethnicity and religion rather than competency (Interview with a Malian Diplomat, Abuja Nigeria, January 2022). Ethnic politics dominates the political landscape of many post-colonial states making ethnic integration a daunting task and setting the groundwork for greater social problems. Ethnic differences and the quest for the domination of minority groups by the majority ethnic groups have posed a significant threat to political stability for the West African States (Interview with the former Nigerien ambassador to Nigeria, Niamey, April 2022). These irreconcilable differences and cultural collisions among distinct ethnic groups with different traditions and cultures promote political conflicts among ethnic nationalities in West Africa. This unhealthy competition among different ethnic nationalities promotes political instability and jeopardizes the West African state's journey to genuine democracy. Ethnic-based conflicts in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso among others are consequences of fractured communities.



The result has always been political instability, insecurity, and perverse anarchy which makes democratization mere wishful thinking.

The defeat of socialism after the Cold War has eliminated the possibility of ideological conflict among post-colonial African states. With the collapse of the USSR, capitalism and liberal democracy defined by free-market forces and a multiparty system triumphed over African socialism as advocated by leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (Interview with seasoned academics on democracy, Maryam Abacha American University Maradi, Niger Republic, February 2022). However, ethnicity became a distinguishing feature among post-colonial political parties/leaders in West Africa. Ethnic and religious solidarity were mobilized by the political parties and elite as sources of popularity and electoral victory. Free, fair, and credible elections were reduced to mere ethnic contests in which the major ethnic groups continuously hold on to power and the minority must accept their political inferiority status. The domination of the minority ethnic groups by the majority groups has potentially increased disintegrative pressures and rendered most of the nation-states politically unstable and economically weak (Interview with a seasoned Malian politician, Abuja, Nigeria, January 2022).

Similarly, majority ethnic groups frequently wield power by all means at the expense of other ethnic groups, ignoring the democratic principle of equal participation and equity. As a result, there have been some high-profile incidences of heightened ethnic tensions associated with multiparty elections. For instance, Burundi has a history of open ethnic strife and has been ruled by the Tutsi minority since its independence. A Hutu party was inevitably elected to power in multiparty democratic elections. However, the army's Tutsi military commanders refused to recognize the electoral defeat and organized a military coup, killing the elected President, numerous cabinet members, and thousands of citizens, bringing the country dangerously close to a genocidal war. Studies have shown that a more equitable allocation of power, has aided the resolution of ethnic disputes in several countries across the world. However, the continued dominance of politics by the major ethnic groups has truncated democratic consolidation in many West African states such as Burkina Faso and Chad (Interview with a Nigerien Diplomat, Niamey, Niger Republic, February 2022).

Before the colonial invasion of Africa, indigenous West African communities have their distinct socio-cultural, political, and economic systems. However, after the conquest of the continent, the colonial powers imposed a Western-oriented democratic political system that is alien to the sub-region. Pre-colonial West Africa had a political system in which each leader dominated his country through well-established patron-client connections and an informal structure for the transfer of power from one governing elite to another (Interview with a renowned Nigerian scholar/historian, Sokoto State, Nigeria, April 2022).

The reluctance of many African states to accept and consolidate the Western liberal democracy might be explained by a lack of similarity between indigenous democratic institutions, culture, and traditions of the two different systems. Ethnic and cultural differences among communities were utterly neglected during the scramble and partitioning of the continent. Hence, the clamour for African (socialist) democracy by some post-colonial nationalists in Africa. The forceful introduction of Western democracy as a system of governance has continued to work against many West African states which resulted in building weak states that could not afford the cost of democracy (Interview



with a Malian and resident of Ndjamen, Chad. February 2022). In pre-colonial communities, patronage is based on the arbitrary control and resource allocation and distribution of political power by a patron. It is incompatible with western democratic ideas of universal rights and public political competition.

The attitude of West African nationalists before the independence of many West African was another hindrance to democratization in the sub-region. Most nationalist leaders saw democratic elections as only a mere prerequisite for independence and continued Western financial and technical assistance. As a result, following the first wave of independence, there was a quick reversal from democracy to single-party domination, characterized by strong central leadership and traditional African patriarchal society (Interview with a Nigerian electorate, Dossa Department, Niger Republic, March 2022).

Thus, after independence, the post-colonial democratic structures established by colonialists became obsolete, and democracy begins crumbled in several West African nations including Ghana, Niger, and Nigeria (Interview with a Nigerian academics on democracy, Abuja, Nigeria, July 2022). Some of the post-colonial nationalists argued that Africa cannot afford democratic regimes, besides, it has not been valued as the most appropriate system by the majority of Africans. Not only was the concept of liberal Western democracy foreign to Africa, but the example offered to West African colonies by European powers throughout the colonial period was not the type practiced in Europe. Thus, the post-colonial political empires not only became authoritarian but captured and maintained power via repression and bloodshed. The persecution of opponents and lack of preparedness of the political elites to tolerate opposition spread the culture of intolerance and antidemocratic behaviour among the post-independence political elite (Interview with a renowned scholar on democracy, Abuja, Nigeria, March 2022).

Constitutional coups become one of the most common strategies deployed by the African political elites to remain in political offices for life. Presidents Gnassingbé (Togo), Museveni (Uganda), Déby (Chad), Biya (Cameroon), Kagame (Rwanda), the late Nkurunziza (Burundi), and El-Sisi (Egypt), to name a few, have all changed their countries' constitutions to remove the two-term limit to remain in power. A constitutional coup happens when the president's term and/or age limitations are removed from the constitution, allowing the incumbent president to illegally extend his term in office. Constitutional coups have created poor institutions of governance and aided incumbents' ability to alter constitutions to remain in power. This is the case in many West African countries such as Burkina Faso (Interview with a former Chadian Diplomat, Ndjamen, Chad Republic, January 2022). The constitutional coups have eroded West African citizens' confidence in democracy. Very few West Africans see democracy as being practiced in the region as an effective system that can ensure the state's economic growth and development.

Inefficient economic performance and pervasive corruption are two hurdles to gaining people's trust and ensuring democratic survival and consolidation in West Africa (Interview with a Malian academic, Abuja, Nigeria, March 2022). Political instability is exacerbated by severe economic challenges, which subsequently affect the transition from authoritarian to democracy and the advancement of democratic ideals. As many African believe that democracy is not an ideal form of governance for Africa but needs a strong, non-elected leader capable of implementing and maintaining law and order. This indicates that there is an absence of mass support for democracy



and the democratization process (Interview with a senior member of civil society in Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria. March 2022).

At the moment, addressing socio-economic challenges such as insecurity, forced migration, refugee crises, debt, poverty, illiteracy, crime, unemployment, illnesses, inflation, and a lack of infrastructure appeared to be more desirable to the majority of West African states citizens than democratic transition or consolidation. Most of the West African State's citizens suffer from the cycle of trans-border banditry, insurgency, and other armed-related violence. West African leaders' looting and mismanagement of resources have significantly affected the quality of life of West African citizens.

In most West African states, such as Burkina Faso, and Chad, among others, democracy has been reduced to a mere periodic election where the ruling party continues to remain in office rather than consolidating democratic ideals. West African leaders hardly distinguish democracy for the public good from democracy as an investment for personal enrichment (Interview with a Nigerian academic, Kaduna, Kaduna State, Nigeria, April 2022). Democratic consolidation, in the opinion of the majority of West Africans, must support economic development that results in job creation, reduces income inequality, improve health care delivery, promotes access to quality education, security and alleviate poverty (Interview with a renowned Malian scholar on Democracy, Abuja, Nigeria, March 2022).

### **Conclusion**

To reverse military incursion in the political landscape of West African states, political elites must be accountable enough to respond to citizens' wishes by allowing them to enjoy the benefits of democracy. The political elites who promised the people security, human rights, and welfare have become affluent wreaking havoc and turning into worms that consume rather than empower the people. For democracy to thrive, political elites must introduce reforms to enable citizens not only to rediscover their interest in democracy but develop confidence in it as well as consolidate it.

In the light of the above, reform toward poverty alleviation, security, health, human rights, education, and a high level of illiteracy must be introduced to enable the citizens of West African states to claim ownership of democracy. These democratic reforms must take into account the ethnic peculiarities of each country and the variety and cultural distinctiveness of each ethnic group. West African states must introduce constitutional reform that will enable every ethnic group to be represented, taking into account their diverse interests, aspirations, and needs. West African political elites must take a firm stand against corruption and support government initiatives and drives to fight corruption. Democracy is expensive to operate and cannot work for hungry people. To consolidate democracy, adjustments must be made to accommodate the interest of the majority. Otherwise, successful military coups in other West African states will continue to trigger military takeovers in other nations. The impression by the majority of West Africans that military coups may eventually give birth to genuine democracy is responsible for the rising popularity of military regimes.



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