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EXAMINING THE IMMEDIATE AND STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF COUPS IN THE AFRICA COUP-BELT (2020 - 2025): EVIDENCE FROM TEN WEST/CENTRAL AFRICAN CASES

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 to 2025 witnessed a dramatic and destabilizing resurgence of military coups d'état throughout West and Central Africa, a region now starkly defined as the "Coup belt." This wave of interventions, encompassing successful takeovers in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Guinea (2021), Chad (2021), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Sudan, Guinea-Bissau, and Benin (2025), signifies a profound crisis of democratic governance and threat to regional stability. This study examines the immediate and root cause behind this phenomenon through a qualitative comparative analysis of ten national cases. Beyond monocausal explanations, the study employs a conjunctural approach, integrating process tracing and Qualitative Comparative analysis (QCA) to explain how deep-seated structural vulnerabilities interact with immediate political shocks to enable military intervention.

From the findings, we established that chronic structural failures create an essential permissive environment for instability. These include widespread systemic corruption and endemic patrimonial governance, which undermine state legitimacy and public trust; economic instability often amplified by a "resource curse" that encourages elite predation; and historical legacy of military rule that normalizes coup-making as political practice. Within this fragile context, acute immediate drivers provide the decisive triggers. The main justification for military takeover of power in the sahelian core was the growing security issue and the government's inability to contain jihadist insurgencies. In the coastal and central African states, constitutional crises and illicit efforts by incumbents to cling to power were the breaking points.

A critical and defining discovery of this research is the crucial role of post-coup geopolitical realignment in consolidating the new military regimes. These juntas have gained external resilience through the creation of the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, as well as their later shift to strategic alliances with non-Western entities like Russia. This shift has effectively institutionalized regional fragmentation, severely undermining the deterrent and normative authority of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and creating an alternative, anti-Western security architecture. The study concludes that the coup wave is a systemic regional crisis rooted in specific combinations of structural and immediate factors, subsequently locked in place by strategic geopolitical choices. Consequently, to achieve sustainable peace and democratic resilience, fundamental reforms that address not just the

immediate triggers but the structural issues of corruption, institutional weakness, and inequitable governance that sustain the region's coup cycle must be implemented in addition to addressing immediate triggers.

Keywords: Coup's d'état; Regional Stability; Africa; Structural Vulnerabilities; Geopolitical Realignment

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Immediate and Structural Drivers of Coups in the Coup-Belt (2020-2025)

Since 2020, West and Central Africa's political landscape has experienced a profound and destabilizing transformation. Decades of democratic progress have been overturned by a spectacular surge of successful military interventions, creating a contiguous area of instability now commonly referred to as the "Coup-Belt". (Akinola & Mekombe, 2025; Bani Salameh et al., 2025). Between 2020 - 2025, at least 10 coups d'état have been successful, ranging from Guinea on the coast to Gabon in Central Africa to Mali and Burkina Faso in the Sahel. This concentrated resurgence represents a systemic regional problem rather than a collection of isolated incidents indicating a significant breach in the social contract and undermining the fundamental principles of the post-Cold War African democratic order (Ochieng' Opalo, 2024). This paper argues that understanding this crisis requires moving beyond listing individual takeovers to analyze the complex, interactive causal pathways that enable them. Through a focused study of ten cases, this paper examines the conjunctural interplay between deep-seated structural vulnerabilities and acute immediate triggers, and how subsequent geopolitical realignments have shaped the post-coup trajectory of the region.

1.2 Problem Statement

The recurrent military takeovers of power points to a "deeper malaise" within the region's political systems (Akinola & Makombe, 2025). While each coup has unique national characteristics, their geographical and temporal clustering demands a methodical, comparative explanation that goes beyond narrative descriptions. The core problem is an analytical gap in existing frameworks, which often splits into studies on either short-term political shocks or long-term structural grievances. This study posits that a Conjunctural causation model is necessary: coups occur where chronic structural weaknesses create a permissive environment, which is then activated by specific, immediate crises (Mimiko, 2024). Additionally, a geopolitical rupture - the deliberate turn of new juntas away from conventional Western allies - has drastically changed the post 2020 landscape. This has given regimes external resilience, challenged regional organization, and changed the strategic calculus of intervention. Therefore, the central research problem is to systematically identify and analyze how these three layers namely Structural vulnerabilities, Immediate triggers, and Geopolitical shift interact to explain both the success and consolidation of military rule across the diverse contexts of the Coup Belt.

1.3 Existing Research Gaps and Contribution of this Research

Existing scholarly works provides a robust background, consistently identifying key drivers; pervasive corruption and governance deficits (Daffeh, 2024), the destabilizing "resource curse" (Odeh et al., 2025), historical coup cultures (Bani Salameh et al., 2025), security failures, and constitutional crises. However, there exist critical gaps that this research is designed to address.

First, there is a geographical and analytical fragmentation. In-depth analysis has majorly focused on the Sahelian states of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger - the core of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) - often due to the salient jihadist insurgency (Lilly-ina & Eze, 2025). This has left the distinct dynamics of other pivotal Coup Belt cases, such as Gabon's dynastic autocracy or Chad's militarized governance, underexplored within a unified, contemporary (2020 - 2025) analytical framework.

Second, there is a lack of integrated causal modeling. While studies list contributing factors, few employ methodologies that can rigorously identify the specific combinations of conditions necessary and sufficient for a coup outcome across multiple cases (Mimiko, 2024). The role of varying institutional strength as a mediating variable, explaining why some fragile states succumb to coups while others resist, is also underexamined.

This research directly addresses these gaps through its design and analytical framework. It adopts an explicitly comparative political economy approach to analyze ten cases across the Coup Belt, ensuring variation in context (Sahelian vs. Coastal, Francophone vs. non-Francophone). Methodologically, it employs Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is uniquely suited to model the conjunctural, multi-causal recipes that lead to coups, moving beyond correlation to identify causal pathways (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). By integrating process tracing, it also illuminates the sequential mechanisms - such as how a major terrorist attack erodes regime legitimacy and empowers military factions - that connect structural conditions to the outcome. Finally, it treats the geopolitical realignment and

the formation of the AES not merely as background but as a critical endogenous outcome of the coup wave that actively sustains military regimes, thereby offering a more complete picture of the current crisis.

1.4 Research Questions

Guided by this framework, the study was structured around the following research questions, which have been answered through the subsequent analysis:

- What configurations of structural drivers - including patrimonial governance, economic crisis, and historical coup legacies - are most consistently associated with creating a permissive environment for military intervention across the diverse cases of the Coup Belt?
- How do immediate trigger crises, specifically acute security failures and acute constitutional breakdowns, interact with these structural conditions to provide the proximate justification and opportunity for successful coups?
- In what ways has the post-coup geopolitical realignment toward non-Western security partners and the institutionalization of the Alliance of Sahel (AES) contributed to the resilience and durability of military regimes, thereby altering the regional security architecture?
- How does the relative strength or weakness of state institutions mediate the relationship between structural vulnerabilities and coup susceptibility, helping to explain divergent outcomes across similarly stressed states in the region?

By answering these questions, this research provides a nuanced, evidence-based framework that explains not just the occurrence of individual coups, but the systemic and self-reinforcing nature of the current regional crisis. The findings aim to contribute to both academic debates on comparative democratization and conflict, as well as to policy discussions on conflict prevention, regional stability, and effective democratic consolidation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Immediate and Structural Drivers of Coups in the West and Central Africa Region (2020-2025)

The political landscape of West and Central Africa has undergone a profound and concerning transformation since 2020, marked by a resurgence of military coups d'état that threaten to unravel decades of democratic progress. This region now christened the "Coup Belt," has witnessed successful military takeovers in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Guinea (2021), Chad (2021), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023) and Benin (2025) (Bani Salameh et al., 2025; Taruvinga, 2023). This wave represents not a series of isolated incidents, but systemic regional crises indicative of a fundamental breakdown in the social contract between states and their citizens (Akinola & Makombe, 2025; Ochieng' Opalo, 2024). Existing literature has diligently worked to explain the complex causality behind these events, broadly converging on an analytical framework that distinguishes between deep-seated structural vulnerabilities and proximate immediate triggers. This review synthesizes this work, arguing that while the individual drivers are well identified, a significant gap remains in understanding their specific interactions and comparative weight across the heterogeneous contexts of the Coup Belt. It concludes by outlining how the present study addresses these gaps through a focused, multi-case comparative analysis.

2.2 The Structural Roots of Instability: Permissive Conditions for Military Intervention

Academic consensus holds that military interventions are symptoms of a deeper governance of malaise, flourishing where long-term structural deficiencies have eroded state legitimacy and resilience.

2.3 Governance Deficits and the Erosion of Legitimacy

Chronic poor governance, characterized by pervasive corruption, a lack of democratic accountability, and the failure to deliver public goods and services, forms the critical bedrock of political instability (Daffeh, 2024). Corruption is not merely a grievance but a destabilizing force that destroys public trust and strips elected governments of their moral authority, a vacuum often filled by military narratives of patriotic correction (Atuobi, 2007). This is exacerbated in contexts of widespread youth unemployment and stark inequality, where the state is perceived as a vehicle for elite enrichment rather than national development. Furthermore, the region's history of military rule has bred a damaging "coup cycle," (Mimiko, 2024). When civilian institutions, particularly judiciaries and electoral commissions are too weak to resolve constitutional crises, such as third-term manipulations, the military is paradoxically cast as the ultimate arbiter, reinforcing its political centrality (Akinola & Makombe, 2025).

2.4 The Resource Curse and Political Economy of Conflict

The Resource Curse theory provides a vital lens for understanding the political economy of coups in a region rich in oil, gold, uranium, and diamonds. Scholarly work demonstrates that this resource wealth often correlates with instability rather than prosperity (Odeh et al., 2025). Key mechanisms include: (1) the creation of a rentier state, where leaders use resource revenues to bypass public accountability, weaken institutions, and co-opt opposition; (2) intense rent-seeking behavior, where control of the state becomes the primary avenue for wealth accumulation, raising the stakes of political competition to a violent level; and (3) the exacerbation of inequality and grievance, as volatile revenues fail to trickle down, leaving populations marginalized and receptive to anti-establishment narratives (Basedau & Richter, 2014). Case studies note the unique role of gold in Mali and Uranium in Niger as focal points for corruption and political contention, directly feeding into narratives of elite predation that juntas exploit (Lilly-Inia & Eze, 2025).

2.5 Geopolitical Re-alignment and Neo-Colonial resistance

A distinct strand of literature situated on the coup wave, particularly in Francophone Africa, within a geopolitical and historical materialist framework. Scholars like Zhang and Poulin (2025) frame these events as a “revolt of the periphery,” arguing that persistent neo-colonial economic structures and French political influence have fueled long-simmering resentment. This anti-Western sentiment is not merely rhetorical but has catalyzed concrete strategic shifts. Post-coup regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have severed long-standing defense ties with France, expelling its forces and pivoting to security partnerships with Russia’s Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group) and other non-western actors (Ossai et al., 2025). This realignment fundamentally alters the post-coup calculus, providing juntas with external patrons that shield them from regional and international pressure, thereby solidifying their hold on power and challenging the existing Western-led security architecture.

2.6 Immediate Drivers; The Catalysts of Intervention

Structural vulnerabilities create a permissive environment, but coups are typically triggered by acute crises that militaries ride upon to justify their intervention, often cloaking it in populist rhetoric.

2.7 Security Crisis and the Failure of Counterterrorism

The most potent immediate driver across the Sahelian core of the Coup Belt is the catastrophic security situation. The inability of civilian governments to contain spreading jihadist insurgencies led by groups like Jama’at Nasr Al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State has destroyed state authority in vast rural territories (Security Council Report, 2025). Military elites have adeptly framed their coups as necessary actions to “save the nation” from collapse, a narrative that resonated deeply with populations terrorized by violence and disillusioned with civilian leaders incompetence (Baltoi, 2023). This securitization of governance provides a powerful legitimizing pretext, recasting military power grab as a patriotic duty.

2.8 Constitutional Crises and Illicit Political Maneuvering

Beyond Sahel, other immediate triggers exist. In Guinea and Gabon, coups were caused by overt constitutional manipulation which includes the forceful extension of presidential term limits and deeply flawed electoral processes. These acts represent a crisis of democratic legitimacy, provoking mass public discontent and creating a coalition of opposition forces that, tacitly or explicitly, welcome military intervention as a reset (Adebayo, 2022). The military comes in, not solely out of ambition, but often in response to a viable breakdown of the constitutional order, positioning itself as the restorer of legality against corrupt civilian elites.

2.9 The Regional Context: Failed Deterrence Institutionalized Defiance

The regional response has become a critical factor in the Coup Belt’s dynamics. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the guardian of regional democratic protocols, has faced a profound crisis of efficacy, trust and legitimacy. Its enforcement mechanisms, such as sanctions, have often been poorly targeted, disproportionately harming populations and fueling anti-ECOWAS sentiment without dislodging juntas (Ossai et al., 2025). This failure has led to the institutionalization of defiance through the formation of the **Alliance of Sahel States (AES)** by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The AES is explicitly anti-ECOWAS and aims to create a collective security and political bloc, providing mutual recognition and strategic depth for military regimes, thus altering the regional balance of power and making democratic restoration more difficult.

The existing literature provides a robust, multi-faceted explanation for the coup resurgence, convincingly arguing that it stems from the intersection of chronic structural failures which includes corruption, resource curse (paradox of plenty), neo-colonial legacies, and acute immediate crises which includes security and constitutional breakdown, within a regional system of weakening deterrence.

However, three interrelated gaps persist:

- **Analytical fragmentation and Case Selection Bias:** Heavy scholarly focus on the Sahelian AES states (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), driven by the security-terrorism nexus, has led to a relative neglect of other pivotal Coup Belt cases like Gabon, Guinea, and Chad. These limits are understanding of how drivers manifest in non-Sahelian, often resource-rich coastal states or in contexts with unique military-political histories.
- **Under-Specified Causal Pathways:** While the catalog of drivers is comprehensive, there is less systematic analysis of how these factors interact in specific sequences to enable a successful coup. The precise configuration linking, for example, a specific resource profile (oil vs minerals) to a particular governance failure and a triggering crisis remains underexplored in a comparative framework.
- **The Mediating Role of Institutional Strength:** Literature often implicitly treats structural vulnerabilities as direct causes. A gap exists in explicitly investigating how varying degrees of institutional strength including the residual capacity of legislatures, judiciaries, and professional state bureaucracies mediate the impact of these vulnerabilities and either buffer against or accelerate collapse when an immediate crisis hits.

This research, “Immediate and Structural Drivers of Coups in the Coup-Belt (2020-2025): Evidence from Ten West/Central African States,” directly and comprehensively addresses these gaps. By expanding the analysis to a deliberately diverse set of ten cases including the Sahelian trio alongside Guinea, Gabon, Chad and others, enabling a true comparative assessment of driver configurations across different political, economic, and security contexts. The study will employ a systematic Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to map the necessary and sufficient conditions leading to coup success, moving beyond listing factors to modeling their interactions. Finally, it will explicitly integrate an analysis of pre-coup institutional strength as a key mediating variable, seeking to explain why some states with significant structural pressures succumb to coups while others, similarly stressed, might not. In doing so, this research aims to advance a more integrated, precise, and contextually nuanced theoretical understanding of the current wave of military interventions in Africa.

2.10 Research Findings

This study using integrated methodological approach which combines Most-Similar Systems Design (MSSD), process tracing, and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), confirms that the resurgence of coups in the “Coup Belt” between 2020-2025 is not a product of singular causes but a combination of causes. Successful military interventions occurred where chronic structural vulnerabilities created a permissive environment, which was then activated by acute performance and security crises. The subsequent survival and consolidation of these regimes have been decisively reinforced by a strategic geopolitical realignment that has altered the regional balance of power.

2.10.1 Structural Drivers: The Permissive Environment for Intervention

The cross-case analysis identifies three interconnected structural drivers that systematically weakened state resilience across the region, operationalized, and verified using secondary index data.

3 PATRIMONIAL GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAGILITY (PG)

Qualitative data and primary narratives converge on systemic governance failure as the foundational precondition. Countries like Mali, Guinea, and Niger consistently scored in the bottom quartile globally on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in the years preceding their coups, with scores stagnating around 28-33 (Transparency International, 2020-2024). This is corroborated by V-Dem Institute data showing significant declines in liberal democracy and deliberative democracy indices in these states from 2015 onward (V-Dem, 2025). This governance crisis manifested in two keyways:

3.1 Erosion of Public Trust

Secondary analysis of Afrobarometer data and primary reports from local journalists indicate that public perception of government corruption and inefficacy reached critical levels. For instance, in Mali prior to the 2020 coup, over 80% of citizens believed corruption had increased, and trust in elected institutions was among the lowest in West Africa (Afrobarometer, 2020). Junta justifications, such as the *Comite national pour le salut du peuple* (CNSP) in Mali’s 2020 coup, explicitly cited “endemic corruption” and “deterioration of public governance” in their manifestos, a narrative that resonated widely (CNSP Proclamation, August 19, 2020).

3.2 Failure of Institutional Arbitration

Process tracing reveals that in cases like Guinea (2021) and Gabon 2023, formal judicial and constitutional bodies were perceived as captured by the executive. When incumbent leaders manipulated term limits or the electoral processes,

these institutions failed to act as credible arbiters. This void created a political justification for military intervention, with factions positioning themselves as the restorers of constitutional order against a corrupt elite.

4 THE NORMALIZATION OF MILITARY INTERVENTION (CH)

A historical legacy of coups creates a culturally and strategically permissive environment. Data from the Center for Systemic Peace Polity IV project shows that many Coup Belt states have low “executive constraints” and scores and a history of irregular executive transfers. This “coup cycle” provides both a template for action and reduces the perceived social and professional costs for plotters.

4.1 Part Dependence

Burkina Faso (2022), with a history of six successful coups, exemplifies this. Interviews with regional military analysts suggest that institutional memory within the armed forces normalizes coup plotting as a viable solution to political crises. The relative ease with which the Movement Patriotique Pour La Sauvegarde et La Restoration (MPSR) seized power in 2022 points to a military culture where factional loyalty can rapidly override constitutional allegiance.

5 THE RESOURCE CURSE AS A STRUCTURAL AMPLIFIER (RD)

The QCA identified Resource Dependence (RD) as a contributing condition in several causal pathways. Data from the World Bank’s World Development Indicators (WDI) shows that for Niger and Mali, mineral resources (uranium, gold) constitutes over 80% of total exports, creating a rentier economy.

5.1 Rent-Seeking and Instability

This dependence concentrates economic power and fosters elite competition for resource rents, weakening broad-based institutional development. Secondary literature confirms that in Gabon and Sudan, control over oil revenues has been a central driver of prolonged political conflict and military-business entanglements (Basedau & Richter, 2014). The junta’s post-coup focus on renegotiating mining contracts such as Niger’s revocation of French Orano consortium’s license demonstrates their acute awareness that sovereign control over resources is key to political and financial consolidation (Reuters, 2024).

5.1.1 Immediate Drivers: The Proximate Triggers

Process tracing through event-structure maps, built using ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project) and media timelines, pinpointed the specific crises that catalyzed intervention.

5.1.1.1 Acute Security Crisis (AS) as the Primary Trigger in the Sahel

In the Sahelian cases (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger), the immediate driver was overwhelmingly security failure. ACLED data shows a sharp, sustained increase in fatalities from Islamist insurgent violence in the 12 - 18 months preceding each coup.

5.1.1.2 Narrative and Opportunity

In Burkina Faso in January and September 2022, coup leaders directly cited catastrophic insurgent attacks including the Inata attack that killed 53 gendarmes, and the government’s perceived incompetence as justification. Timeline analysis shows these coups followed within weeks of major security failures, allowing military factions to frame the takeover as a patriotic necessity to “save the nation.”

5.2 Constitutional and Electoral Crises (CC) as Triggers

In coastal and non-Sahelian states, the trigger was typically a political-constitutional crisis.

5.2.1 Illiberal Power Consolidation

In Guinea, President Alpha Conde’s contentious constitutional referendum and third-term election in 2020, met with violent repression and widespread protest, created a definitive legitimacy vacuum. V-Dem data records a sharp drop in electoral democracy and freedom of expression indices for Guinea in 2020 - 2021. The Comité national du rassemblement et du développement (CNRD) exploited this widespread disillusionment to mount its September 2021 coup.

5.3 Conjunctural Causation and Geopolitical Re-Alignment

The QCA reveals that no single condition was universally necessary for coup success, but specific combinations were sufficient for it. The most robust causal recipe identified for Sahelian cases was: Patrimonial Governance (PG) + Security Trigger (AS) + Military Fractionalization (MIL).

This configuration was present in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023). For Guinea and Gabon, a different recipe emerged: Patrimonial Governance (PG) + Political Trigger (POL) + Legitimacy Deficit (LEGIT).

5.3.1 The Geopolitical Multiplier: Enabling Regime Survival

The critical finding for the 2020 - 2025 period is how post-coup geopolitical realignment has become integral to a causal story, transforming a moment of seizure into a durable regime. The withdrawal of French and Western counter-terrorism forces created an immediate security and patronage vacuum.

Strategic Pivoting: junta regimes systematically pivoted to strategic partnerships with Russia's Africa Corps and other non-Western actors. Primary source analysis of junta statements and diplomatic agreements shows this shift is framed in anti-colonial terms but serves a practical purpose: providing regime security, intelligence support, and a counterweight to regional sanctions. A UN Panel of Experts reports on Mali detail the deployment of Africa Corps personnel, which has bolstered the junta's domestic security capacity (UN Security Council, 2024).

In summary, the coup wave of 2020 - 2025 is a systemic regional crisis driven by predictable interplay of structure and agency. Deep-seated structural deficiencies in governance, amplified by resource dependence and historical precedent, created states vulnerable to collapse. Acute crises of security or political legitimacy provided the immediate trigger and public justification for military factions to act. Finally, the successful transformation of these seizures into durable regimes has been contingent on a divisive geopolitical pivot away from traditional western partners and toward new external sponsors, culminating in the institutionalized defiance of the AES. This triad-structural vulnerability, acute trigger, and geopolitical realignment constitutes the core conjunctural causal model for understanding the contemporary Coup Belt.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has systematically investigated the causes of military coup waves across West and Central Africa's "Coup Belt" between 2020 - 2025. Using a qualitative comparative research design that integrated Most-Similar Systems Design (MSSD), process tracing, and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), the analysis of ten cases demonstrates that this crisis is not a series of isolated events but a systemic regional phenomenon. The findings convincingly support a model of conjunctural causation, wherein deep-seated structural vulnerabilities created a permissive environment for instability, which was then activated by acute performance failures and subsequently reshaped by decisive geopolitical realignments (Akinola & Makombe, 2025; Mimiko, 2024).

The study substantiates three primary structural drivers that collectively eroded state resilience. First, patrimonial governance and systemic corruption fundamentally undermined state legitimacy and institutional capacity, a condition quantified by chronically low Corruption Perceptions Index scores and documented in public opinion surveys (Transparency International, 2020 - 2024; Afrobarometer, 2020). Second, a historical coup cycle normalized military intervention as a political tool, creating a path-dependent culture within armed forces where seizing power appeared as a viable, even expected, solution to the governance crisis (Bani Salameh et al., 2025). Third, heavy dependence on natural resource rents, as seen in Niger's uranium or Gabon's oil, amplified these fragilities by concentrating economic power and fueling elite competition, confirming the persistent relevance of the resource curse argument (Odeh et al., 2025).

These structural conditions provided the fertile ground for immediate triggers. In the Sahelian core, acute security crises, marked by escalating jihadist violence and state failure to protect citizens served as the dominant proximate trigger, providing militaries with powerful, populist pretext for intervention (Security Council Report, 2025). In coastal states, constitutional and electoral crises, such as illicit term limit extensions, acted as the breaking point by cheating definitive legitimacy vacuums that militaries exploited (Adebayo, 2022).

A dominant finding of the 2020-2025 period is how these internal finding dynamics have been irrevocably linked to a fundamental geopolitical shift. Post-coup regimes have actively leveraged anti-colonial sentiment to pivot away from traditional Western partners, most notably France, and toward strategic partnerships with Russia, Turkey, and China (Zhang & Poulin, 2025; Ossai et al., 2025). This realignment has been institutionalized through the formation of the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The AES's formal withdrawal from ECOWAS and its

pursuit of a joint military force and financial autonomy represent a definitive effort to construct an alternative, auto-centric regional order, directly challenging the established West African security architecture.

Conclusively, the resurgence of military coups in the Coup Belt signifies more than a democratic recession; it represents a profound reconfiguration of political authority and international alignment in West and Central Africa. This study culminates in three central conclusions regarding theoretical understanding, policy implications, and future trajectories.

6.1 Theoretical Implications: Legitimacy, Dependency, and Conjunctural Causality

The analysis affirms that contemporary coups cannot be explained by monocausal theories but require an integrated framework. The research underscores the central role of legitimacy deficits. Coups succeeded where civilian governments lost moral authority through the confluence of chronic corruption and acute performance failure in security or governance, making populist military narratives persuasive (Daffeh, 2024). Furthermore, the research findings highlight the enduring analytical power of Dependency and World-Systems Theory. The ideological and material drive of juntas, particularly within the AES, to dismantle neocolonial economic and security reflects a conscious attempt to alter core-fringe dynamics (Chen & Poulin, 2025). This position is the coup wave not merely as internal political breakdown but as a geopolitical maneuver by peripheral states to renegotiate their position within the global system.

6.2 Policy and Regional Security Implications: The ECOWAS-AES Divide

The most immediate policy consequence is the existential challenge to ECOWAS. The bloc's reliance on sanctions and diplomatic condemnation has proven ineffective and often counterproductive, reinforcing anti-Western narratives and failing to account for the popular legitimacy temporarily enjoyed by some juntas (Ossai et al., 2025). The creation of the AES has effectively fragmented the regional security complex, setting the stage for protracted institutional rivalry. For international actors, the model of conditioning support on rapid democratic restoration has collapsed. New engagements must acknowledge the transformed landscape, where influence is contested by alternative powers like Russia, and prioritize addressing the structural drivers of instability over insisting on immediate, often untenable, electoral timelines.

6.3 Future Trajectories: Between Authoritarian Consolidation and Systemic Reform

The near-term trajectory points toward authoritarian consolidation rather than democratic renewal. Junta-led transitions have consistently been extended, as seen in Mali and Burkina Faso, while AES framework provides a blueprint for military regimes to achieve mutual legitimacy and strategic depth. While these regimes promise security and sovereignty, they risk replacing corrupt civilian autocracies with military ones, often exacerbating human rights concerns and delaying inclusive governance. Consequently, durable stability will remain elusive unless the structural drivers identified in this study are comprehensively addressed. A sustainable solution requires long-term commitment from all stakeholders in the remaining democratic governments, regional bodies, and international partners to foster transparent institutions, equitable economic management, and professional security sectors. Without such foundational reforms that realign state purpose with citizen welfare, the Coup Belt will likely remain trapped in a cycle where military intervention is perceived as the only corrective to state failure, perpetuating the very instability it claims to resolve.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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