

Democratic Breakdown and Military Ascendancy in Mali

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Abstract

In the heart of West Africa, where the promise of postcolonial sovereignty once stirred hopes of democratic renewal, the shadow of the military looms persistently over fragile state institutions. Mali, emblematic of this regional malaise, has become a crucible of political disillusionment, insurgency, and foreign entanglement. This study interrogates the recurrent collapse of democratic governance and the rise of military rule in Mali through the lens of Samuel P. Huntington's theory of praetorianism. Anchored in a qualitative methodological approach, the study employs the documentary method and textual analysis to critically examine secondary data, ranging from policy documents, academic publications, and international reports to media archives, focusing on events from the 2012 coup to Mali's latest political transitions. The findings reveal that military interventions in Mali are not isolated disruptions but systemic responses to structural fragilities, including weak state capacity, endemic corruption, and growing public disillusionment with democratic institutions. The military has exploited popular frustrations to position itself as a guardian of national stability, thereby perpetuating a "coup trap" that undermines democratic consolidation. Furthermore, the study argues that international actors like France, MINUSMA, and ECOWAS have, through securitised and self-interested interventions, inadvertently legitimised military rule in Mali and reinforced neo-imperialist perceptions. It concludes that Mali's crisis reveals the failure of procedural democracy and liberal internationalism in postcolonial settings. The study calls for inclusive national dialogue, decentralised development, and a reorientation of external engagement toward locally grounded democratic institution-building and civic empowerment, contributing to broader debates on military politics and postcolonial governance.

Key Words: Democratic breakdown, Military ascendancy, Praetorianism, Corruption, Coups

Introduction

Military coups have become a common phenomenon in post-independence Africa. Between 1958 and 2008, Africa recorded over 200 coups and attempted coups, with West Africa accounting for 44.4% of these disruptions (Dan Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). Since 2010, more than 40 coups and attempted coups have occurred across Africa, with about half taking place in West Africa and the Sahel (Sampson, Bisset & Chason, 2023). Of particular concern is the concentration of successful coups since 2019 in former French colonies, underscoring a pattern of political disillusionment and institutional collapse (Taruvunga, 2023). The recurrence of these military interventions in the West African region, not only disrupts democratic consolidation, but also compounds the developmental and security crises plaguing the region. This makes the West African democratic experiment increasingly precarious (Gallo, 2022).

Mali serves as a critical case study in this broader regional trend. Since 2012, the country has faced a compounded crisis of state collapse, armed rebellion, and external intervention. The Tuareg-led insurgency and the subsequent military coup that year created a power vacuum that allowed jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State to entrench themselves in the northern regions (Dion & Sany, 2021). Despite the deployment of French and UN forces to stabilize the country and support democratic governance, Mali has remained trapped in a cycle of violence and institutional failure (Aljazeera, 2022). Social

unrest, humanitarian crises, and intercommunal violence have continued to plague the state, with democratic institutions struggling to gain legitimacy and effectiveness.

The 2020 and 2021 coups further exposed the deep institutional weaknesses and popular disillusionment with democratic rule. Public frustration over government failure to address insecurity, poverty and unemployment, and corruption fuelled support for military interventions, which were led by Colonel Assimi Goita (Dion & Sany, 2021; Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2021). The military junta's ambiguous transition plan has strained relations with key regional and international actors, including ECOWAS and France, prompting sanctions and diplomatic isolation. In turn, the junta has aligned itself with alternative powers such as Russia, allegedly through the Wagner Group, raising new concerns about external interference, sovereignty erosion, and human rights violations (Freedom House, 2023; Aljazeera, 2023a). The current trajectory in Mali, marked by the withdrawal of MINUSMA and other Western troops, resurgence of Tuareg rebellion in northern region, and continued insecurity, has laid bare the limits of international peacebuilding and democratic promotion efforts (Aljazeera, 2023b). Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the internal and external factors undermining democracy in Mali and the structural conditions that facilitate recurring military interventions.

Literature Review

The academic conceptualisation of democracy reveals a complex and evolving discourse shaped by differing interpretations of its meaning, aims, and mechanisms. While the foundational idea of democracy rests on the notion of rule by the people, scholars such as Bulmer (2023) stress the practical embodiment of this principle through representative government, where elected officials act on behalf of citizens. However, this model is not without critique; concerns about elite domination, class inequalities, and the disconnect between representatives and constituents have prompted calls for supplementary participatory frameworks. Aborisade and Omotosho (2021) support a broader view of democracy that encompasses institutional mechanisms and civic engagement processes, highlighting the importance of both procedural legitimacy and substantive inclusion. This expansion of democratic understanding aligns with that of Kerry (2015) and Asaju (2015) which frame democracy as a set of core values such as freedom, equality, and participation, that transcend specific cultural and institutional contexts, underpinning its widespread normative appeal.

Yet, the operationalisation of democratic ideals remains contested, particularly in balancing direct and indirect models of governance. Brooks (2023) and Bulmer (2017) underscore the paradoxes inherent in each: direct democracy may enhance immediacy and popular involvement but risks instability through majoritarianism and demagoguery, while indirect democracy offers structural coherence but can alienate

citizens from decision-making. These tensions necessitate a nuanced equilibrium between efficiency and democratic depth. Typological analyses by Froomkin, Shapiro, and Dahl (2023) differentiate among parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential systems as institutional expressions of democratic governance, while Herre (2022) introduces federal and unitary variants that influence regional autonomy and power dispersion. Brooks (2023) extends this typology with models like social, participatory, and consociational democracy, which seek to remedy liberal democracy's deficits by prioritising equity, inclusion, and deliberation. These models reflect evolving attempts to address the limitations of traditional liberal democracy by foregrounding equity, inclusion, and deliberative legitimacy. Taken together, this diverse typology illustrates democracy's adaptability in confronting contextual challenges and evolving societal needs.

On the other hand, the concept of military ascendancy, particularly in African politics is closely intertwined with the historical and contemporary prevalence of military coups, which continue to reshape governance and state legitimacy across the continent. Mohammed (2022) argues that military coups, by their nature, are abrupt and illegal mechanisms of seizing power that disrupt constitutional order and civilian governance. His identification of structural, politicisation, and economic determinist schools of thought illustrates how internal military culture, officer ideologies, and socio-economic grievances converge to fuel praetorian tendencies, where the military assumes the role of national saviour amid perceived

governance failures. Odigbo, Ezekwelu, and Okeke (2023) expand this framework by examining the regional trend of military resurgence in Africa, asserting that the reappearance of military coups is not merely a deviation from democratic norms but a symptomatic response to leadership deficits, fragile democratic institutions, and governance inefficacies. Their analysis highlights a paradox in which military ascendancy garners popular support in contexts where democratic regimes have failed to deliver, thereby blurring the line between illegitimate power seizure and perceived restoration of order.

Further scholarship provides a deeper interrogation of the underlying political economy of military ascendancy. Chilaka and Peter (2022) point to West Africa's deteriorating security landscape and economic malaise as direct triggers for military takeovers, emphasising how pervasive criminality, terrorism, and citizen discontent create conditions ripe for intervention. This view is echoed by Isilow (2022), who attributes public tolerance of coups to widespread disillusionment with democratic practices. Meanwhile, Alhinho (2023) reframes military ascendancy within the global capitalist crisis and incomplete postcolonial state formation, arguing that coups often coincide with economic restructuring and globalisation's destabilising effects. These insights reveal that military dominance is not solely a domestic governance issue but is linked to broader structural pressures.

In a complementary perspective, Ashoko-Shaba (2022) and Levan (2015) reveals the

failures of civilian leadership, particularly the manipulation of democratic institutions and suppression of opposition, as conditions enabling military ascendancy. Cassani (2020) and Felter (2021), alongside Duzor and Williamson (2022), further contextualise these trends within constitutional subversion and external shocks, reinforcing the thesis that military ascendancy is as much a consequence of domestic democratic erosion.

Military ascendancy in Malian political leadership in modern time reveals a deeply entrenched history of governance failures, institutional fragility, and socio-political instability that have rendered the state democracy vulnerable to recurrent coups and authoritarian regressions. As Wee, Lendorfer, Bleck, and Yaiche (2014) detail, Mali's democratic frailty cannot be disentangled from its post-independence legacy of cyclical rebellions and unfulfilled peace agreements, especially in the northern region of the country. They argue that the 2012 coup was a tipping point in this trajectory, exacerbating state weakness and exposing the deep-rooted grievances of marginalised communities. This view is further supported by Bodian, Tobie, and Marending (2020), who highlight the alarming shift of instability from the north to the central regions of Mopti and Ségou, where the Malian state's failure to assert authority has allowed jihadist groups and intercommunal violence to flourish. They argue that deterioration of state control and the erosion of monopoly on legitimate force in both regions have created fertile ground for military intervention, often framed as a corrective measure to civilian ineptitude.

The military's role, however, is itself marred by chronic dysfunction and politicisation. Badji (2017) exposes the endemic weaknesses within the Malian armed forces, including poor discipline, resource mismanagement, and ineffectual defence planning, which rendered the institution unprepared to confront rising insurgencies and terrorism. Despite legislative attempts like the Law on Military Planning, the military remained ill-equipped and poorly motivated, leading to further insecurity. Klatt (2020) corroborates this depiction by underlining that the core of Mali's crisis lies not in its security apparatus per se, but in its political architecture. The absence of the state in large territories, compounded by elite corruption and a deteriorating public service infrastructure, reflects systemic political failures that have deepened public disillusionment. In this context, military takeovers become a symptom of deeper democratic decay, rather than a solution. The ascendancy of the military thus reflects not its inherent capability but the vacuum created by the collapse of civilian governance.

Contributing to this democratic breakdown is the clientelist and neopatrimonial character of Malian politics. Ba and Bøås (2017), alongside Maiga and Schwartz (2019), demonstrate how decentralisation reforms, intended to democratise governance, instead reinforced the power of local elites, institutionalised corruption, and deepened the state's fragility. The resulting entrenchment of patronage networks hollowed out democratic institutions and distorted state-society relations. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2022), political parties in Mali lack ideological coherence, function

as vehicles for individual ambition, and are riddled with corruption and vote-buying. These systemic flaws have eroded trust in electoral processes and rendered political institutions ineffective, thereby legitimizing, at least rhetorically, military intervention as a preferable alternative. Shipley (2017) further exposes the intertwined nature of corruption, organised crime, and weak judicial oversight in perpetuating impunity, all of which undermine public confidence in democratic institutions and enable military actors to justify their usurpation of power.

Yet, as Adetuyi (2021) convincingly argues, military ascendancy does not rectify Mali's structural deficiencies. While both democratic and military regimes have failed to resolve the country's chronic issues, ranging from terrorism to economic collapse, the militarisation of governance has introduced new layers of authoritarianism, rights violations, and policy paralysis. MacLachlan (2015) and Bak (2020) demonstrate how the criminalisation of the state and the fragmentation of authority have created an environment where neither civilian nor military regimes can restore legitimacy or stability. The result is a political order characterised by cyclical transitions between weak democracies and repressive military juntas, without addressing the socio-economic and political grievances at the heart of Mali's instability.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theory of praetorianism, Samuel P. Huntington (1968). Huntington's theory of praetorianism, introduced in his seminal work "Political Order in Changing Societies (1968)," offers a

foundational framework for understanding political instability in developing nations. Huntington posits that rapid social mobilization and economic development, when not matched by the institutionalization of political organizations, result in disorder and authoritarianism. Central to this theory is the notion that in praetorian societies, where institutions are weak or underdeveloped, social forces such as the military, religious groups, and economic elites directly intervene in politics, bypassing formal channels of political mediation (Huntington, 1968).

Unlike in stable societies where interest articulation is filtered through robust institutions, praetorian systems are characterized by direct, often violent, competition for power, as various groups seek to influence state decisions without restraint (Huntington, 1968). Huntington argues that such imbalance between political participation and institutional capacity is a principal cause of political decay, especially in post-colonial states that have undergone rapid modernization without corresponding institutional consolidation.

Further, Huntington's theory of praetorianism aptly captures the volatility of transitional societies, particularly in the Global South during the Cold War period, where military coups and elite-driven governance were prevalent. Scholars such as Linz and Stepan (1996) have extended Huntington's insights by emphasizing the significance of institutional strength in democratic consolidation. However, Huntington's theory has been critiqued for legitimizing authoritarianism under the guise

of "order," thus privileging stability over democratic participation (Mahoney, 2001). Despite this criticism, the theory of praetorianism remains a valuable analytical lens in examining military interventions in various African democracies in recent times.

Huntington's theory of praetorianism serves as a useful lens to understand the socio-political and economic conditions underlying democratic breakdown and military ascendancy in Mali. According to Huntington (1968), when rapid social mobilization outpaces the development of strong political institutions, societies become susceptible to instability and authoritarian interventions. In the Malian context, persistent economic hardship, widespread corruption, weak democratic institutions, and the inability of civilian governments to address insecurity, particularly in the northern and central regions, have undermined state legitimacy and governance capacity. These conditions mirror Huntington's concept of a praetorian system, where institutional weakness allows non-political actors, especially the military, to assume political authority in the name of restoring order. The successive coups in Mali since 2012, culminating in the 2020 and 2021 military takeovers, exemplify how the imbalance between political participation and institutional strength fosters a political vacuum that the armed forces exploit.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing the documentary method of data collection and textual analysis as its primary methodological tools. The documentary method enables a systematic collection and interpretation of secondary

data sourced from government reports, policy documents, international organization assessments, scholarly publications, media archives, and NGO briefings. These documents are critically selected based on their relevance, credibility, and temporal proximity to key political developments in Mali, particularly from the 2012 coup to the most recent transitions. Textual analysis is applied to interpret the discursive patterns, power narratives, and institutional justifications that underpin the legitimization of military interventions and the erosion of democratic institutions.

Discussion

Mali's Democratic Journey and Military Interventions

Mali's post-independence political trajectory has been deeply entangled with recurring military interventions that have alternately disrupted and redefined the country's democratic aspirations. Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Mali has experienced five military coups – 1968, 1991, 2012, 2020, and 2021, each shaped by complex structural, socio-political, and economic factors. These military takeovers, while often initiated under the banner of people-oriented reforms, have paradoxically both enabled and obstructed the democratic development of the Malian state (Adetuyi, 2021).

The first military coup in Mali occurred on 19 November 1968, led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who ousted President Modibo Keita and subsequently established a military dictatorship. Traoré's reign, lasting until 26 March 1991, was marked by significant

repression, economic stagnation, and the institutionalisation of a one-party state through the creation of the Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM) in the late 1970s (Adetuyi, 2021). This period saw widespread human rights violations, systemic corruption, and governance failure, which culminated in a crisis by the late 1980s. The final straw was the regime's violent suppression of pro-democracy student protests and persistent economic decline, including a five-year period during which civil servants' salaries went unpaid (Adetuyi, 2021). Consequently, Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré led a second coup in March 1991, responding to a popular uprising against Traoré. Unlike his predecessor, Touré instituted a transitional government of military and civilian actors, leading to democratic elections in 1992 and the peaceful transfer of power to President Alpha Oumar Konaré (Adetuyi, 2021).

Between 1992 and 2012, Mali experienced two decades of democratic governance. Konaré served two constitutional terms (1992–1997; 1997–2002) and was succeeded by Amadou Toumani Touré, the same figure who led the 1991 coup, now returning as a civilian leader (Adetuyi, 2021). Touré's presidency (2002–2007; 2007–2012) was marked by Mali's increased integration into international democratic and development frameworks. Nevertheless, beneath the surface of electoral democracy, institutional fragility persisted. These included state neglect of peripheral regions, especially the north where armed violence was on the increase, systemic corruption, and an over-reliance on foreign aid that failed to build resilient governance structures (Adetuyi,

2021). The 2012 coup dramatically revealed these weaknesses.

The 2012 military coup, executed on 22 March by Captain Amadou Sanogo and junior military officers, was catalysed by the resurgence of the Tuareg rebellion in the north. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), strengthened by returning mercenaries from Libya with heavy weaponry, launched a successful offensive that exposed the Malian army's ill-preparedness. The rebellion quickly became complicated by the involvement of Islamist groups such as Ansar Dine, AQIM, and MUJAO, which supplanted the MNLA's secular aspirations with a radical Islamist agenda (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015). Sanogo's mutiny stemmed from soldiers' frustration with President Touré's failure to support troops and manage the rebellion. The coup upended Mali's democratic image and accentuated deep-rooted ethnic, regional, and political divisions (Fornof & Cole, 2020). Notably, it also disrupted national elections originally scheduled for April 2012 and set off a prolonged period of insecurity.

In the aftermath, presidential elections were eventually held in July and August 2013, with Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) emerging victorious after his opponent conceded in the runoff (BBC, 2013). IBK's administration began with promises of restoring national unity and security, especially in the north. However, his tenure was marred by worsening violence, unfulfilled economic promises, and widespread allegations of corruption. During his 2018 re-election, the opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé was abducted, casting further doubt on electoral

integrity (Puig, 2020). Also, the government's failure to implement the 2015 Algiers Peace Accord and its increasing detachment from civil society fuelled disillusionment.

This mounting discontent exploded in 2020 with mass protests orchestrated by the June 5 Movement–Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), an alliance of opposition politicians, civil society organisations, and religious leaders including Imam Mahmoud Dicko. The immediate trigger was the controversial March 2020 legislative elections, characterised by a historically low voter turnout of just 7.5 percent, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, insecurity, and the kidnapping of opposition leader Cissé. Public anger deepened when the Constitutional Court annulled election results in favour of IBK's party (Fornof & Cole, 2020). Government attempts to suppress protests resulted in the deaths of 11 demonstrators. Despite a series of concessions, including a reshuffled judiciary and promises of a coalition government, the protests persisted until 18 August 2020, when soldiers led by Colonel Assimi Goïta arrested IBK and declared a coup (Al Jazeera, 2020; Puig, 2020).

Public reception of the 2020 coup was largely positive, reflective of widespread frustration with democratic institutions perceived as corrupt and ineffectual. Afrobarometer survey data collected in early 2020 revealed that while 75% of Malians expressed a preference for democracy, they simultaneously demonstrated higher trust in the military and traditional authorities than in elected officials (Coulibaly, Logan,

&Gyimah-Boadi, 2020). Goïta's junta installed Bah Ndaw, a retired colonel, as interim president and promised elections within 18 months. However, tensions soon surfaced. On 24 May 2021, Ndaw removed several military figures from the cabinet, prompting Goïta to stage another coup that led to the detention of Bah Ndaw and assume the presidency, citing sabotage of the transition process (Lawal, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2021).

Goïta's self-declared leadership extended military rule beyond the initial 18-month transition. Originally set for February 2022, elections were postponed to 2026, citing the need for further national consultations. Amid mounting international pressure, including sanctions from ECOWAS and condemnation from civil society, the junta later proposed a new 24-month timeline, aiming for elections in 2027 (Afrobarometer, 2021; Akinola&Makombe, 2024). The continual deferral of elections has raised concerns over democratic backsliding and the militarisation of governance.

Mali's democratic trajectory thus reveals a persistent cycle of civilian rule interrupted by military interventions, often justified by public dissatisfaction with governance failures. The coups of 1991, 2012, 2020, and 2021, each began with popular support and promises of reform, yet their outcomes varied significantly. The 1991 coup led to genuine democratisation, while those of 2012, 2020, and 2021 exposed the fragility of Mali's political institutions. Though democracy remains a normative ideal among Malians, its actual practice has been undermined by elite

failures, persistent insecurity, and the militarisation of political solutions.

Therefore, Mali's journey from military dictatorship to multiparty democracy and back to military rule reflects the paradox of democratic aspirations in weak states. The repeated military coups highlight systemic vulnerabilities, ineffective governance, regional disparities, corruption, and external shocks. While each intervention has been rationalised by the failures of civilian regimes, military solutions have rarely addressed root causes.

The Fragility of Democracy in Mali and the Second Wave of Military Coups

Democratic erosion and the entrenchment of military power in Mali can be attributed to the interplay between internal and external factors. Rising insecurity, a deteriorating economy, and pervasive poverty have collectively undermined state legitimacy, fueling widespread public discontent. This disillusionment is further exacerbated by perceived failures of ECOWAS, the double standards of France's foreign policy, and the instrumentalization of international security interventions. Together, these elements serve not merely as symptoms but as structural indicators of democratic breakdown, facilitating the military's seizure of political authority through coups.

• Rising Insecurity

Once heralded as a model of democracy in West Africa, Mali has undergone repeated shocks that have drastically undermined democratic governance and facilitated the

recurrence of military interventions in national politics. Central to this deterioration has been the government's failure to effectively manage a long-standing insurgency in the north of the country, revealing not only institutional weaknesses but also the corrosive impact of radicalisation and organised violence on state legitimacy.

The onset of Mali's contemporary insecurity crisis can be traced back to the 2012 Tuareg rebellion, launched on 17 January by the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA). The rebellion quickly escalated when it was hijacked by jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, and the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO), along with Arab militias (Maroonian, 2012). These actors expelled the Malian army from the north, precipitating a constitutional crisis that culminated in a coup d'état on 22 March 2012, deposing President Amadou Toumani Touré (International Crisis Group, 2012). These twin events did not only fragment the country's territorial integrity but also exposed the state's profound incapacity to project authority and protect its citizenry, core functions of any democratic regime.

The impact of the 2012 rebellion and subsequent jihadist occupation of the north has had long-term destabilising consequences. According to Thurston (2024), the rebellion catalysed a cycle of insecurity and instability that extended beyond the north into central and eastern regions such as Mopti, Ségou, and Ménaka. This spatial diffusion of conflict has entrenched violence as a persistent feature of daily life for many

Maliens. Data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project reveal that between 2012 and 2023, Mali suffered 20,930 fatalities due to violence, the highest among the Sahelian states, surpassing Burkina Faso, and Niger (Thurston, 2025). Notably, the period 2019–2023 witnessed 15,726 deaths, demonstrating an intensification of insecurity even as democracy remained nominally intact.

Terrorist incidents have likewise surged. Between 1990 and 2014, Mali experienced 199 terrorist attacks, killing 725 people, with 70% of these attacks occurring from 2012 to 2014. Furthermore, 14% of the incidents in that period involved hostage-taking or kidnappings (Rivinius, 2015). The pattern persisted in subsequent years: the first half of 2015 alone saw 77 attacks resulting in 154 deaths. The persistent nature of such violence has not only exacerbated public disillusionment with democratic institutions but also created a political climate ripe for military intervention, under the pretext of restoring order and security.

The human costs of this insecurity are staggering. By August 2012, over 595,000 people had fled their homes (OCHA, 2013; Haysom, 2014). Displacement intensified with time; from 35,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in December 2017, the number soared to 126,000 by the end of 2018 (The Norwegian Refugee Council, 2019). In 2019 alone, over 87,000 new displacements were recorded. By October 2022, IDPs exceeded 440,000, increasing to nearly 355,000 by April 2024 (ACAPS, 2024). These displacements were driven by inter-communal conflict, clashes between non-

state armed groups (NSAGs), and operations by the Malian Armed Forces (ACAPS, 2024). Such demographic upheaval signifies more than humanitarian distress; it represents a crisis of state capacity, further delegitimising the democratic state's claim to authority and protection.

This crisis in governance was further compounded by fluctuating levels of violence under different regimes. Notably, under the military junta that took power in 2020, there was a temporary decrease in violence. Fatalities dropped from 2,829 in 2020 to 1,903 in 2021, a 33% reduction (Thurston, 2025). However, this lull was short-lived, as violence surged again to 4,848 deaths in 2022, before marginally declining to 4,285 in 2023. This volatility in security reflects the limited ability of both democratic and military governments to provide stability, revealing an entrenched structural crisis that undermines all forms of governance.

The deeper issue lies in how protracted conflict has reshaped political and social dynamics within Mali. As noted by the Institute for Peace and Security Studies (2019), Mali's traditionally diverse and tolerant society has become increasingly vulnerable to radical ideological influences. Jihadist groups have capitalised on local grievances, marginalisation, economic underdevelopment, and weak governance, to recruit and mobilise. This ideological penetration not only militarises society but also undermines the civic norms essential for democratic governance. It thus perpetuates a vicious cycle, where insecurity weakens democracy, and weakened democracy, in turn, fails to contain insecurity.

Furthermore, the human repercussions are dire. As of February 2024, over 7.1 million Malians required humanitarian assistance, including nearly 3.9 million children (ACAPS, 2024). The inability of successive governments to provide basic services amidst conflict further erodes state legitimacy. Such structural deprivation delegitimises democratic institutions and increases susceptibility to authoritarian alternatives, reinforcing a "coup trap" where militaries repeatedly intervene to fill vacuums of authority.

Thus, the rising insecurity in Mali is both a symptom and a cause of democratic breakdown. From the 2012 rebellion to the more recent escalations in violence and displacement, the Malian state has faced systemic challenges in maintaining order, protecting citizens, and upholding the social contract. These failures culminated in two military coups within a span of nine months. The Malian case starkly illustrates how insecurity undermines democratic consolidation, erodes public trust, and normalises military intervention in politics.

- Worsening Economy and Rising Poverty**

The deterioration of Mali's democratic experiment is a complex crisis, driven not solely by political ambition or military opportunism but by deep-rooted socio-economic decay. At the heart of Mali's fragility is a failing economy, marked by rising poverty, an incapacitated state, and a loss of public confidence in democratic governance. The Malian economy has long been vulnerable, but its post-2012 trajectory marks a distinct phase of structural

deterioration. According to the World Bank (2022), the conflict in Mali, particularly in the northern region led to economic losses amounting to 23 percent of the country's GDP between 2012 and 2018, largely due to a collapse in investor confidence and the loss of private investment estimated at US\$5.3 billion, including US\$3.2 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). The sectors most adversely affected include telecommunications, trade, public services, and agriculture (World Bank, 2012). This economic regression represents not merely a cyclical downturn but a systemic breakdown that has crippled the state's capacity to deliver basic services, deepening the public's disenchantment with democratic governance.

Mali is the fifth most populous country in West Africa, with a population rising from 9.2 million in 1990 to 23.8 million in 2023 and projected to reach 41.5 million by 2043 (Aikins, 2024). The population structure is heavily skewed towards youth, with 46.2 percent under the age of 15 and over 51 percent of working age (Aikins, 2024). This demographic trend, while potentially a development dividend, has instead become a liability given the absence of adequate economic opportunities. Unemployment, underemployment, and widespread poverty have turned a youthful population into a disenfranchised and volatile force (Aikins, 2024).

Despite periods of modest growth, poverty has remained structurally entrenched. Between 2001 and 2011, the poverty rate declined from 55.6% to 47.7%, with two-thirds of this decline attributed to economic growth and the remaining one-third to a

reduction in inequality (Dembele, 2020). However, due to high population growth, the absolute number of people living in poverty increased from 5.7 million to 6.4 million during the same period. While the poverty rate continued to decline marginally between 2011 and 2017, reaching 44.9%, the economic gains were insufficient to arrest the widening socio-economic exclusion (Dembele, 2020). This trend has worsened in the context of recent crises. According to the World Bank (2022), the poverty rate increased from 42.5% in 2019 to 44.4% in 2021, pushing an additional 375,000 Malians into extreme poverty due to income losses, declining remittances, and rising inflation. By 2022, poverty incidence had reached 45.5%, only slightly declining to 45.3% in 2023, a figure still unacceptably high in a resource-scarce country with mounting fiscal challenges (African Development Bank, 2024; Doumbia&Batana, 2024).

The decline in living standards has been compounded by alarming human development indicators. Mali currently ranks 188th out of 193 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index (World Food Programme, 2024). In 2023, 3.4 million Malians, or 14.2% of the population, lived on less than US\$2.15 a day, a figure well below the African low-income average of 41.5% (Aikins, 2024). While this might suggest some relative progress, projections indicate that by 2030, 10.9% of Malians, around 3.2 million, will still be in extreme poverty, delaying the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 1 until 2051 (Aikins, 2024). Food insecurity, a core indicator of human vulnerability, remains high, with approximately 1.26 million Malians food

insecure in 2023, although this figure represents a 30% reduction from 2022 levels (UNICEF, 2023). Such multidimensional poverty entrenches a sense of despair, particularly among youth, making them susceptible to radicalisation and military appeals to restore national order.

The failure of democratic governance is also evident in Mali's abysmal public service delivery. As of January 2023, nearly 3.2 million Malians lacked access to clean water, and by May 2024, around 11.2 million, nearly 59% of the population, lacked proper sanitation facilities. The education system is in freefall, with over 1,788 schools closed across the country as of April 2024, affecting over 536,000 students and 10,700 teachers (ACAPS, 2024). The Mopti region alone accounts for 828 closed schools (ACAPS, 2024). For children who remain in school, the psychological trauma from witnessing violence impedes learning. These conditions not only violate fundamental rights but also signify the disintegration of the state's capacity to fulfil its constitutional obligations, eroding faith in democratic institutions and enabling the military to position itself as the nation's saviour.

- **Growing Discontent toward International Security Intervention and Failures of ECOWAS**

Central to the collapse of democracy in Mali was growing discontent with France's postcolonial security involvement, the failed stabilisation efforts of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the structural weakness of the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS). The instability in northern Mali in the post 2012-coup, prompted interim authorities to invite international assistance, setting the stage for French military intervention and UN peacekeeping deployments.

France's Operation Serval, launched in January 2013, initially garnered public support for its role in halting jihadist advances on Bamako. However, as noted by Chafer, Bertrand, and Stoddard (2024), the French mission evolved into Operation Barkhane, a broader counterinsurgency effort across the Sahel, which failed to achieve its stated objectives. Instead of restoring security, it fuelled perceptions of neo-colonialism. As violence escalated, popular trust in France eroded. The public questioned how a former colonial power with significant military capabilities could fail so dismally in defeating local insurgents. This failure spawned conspiracy theories and mass disillusionment with the French presence, amplified by social media discourse (Chafer, Bertrand, & Stoddard, 2024). The turning point came after Mali's second coup in August 2020, followed by another in May 2021. The new junta, led by Colonel AssimiGoïta, began distancing itself from Western allies, accusing France of manipulation and ineffectiveness.

The deterioration of international legitimacy further deepened with the failed promises of MINUSMA. Established by Security Council Resolution 2100 on 25 April 2013, the mission was mandated to support transitional authorities and stabilise Mali (United Nations, 2025). Yet, despite maintaining a force of around 15,000 personnel for over a

decade, MINUSMA achieved little in halting jihadist violence or supporting democratic recovery. Al Jazeera (2023) reported that approximately 180 UN peacekeepers were killed, making it one of the deadliest UN missions. These losses, coupled with growing anti-French sentiment, created a toxic narrative portraying the UN as an appendage of France's postcolonial ambitions (Sauter, 2024). In June 2023, the military-led Government of Mali formally withdrew consent for the presence of UN peacekeepers, symbolising a decisive break from the international order and a turn towards isolationism and authoritarian consolidation.

Furthermore, ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) failed to offer a meaningful diplomatic alternative. Instead of addressing the legitimate grievances that triggered military interventions, ECOWAS imposed sweeping sanctions aimed at reinstating IBK's government. IBK's presidency had long been marred by allegations of corruption, ineffective leadership, and detachment from Mali's rural and marginalised populations. His re-election in 2018 was heavily contested, and by 2020, mass protests erupted in Bamako, driven by a coalition of civil society groups under the M5-RFP movement. Despite these clear indicators of a democratic legitimacy crisis, ECOWAS's primary concern was preserving constitutional continuity, even if it meant supporting an ineffective regime (Kane, 2019; Cabot, 2022).

The imposition of ECOWAS sanctions in January 2022, after the junta delayed proposed elections, was met with widespread public opposition. These measures included

border closures, trade embargoes, and asset freezes at the Central Bank of West African States. France and the European Union (EU) quickly endorsed these sanctions, aligning with ECOWAS's punitive strategy (Oxfam, 2022). Air France suspended flights, and France used its presidency of the EU Council to pressure European partners to adopt a hardline stance. The United Nations also echoed this call for an "acceptable election timeline" (Cabot, 2022). However, this externally driven approach ignored local realities and further alienated Mali's population, strengthening support for the military government.

The persistence of international pressure, coupled with local resentment, pushed Mali's junta into a new geopolitical alignment. By March 2022, the Malian junta withdrew the country from military pacts it entered with France and other European partners (Deutsche Welle, 2022). This saw France and other Western allies withdraw their troops from the country. In June 2023, the Government of Mali formally withdrew its consent for the United Nations peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, effectively ending the mission established by Security Council Resolution 2100 on 25 April 2013. The mission, which had deployed 15,000 troops and police personnel over a decade and lost 180 members to hostilities, failed to stabilise the country or create viable democratic institutions (United Nations, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2023). In the face of distrust of Western intentions, the junta aligned itself with Moscow, presenting Wagner as a more effective alternative to French and UN forces (Sauter, 2024). Also, in January 2025, Mali, along side Burkina Faso and Niger officially

withdrew their membership of the West African regional bloc ECOWAS and formed the alliance of Sahel States (Obiezu, 2025). The junta's justification for these withdrawals rested on accusations that the UN, France, and ECOWAS were complicit in postcolonial domination and domestic destabilization of Mali.

- **France's Economic Interests and Policy Double Standards**

France's entrenched economic interests in Mali have played a pivotal role in shaping the West African nation's turbulent political trajectory, particularly in contributing to the breakdown of democracy and the resurgence of military coups since 2012. Mali, a resource-rich country endowed with gold, phosphate, kaolin, bauxite, iron, and uranium, holds strategic significance for France's energy security, especially as two-thirds of France's electricity is generated from nuclear power reliant on uranium (Fariaty, 2022). This dependency has ensured a persistent French presence in Malian affairs under the guise of counterterrorism and state-building. Yet, the veneer of stability masks a deeper reality where foreign intervention is interwoven with extractive motives, leading to widespread discontent and eroding trust in democratic processes.

The initial coup of March 2012, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, occurred against the backdrop of France's increasing entrenchment in Mali's domestic affairs. While framed by its proponents as a response to government ineffectiveness in dealing with the Tuareg rebellion and Islamist insurgencies in the north, the deeper malaise stemmed from public frustration with French

influence and the perception that national sovereignty was being compromised for foreign benefit (Puig, 2020). These frustrations intensified under President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who was widely viewed as a proxy of French interests. His administration was marked by failure to provide security, widespread corruption, and perceived collusion with French actors. As Puig (2020) explains, Keïta symbolised the dysfunction of a postcolonial state overwhelmed by foreign interference and elite complicity, culminating in the August 2020 coup. France's economic interests, most notably uranium and gold, thus did not just draw it into Mali, but ensured the endurance of an unequal political order, with Keïta serving as a visible casualty of its failure.

Also, France's use of foreign aid and military intervention to secure its strategic position further undermined Mali's democratic institutions. As Ahsan (2023) notes, French policy in the Sahel has long blended economic interests with security rhetoric, often supporting compliant regimes and using aid to maintain regional hegemony. This dynamic was evident in the French-led Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014, which aimed to combat jihadist groups but gradually became a symbol of foreign overreach. The operation's failure, as argued by Baand Diallo (2022), stemmed from France's prioritisation of geostrategic interests over local legitimacy. France's rigid opposition to negotiations with armed groups constrained the Malian government's policy space, alienating both state actors and the broader population. The public's increasing rejection of Operation Barkhane revealed a critical rupture between foreign-imposed

security frameworks and the demands of democratic self-determination (Ba & Diallo, 2022).

Policy inconsistencies and overt double standards in France's regional engagement further deepened the perception of democratic hypocrisy. In 2019, French forces aided Chadian leader Idriss Déby's crackdown on rebels by bombing convoys in northern Chad, an overt support for authoritarian consolidation (Chafer, Bertrand, & Stoddard, 2024). Following Déby's death in 2021, France swiftly legitimised the unconstitutional succession of his son, General Mahamat Idriss Déby. By contrast, France harshly criticised Mali's junta following the August 2020 coup and again after the May 2021 putsch that ousted transitional leaders (Chafer, Bertrand, & Stoddard, 2024). This contradiction, supporting authoritarian stability in Chad while condemning similar moves in Mali, exposed France's selective application of democratic norms. For many Malians, such duplicity underscored that democracy promotion was secondary to the maintenance of French geopolitical leverage in West Africa. The resulting erosion of faith in electoral democracy facilitated military interventions as an increasingly legitimate alternative.

The culmination of economic exploitation, compromised sovereignty, and foreign hypocrisy, fostered a political environment ripe for repeated coups. The May 2021 military coup, which followed the August 2020 seizure of power, was partially justified on grounds of national resistance against French manipulation and the ineffectiveness

of Western-backed transitional arrangements (Powell, 2022). By consistently aligning with elite actors like Keïta, and marginalising alternative political pathways including negotiated peace processes, France became complicit in Mali's democratic disintegration. As Fariaty (2022) emphasises, the reality of France's uranium dependence meant that its military and political investments in Mali were always more about preserving its energy infrastructure than stabilising Mali. Thus, France's dual role as both peacekeeper and economic stakeholder introduced systemic contradictions into Malian governance, leaving democracy weakened and military intervention normalised.

Conclusion

Mali's democratic breakdown and the ascendancy of military rule represents a complex entanglement of structural, institutional, and geopolitical dynamics that have persistently undermined the country's democratic aspirations. Mali's political trajectory illustrates the fragility of democratic consolidation in a context of chronic insecurity, economic malaise, and weak state capacity. The repeated military interventions, often framed as corrective measures, are less an interruption of democratic norms than a reflection of their superficial institutionalisation. Each coup has capitalised on popular disenchantment with corrupt civilian leadership and unresponsive governance, but ultimately entrenched the military as a political actor, thereby

reproducing the very conditions that render democracy untenable. The pattern underscores the paradox of procedural democracy devoid of substantive legitimacy, where elections are held without meaningful representation, and democratic institutions operate in a context devoid of citizen trust and state authority.

Crucially, Mali's crisis cannot be understood in isolation from its geopolitical entanglements. The failures of international and regional actors, most notably France, MINUSMA, and ECOWAS, have not only failed to arrest Mali's democratic decay but have inadvertently legitimised military rule. The securitisation of international engagement, double standards in the promotion of democratic norms, and the prioritisation of strategic interests over democratic accountability have deepened local perceptions of foreign interference and neo-imperialism. In this context, the military's seizure of power is not merely a domestic phenomenon but a symptom of a broader crisis in the liberal international order's approach to postcolonial governance. Mali's democratic collapse thus represents more than a national failure; it is a cautionary tale of how weak state institutions, external manipulation, and socio-economic despair can converge to produce an enduring "coup trap" in which military ascendancy becomes the default mechanism of political change.

Recommendations

The transitional military authority in Mali, in collaboration with civil society and political stakeholders, should establish a transparent

and inclusive national dialogue to draft a new constitutional framework that reflects local grievances and aspirations. This process must be nationally owned and facilitated by an independent body with technical support from the African Union, ensuring credibility and buy-in across ethnic, regional, and political divides.

The Malian government, supported by regional partners such as the African Development Bank and ECOWAS, must prioritize decentralised investment in public services, particularly education, healthcare, and rural infrastructure, in conflict-prone areas. Rebuilding trust requires visibly improving state presence beyond Bamako, coupled with the professionalisation and community oversight of security forces.

ECOWAS, the United Nations, and other global actors should shift from punitive diplomacy to engagement rooted in democratic legitimacy and local ownership, focusing on strengthening grassroots democratic institutions and conflict mediation mechanisms. A permanent joint mechanism for monitoring governance, human rights, and economic development should be co-created with Malian civil society to avoid future legitimacy crises.

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