



THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND THE VOLATILITY OF POLITICS IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION

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Abstract

While other continents are strategically positioning themselves to harness the advantages of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) that is sweeping globally, Africa appears to be lacking in readiness. Unprepared due to the lack of fundamental elements for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, as a stable governance and political structure are notably absent in a context where coup d'états have become commonplace. This pertains specifically to three nations within the ECOWAS region: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. One might contend that these issues are unique to these nations and should not be imposed upon the endeavours of other countries in their pursuit of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This study challenges the notion that such a perspective is accurate. This phenomenon arises from the intricate interconnections these nations share in trade and commerce, to the extent that neighbouring countries experience consequential effects. Furthermore, the recent surge of coups has prompted various African nations to reevaluate and reorganise their military structures to preempt the potential occurrence of similar upheavals. In light of this, the pivotal inquiry arises: given the initiatives aimed at military standardisation and the objectives to avert the descent into military governance, are African nations genuinely prepared to harness the potential advantages of the Fourth Industrial Revolution?

Keywords: 4IR, Coup d'états, Democracy, Development, Contemporary African political system

Introduction

Only a limited number of countries in Africa have been fortunate enough to maintain their democratically elected governments without experiencing the upheaval of coups d'état. In their 1982 discourse, Thomas Johnson, Robert Slater, and Pat McGowan elucidate that from 1960 to 1982, nations in sub-Saharan Africa encountered 52 successful military coups, 56 attempted coups, and an additional 102 documented plots (refer to Johnson et al 1982). The report indicates that "38 of the 45 countries (84%) experienced some form of military intervention from the start of 1960 to the conclusion of 1982" (Johnson et al 1982, 622). Since 1982, it is evident that the statistics concerning coups on the continent have not diminished. This observation holds particularly true for the most recent developments on the continent: Gabon, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. On January 28, 2024, these nations declared their intention to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Wahab 2024).



At first glance, one might assume that these landlocked counties lack significant political and economic ramifications, not only for West Africa but for the African continent as a whole. The argument may encompass the perspective that should these countries choose to withdraw from ECOWAS and establish a bloc, they might inadvertently consign themselves to a state of isolation within the realm of political economy. Upon careful consideration, it is essential to highlight that the repercussions stemming from ECOWAS present at least three significant implications for both the region and the continent in 2024. The departure of these nations from ECOWAS indicates significant economic and security dilemmas for the region. Furthermore, the triumph of these coups is poised to incite or cultivate an increase in the occurrences or manifestations of coups in various nations. This is particularly evident in the instances of Cameroon and Rwanda, which have had to reorganise their military structures to prevent a situation similar to that of Gabon (Daily Trust, 2023).

This is against the backdrop of their conviction that ECOWAS has failed to effectively confront the challenges posed by insurgents and activities related to terrorism in the region. The justifications presented now diverge from those initially offered for the engagement in the coups. Naturally, each individual articulated their rationale for the dismantling of the preceding political administrations. In addition to the pervasive corruption and the dictatorial regimes where familial ties govern the nation's affairs (as seen in Gabon), the rationale for dismantling the existing political structure is not primarily centred on safeguarding democracy. Rather, it emphasises the pursuit of genuine freedom and self-determination, liberated from French influence. If this were incorrect, the concept of “French colonial tax” would not have emerged in the discourse to begin with.

Evidence suggests that France exerts economic dominance over fourteen African nations through the imposition of a colonial tax, prompting many of these countries to explore avenues for disengagement from the West African CFA union (Hundeyin 2019). The report reveals that these nations are remitting approximately five hundred billion dollars each year to the French treasury as a form of colonial debt subsequent to their independence. When one considers the historical context of pillaging and exploitation that defined the colonial era, which significantly contributed to the continent's underdevelopment, the rationale for dismantling governments that remain subservient to France appears to hold merit. While this is not intended to condone the coups in Africa, it is essential to recognise that these actions serve as mechanisms for asserting self-determination and achieving total freedom (Rodney 1972). Nonetheless, the pivotal inquiry to contemplate at this moment is: What implications do all of these hold for the political terrain of the continent in 2024? This is the paramount inquiry that the current study grapples with.

To address the aforementioned research question, the initial step is to gain a succinct understanding of the motivations behind the overthrow of the previous administrations in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Therefore, this analysis focuses on the primary political frameworks and characteristics of the administrations that provided a rationale for the actions of the coup leaders. Subsequently, the focus transitions to the implications of the coups in these nations on both the regional (ECOWAS) and continental stages. The emphasis here is to contemplate the ramifications that this 'wind of coup' signifies for the nation as a whole. This research in the final



section examines whether the evaluation of democratic gains or self-determination serves as the most appropriate framework for analysing the exploration of coup options by these nations.

Justifications for the Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso Coups

This section evaluates the circumstances in each of these nations to comprehend the existing status quo that ostensibly warranted a coup. Beginning with Mali, it is essential to note that the coup in Mali was based on specific factors that can be addressed as a result of ineffective democratic governance.

In 1991, the people of Mali adopted a non-violent strategy to challenge the prevailing party system in the country, a movement subsequently supported by the Malian military under the leadership of then-Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré. This action led to the arrest of the president and the suspension of the constitution for two months, facilitating the introduction of a multi-party system, which also contributed to the peaceful conflict resolution in the northern regions (Emily & Emily 2020).

Furthermore, preceding the coup on 18th August 2020, the people of Mali, in conjunction with the military, engaged in a protracted period of peaceful protest lasting three months, which ultimately did not yield significant political results. This could be considered as one of the underlying reasons for the coup. The leaders of the coup assert that their 'action' was a response to the government's inefficacy and corruption in managing the conflict in the northern and central regions of the country (Emily & Emily 2020). An intriguing occurrence relates to the populace's perception that Keita's administration represents a paradigm of failure, characterised by prevalent instances of corruption and a backdrop of political instability (Ena & Joseph, 2021). The government's inability to uphold democratic principles, address conflicts, and supply essential services to its citizens incited widespread discontent, ultimately leading to the coup.

In accordance with the preceding discussion, the research conducted by Emily & Emily (2020) reveals certain inconsistencies within the Malian democratic government, which facilitated the alignment of discontented Malians with a coalition of entities, including the June 5 Movement and a network of social organisations, alongside the influence exerted by supporters of Imam Mahmoud Dicko, the former leader of Mali's high Islamic Council. The pursuit of genuine democracy by the people of Mali has been undermined, a fact that the coup leaders cite as a rationale for their intervention.

Niger, conversely, is a landlocked nation situated in a region historically linked to political instability and insecurity. The coup in Niger occurred on July 26, 2023, resulting in General Abdourahamane Tchiani proclaiming himself as the new head of state (Ajala 2023; Yabi 2023). At this point, it is important to note that preceding this successful coup, there was an unsuccessful attempt that took place forty-eight hours after the 2021 Niger election, which proclaimed Bazoum as the president-elect. However, the presidential military guards successfully thwarted this coup (Ajala 2023). It is evident that their return in 2023 was a requisite for achieving success.



Certainly, akin to the Mali coup, the Niger coup possesses its own set of justifications. France has been identified as the European nation that has consistently shaped the political landscape of Niger (Yabi, 2023). The motivations for their overthrow, which they believe serve the interests of the citizens of Niger, include the increase in insecurity alongside the economic downturn (Ajala 2023). The situation in Niger can be succinctly characterised as a reaction to ineffective governance and the ongoing military involvement of France in the region. The presence of French and United States military forces in the country has been regarded as detrimental to its stability and self-determination. Similar to Mali, it is important to note that another rationale presented by the coup leaders is that Niger has not succeeded in delivering the benefits of democratic governance to its populace (Ajala, 2023). The state was identified as lacking in the provision of adequate health care facilities, access to pipe-borne water, and essential infrastructure, among other critical needs. In addition to the aforementioned points, the possibility of resource exploitation remains a consideration.

Ajala (2023) highlights the exploitation of Niger's uranium resources by France, noting that this has resulted in minimal benefits for Niger's economy, where poverty remains a pervasive issue. Ultimately, one might ponder whether the triumph of this coup in Niger could have laid the groundwork for a transition in allegiance from France to Russia, akin to the situations observed in Mali and Burkina Faso, which we shall now examine.

In January 2022, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba executed a coup d'état against the administration of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. He rationalises the coup as an essential measure in light of the government's failure to effectively address the jihadist insurgency in Burkina Faso, which began in 2019. Another rationale for the coup, as articulated by Damiba, pertains to the pervasive influence of France in nearly all facets of Burkina Faso's political economy, with the Kaboré administration being viewed as under French control (Aljazeera News, 2022). Despite the support for this overthrow, the Burkinabe military executed a counter-coup on September 30, 2022, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Traoré articulates his rationale for the counter-coup by asserting that Damiba failed to effectively address the Islamic insurgency and various non-governmental entities within the country, resulting in a significant loss of 40% of the nation's territory to non-state actors (Ndiag & Mimault 2022; Bado 2022). Moreover, it was indicated that Damiba did not comply with military recommendations and guidance, instead of persistently clinging to ineffective strategies utilised by the preceding administration. Ultimately, this, along with the preceding justifications, constituted the basis for the coup in September, as the nation's military endured significant losses at the hands of insurgents (Ndiag & Mimault 2022).

In his evaluation of the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina, Lawal (2024) posits that it is debatable how France, which does not inherently possess gold as a natural resource, has acquired it through its engagements in West Africa. To put it differently, these francophone nations have consistently faced exploitation, yielding no tangible advantages attributable to their national economies. This perspective supports the belief that Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali are actively involved in a struggle for self-determination, emphasising the pressing need to sever ties with French influence over their political and economic systems.



Despite the well-documented reality that these nations are embroiled in a struggle for self-determination and genuine independence from France, it is important to note that domestically, these three countries persistently grapple with insecurity, poverty, and political and economic instability. This tumultuous environment has fostered a propensity for coups aimed at displacing ineffective democratic governments that have not fulfilled the needs of their citizens. The subsequent section will delve into the ramifications of the recent declaration by these three nations from ECOWAS, particularly concerning the political stability of West Africa and the broader African continent.

Coups and Africa's Political Stability in 2024

The occurrences of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have illuminated the profound nature of the political instability in these nations, which is not merely a contemporary phenomenon but rather a persistent challenge that has afflicted them since their political independence in the last century. The recent coups d'état carry significant implications not only for the nations involved but also for their regional organisations and the broader context of Africana as a whole.

The repercussions of the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso carry significant implications for both the African continent and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The situation arises from the fact that the coups erode the legitimacy of ECOWAS, particularly in light of the recent declaration of withdrawal from the regional organisation (Wahab 2024). The 2001 ECOWAS protocols on democracy and good governance explicitly reject the legitimacy of coup d'états (Edu-Afful 2021). The occurrence of coups in these countries serves as a clear indication of their inability to adhere to the principles established by ECOWAS. Furthermore, despite the appeals from the international community, the African Union, and ECOWAS urging these nations to revert to democratic governance, the evident disregard for such entreaties underscores a lack of respect for these organisations. Their announcements regarding the withdrawal from ECOWAS serve as unequivocal indicators of this lack of consideration (Wahab 2024).

The recent surge of coups d'état in Africa has elicited a measured response both within the continent and internationally. The recent declarations of withdrawal from ECOWAS by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger warrant a thorough examination of the political and economic ramifications these departures entail for both West Africa and the broader African continent. It appears that these nations recognise the strategic benefit of their coalition of non-ECOWAS states within West Africa, as any military action directed at one would implicate the entirety of the group. Nonetheless, in light of the recent military upheavals in Cameroon and Rwanda, two nations situated in Central Africa, it becomes evident that other countries exhibit a greater apprehension towards military coups than towards the fortification of democratic principles. This presents arguments suggesting that ECOWAS lacks the capacity to effectuate a return to democratic governance in these nations. It is certainly possible for a critic to argue that this perspective is limited to Central Africa, while the situations in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger pertain to West Africa. The reaction from these nations—Cameroon and Rwanda—pertains to



the coup in Gabon (Daily Trust 2023). This study posits that, in the near future, one cannot dismiss the possibility of analogous military upheavals or even successful coups occurring not only in other West African nations but also in various regions across the African continent.

Undoubtedly, the recent increase in coups within Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso has significantly undermined democratic advancements, including efforts towards poverty alleviation, electoral participation, and access to quality healthcare, among other political considerations. The ramifications for security and the political economy in West Africa warrant serious attention (Edu-Afful, 2021). The security implications of these two are particularly significant. The success of these coups in various countries creates an opportunity for violent non-state actors, such as Jihadists, to exploit this situation to launch attacks, consequently undermining peace, potential development, and stability in the region and across Africa as a whole (Edu-Afful, 2021). The outcome is that the actions of violent non-state actors may escalate and evoke fear, subsequently influencing the political economy of these nations.

Another conceivable scenario is that, although these Francophone coupists may have been driven by a desire for self-determination and liberation from French colonial taxation, the role of democracy as the most appropriate form of governance will persist in undergoing scrutiny and reassessment. This reassessment is likely to create a division within the ECOWAS region, as the secessionist trio may face stringent economic penalties. The central inquiry is: with Russia now involved, what will be the durability or efficacy of the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and its allies from the global north for these nations? While this intriguing inquiry will be addressed by future developments, it is important to note that the authority and influence of ECOWAS has come under scrutiny.

Regardless of the prevailing circumstances, it is evident that the departure of these three nations or bloc from ECOWAS will adversely affect the organization's revenue streams. This situation is not insurmountable, as the revenue generated by ECOWAS through this avenue is likely to decline due to the significant reduction in contributions from Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to the regional trade quota. Moreover, the departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso could potentially pose significant challenges for regional trade integration, given their crucial roles in trade and flight routes. This situation warrants careful consideration in light of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCTA) and other regional trade dynamics (see Edeh & Abe, 2024). Ultimately, this will undermine the economic integration of Africa, which stands as one of the fundamental purposes for the establishment of ECOWAS from the outset. Between the Consolidation of Democratic Gains and the Quest for Self-Determination for Africa in 2024.

Upon reflecting on the rationales behind the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, along with their repercussions for the stability of the ECOWAS region and the continent at large, this section transitions to examine whether the advancements in democracy outweigh the pursuit of genuine self-determination unencumbered by external influences.

Obviously, it is one matter to be influenced by democratic principles or ideals as a nation; and it is, assuredly a distinctly separate endeavour to ensure that these principles are manifested and



evident in the lives of the populace. Hence, in addition to acknowledging fundamental rights and ensuring access to accountable governance, democracy must also serve to enhance both political and economic advancements (Bisong & Asira 2020). Fundamentally, the core principle of democracy is to address and mitigate infrastructural issues, poverty, social dislocations, elevated unemployment rates, and violent crime (ThankGod 2018). When these issues are adequately tackled, the outcome would be a manifestation of democratic progress.

Although the benefits of democracy include infrastructural development, access to quality healthcare, education, fair elections, and equitable economic opportunities, yet it is crucial to acknowledge that these three nations have come to realize and understand that achieving these goals remains elusive if democracy is constrained (Bisong & Asira 2020) or limited to its dividends. In a pertinent observation, ThankGod (2018) indicates that in numerous African nations, the judiciary, which is expected to function as the ultimate refuge for the ordinary citizen and to administer appropriate penalties for public officials involved in economic offences, has been undermined (Bisong & Asira 2020).

Initially, one might infer that democracy was adopted in Africa during the quest for independence as a means of escaping the adversities of the colonial era characterised by “authoritarianism, political assassinations, military coups and subjugation of individual rights” (Bisong & Asira, 2020). Nonetheless, the historical prevalence of coups across the continent, coupled with the lack of accountability among democratic governments in Africa, raises significant doubts about this ideal.

The focus on self-determination, coupled with the imperative to diminish France's influence over the independence of these nations, serves as a more compelling motivation than the preservation of democratic ideals. The recent coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso present a critical juncture for examining the excessive influence exerted by France on the economic and political landscapes of these nations, as well as other Francophone countries.

The rationale behind the situations in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso is, in part, rooted in the consequences of insecurity that have resulted in the loss of lives and property, including that of the national military forces (Ajala 2023). This arises from the government's inadequacy in implementing appropriate security measures, which are integral to the achievements of democracy. It is important to remember that one of the propositions articulated by John Locke in the Second Treatise is the notion that a government deemed unjust may be subject to rebellion. Regrettably, advocates for the global implementation of democracy remain conspicuously quiet regarding the provision that legitimises rebellion when the populace loses faith in their government and when that government fails to fulfil its commitments to the citizenry (Warburton 1999). It can be posited that the fundamental nature of democracy is rooted in the benefits it distributes and maintains for the populace. When these dividends or democratic gains are not forthcoming or are being withheld, the populace is warranted in questioning the government. The persistent inability to provide a meaningful enhancement may incite insurrection, as evidenced by the recent coups (Edu-Afful, 2021). It appears that coups d'état serve as Africa's mechanism for exercising the right to resist a malfunctioning democratic regime.



In various regions, it is often observed that government officials choose to resign in order to preserve their dignity upon recognising their failure to serve the populace effectively. In the context of Africa, such a change is often sought only in the lead-up to the subsequent electoral year, contingent upon the absence of electoral manipulation and deceit. In the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the 'rebellion' sparked by the coups serves as a clear indication of the inadequacies of democratic governments in confronting the significant accountability deficit that has escalated to a critical and intolerable extent.

Secondly, the francophone countries under examination are being subjected to exploitation by their former colonial powers and various international entities. For example, Niger possesses substantial uranium reserves, ranking as the third largest exporter of uranium to France and the second largest to the European Union (Yabi, 2023). Similarly, Mali is abundant in gold and various precious stones. Nevertheless, the extraction of these minerals and elements has primarily served the interests of France rather than those of the African nations. The recent coups and the choice to withdraw from ECOWAS evidently stem from a pursuit of self-determination and genuine independence, rather than the assertion that democracy has been undermined.

Thirdly, these nations perceive the substantial presence of foreign military personnel and installations within their borders as a potential threat, leading to a generally unfavourable reception. This situation is particularly evident in Niger (Ajala 2023). Despite their significant presence and influence, the military forces of France and the United States have been unable to effectively quell the insurgencies in the region. The assertion that the colonial power's efforts to address the security issues in the region amount to little more than superficial gestures is underscored by the reality that their presence primarily serves the purpose of exploiting natural resources (Ajala 2023).

The pursuit of self-determination and liberation from external influences, alongside the government's inability to uphold democratic achievements or maintain accountability to the populace, serve as justifications for the occurrence of coups. Moreover, their declaration to disengage from ECOWAS and establish an independent bloc carries significant security and economic ramifications for the equilibrium of power in Africa, particularly with the increasingly evident presence of Russia. Although the previous leaders in these three nations were unable to reject external influence that precipitated the coups, the focus on democratic advancements remains a superficial concern, as genuine independence has eluded the populace, with France's presence continually hovering in the background. This clearly reminds one of Walter Rodney's (1972) affirmation concerning how African accomplices participate in the business of subjugating the continent for external benefits. In a worthy passage of his masterpiece, Rodney (1972, 33-4) tenders:

The presence of a group of African sell-outs is part of the definition of underdevelopment. Any diagnosis of underdevelopment in Africa will reveal not just low per capita income and protein deficiencies, but *also the gentlemen who dance in Abidjan, Accra and Kinshasa when music is played in Paris, London and New York. (italicized emphasis mine).*



The narrative surrounding corruption, capital flight, and the embezzlement of African funds—often concealed in nations that profess to aid Africa in combating these very issues—has been characterised by Ofuasia (2022) as a striking example of political hypocrisy. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose that the implications of all these factors for Africa in 2024 can be distilled into the following propositions:

- (1) A growing number of African nations might consider orchestrating coups to dismantle democratic regimes, particularly if their rationales align with those presented by Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali;
- (2) This could lead to a realignment of power dynamics within West Africa. This indicates that the sway of the United States and its allies, including France, will diminish in light of Russia's involvement. A greater number of African nations might express a readiness to participate in and contribute to the expansion of BRICS. Regardless of the circumstances, the impact of Western influence on Africa is poised to diminish.

Conclusion

To date, this research has successfully evaluated the coups occurring in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mali. The justifications for participating in these coups are intricately linked to the failures of democracy and the persistent influence of France in their affairs. In light of this rationale, this study posits that such coups are warranted, as even the principles espoused by John Locke permit insurrection against a democratic regime that has not fulfilled its obligations. It is, nonetheless, regrettable that the recourse to coups has become Africa's method of opposing a faltering democratic governance. It is evident that the coups occurring in these nations will result in a significant realignment of power on the global stage. As we approach 2024, the possibility of additional coups cannot be dismissed, particularly given the underperformance of democratic governments and the lingering influence of former colonial powers in the governance of their erstwhile colonies.

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AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy, Vol. 24. No. 1, 2026

ISSN Print: 1597 – 0779; ISSN Online: 3043- 5269

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Indexed: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

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