



DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND COUP D'ETAT IN WEST AFRICA: A POPPERIAN EXPOSITION

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Abstract

The recurrence of coup d'état in West Africa continues to pose a profound challenge to democratic governance and political stability in the region. While military takeovers are often justified as corrective responses to civilian misrule, corruption, or institutional failure, their normative legitimacy and long-term democratic value remain deeply contested. Using the method of analysis, this paper offers a philosophical examination of coup d'état in West Africa through the lens of Karl Popper's political philosophy, particularly his conception of the open society and democratic governance. Drawing on Popper's critique of historicism, political messianism, and revolutionary social engineering, the paper argues that coups are symptomatic of institutional closure rather than genuine mechanisms of democratic correction. From a Popperian perspective, democracy is valued not for the moral superiority of rulers but for its capacity to remove bad governments through non-violent, institutionalised procedures. The paper finds that the erosion of such corrective mechanisms (manifested in weakened electoral systems, compromised judicial independence, and restricted spaces for political criticism) creates conditions under which military intervention is perceived as a substitute for democratic accountability. However, far from restoring openness, coups further entrench political closure and undermine the principle of institutional correctability central to Popper's open society. The paper concludes by advancing Popperian solutions to democratic fragility in West Africa, emphasizing piecemeal institutional reform, the protection of critical dissent, and the strengthening of constitutional mechanisms as sustainable alternatives to military intervention.

Keywords: Constitutionalism, Coup d'état, Democracy, Governance, Institution, Military, Open Society.

Introduction

The resurgence of coup d'état in West Africa over the past decade has reignited fundamental debates on the nature, resilience, and legitimacy of democratic governance in postcolonial states. Despite the formal adoption of constitutional democracy across much of the region since the late 20th century, military takeovers have reemerged in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and previously The Gambia, challenging assumptions about democratic consolidation in Africa (Williams, 2014). These coups are frequently rationalised by their perpetrators and segments of the populace as corrective interventions aimed at rescuing the state from corruption, authoritarian drift, economic mismanagement, and institutional decay. Yet the recurrence of military intervention raises deeper philosophical questions about whether such actions represent genuine responses to democratic failure or merely reflect a more profound crisis of political



institutions and civic culture. Existing scholarly explanations of coups in West Africa have largely focused on structural and empirical factors, including weak civil-military relations, neopatrimonial governance, economic insecurity, and the legacy of colonial state formation (International Crisis Group, 2022). While these analyses provide valuable insights, they often understate the normative foundations of democracy itself - particularly the institutional conditions that render democratic systems capable of self-correction without resort to extra-constitutional force. As a result, the philosophical question of why democratic mechanisms fail to prevent coups, and what kind of democracy might sustainably avert them, remains insufficiently explored.

This paper addresses this gap by examining coup d'état in West Africa through the political philosophy of Karl Popper, especially his conception of the open society. For Popper, democracy is not defined by the moral quality of rulers or the realisation of collective ideals, but by the existence of institutional mechanisms that allow societies to remove bad governments without violence. From this perspective, the central danger to democracy is not merely poor leadership but the gradual closure of institutions that suppress criticism, entrench power, and eliminate peaceful avenues for political change. When such closure occurs, extra-institutional interventions (including military coups) are often perceived as substitutes for democratic accountability.

This paper advances two core arguments. First, that recurrent coups are best understood as symptoms of institutional closure rather than solutions to democratic failure. Second, that sustainable responses to democratic fragility in the region lie not in revolutionary regime change but in Popperian piecemeal reforms aimed at strengthening constitutionalism, protecting critical dissent, and preserving the correctability of political power. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on democracy, military intervention, and political legitimacy in Africa by re-centering the discussion on the philosophical foundations of democratic governance.

2.1 The Open Society and Democratic Governance

Karl Popper's conception of the open society constitutes one of the most influential philosophical defences of liberal democracy in the 20th century. Developed most elaborately in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper's political philosophy emerged as a response to the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism, which he regarded as products of epistemological dogmatism and historical determinism (Popper, 2002). At its core, the open society is characterised by institutional openness, critical rationality, and the rejection of absolute political authority. Unlike closed societies that rely on unquestioned traditions, collective myths, or charismatic leadership, open societies are defined by their willingness to subject social and political arrangements to continuous criticism and reform. Popper insists democratic governance is not grounded in the assumption that the people are infallible or that rulers possess superior moral insight. Rather, democracy is valued for its procedural capacity to limit power and correct political error. He famously redefines the classical question of political philosophy ("Who should rule?") as fundamentally misguided. The more relevant democratic question, Popper insists, is "how is the state to be constituted so that bad rulers can be got rid of without bloodshed, without violence?" (Popper, *Open Society*, 2002, p. 124). This shift from ideal leadership to institutional



design marks a decisive departure from perfectionist or teleological theories of democracy and places Popper firmly within a tradition of political fallibilism.

In essence, democratic governance, in the Popperian sense, is inseparable from the principle of institutional correctability. Political institutions must be structured in such a way that policy failures, leadership abuses, and governance errors can be identified, criticised, and reversed through lawful and peaceful means (Shearmur, 1996). Elections, judicial review, legislative oversight, and a free press are not merely procedural accessories; they are the mechanisms through which societies learn from political mistakes. When these mechanisms function effectively, political dissatisfaction does not translate into violent rupture, as the system itself provides channels for reform. This is why Popper (2002) argued that democracy is only efficient in an open society. Central to the open society is the protection of critical discourse. Popper's epistemology of critical rationalism holds that knowledge advances not through certainty but through conjecture and refutation (Popper, *Conjectures*, 2002). This epistemic model is transposed into the political realm such that no policy, ideology, or government decision is immune from criticism. Freedom of expression, academic independence, and political opposition are thus not threats to social order but conditions of democratic rationality. Where criticism is suppressed, political errors accumulate unchecked, and governance becomes increasingly detached from social realities.

Surprisingly, Popper (2002) rejects the identification of democracy with substantive outcomes such as equality, justice, or economic prosperity. While these goals may be desirable, he cautions against embedding them as definitive criteria of democratic legitimacy. He posits that “we must not argue that since certain ends are valuable we must choose the best of all possible means for achieving them” (*Open Society*, pp. 109-113). Doing so invites authoritarian justifications in the name of achieving higher social ends. In contrast, Popper's procedural conception of democracy emphasises restraint, accountability, and reversibility. A government that fails to deliver prosperity may still be democratic if citizens retain the power to remove it peacefully. Conversely, a government that claims to deliver social goods while suppressing dissent undermines the very conditions of democracy. This procedural understanding of democratic governance has significant implications for societies experiencing political instability. Popper explicitly warns against conflating popular frustration with democratic justification. The fact that a population is dissatisfied with civilian leadership does not, in itself, legitimise extra-constitutional interventions (Shearmur, 1996). Democratic governance requires patience with institutional processes, even when they appear slow or imperfect. The temptation to seek immediate solutions through force or revolutionary change reflects what Popper (2002) describes as a relapse into tribalism - “a desire for certainty, unity, and decisive authority at the expense of freedom and critical inquiry” (*Open Society*, pp. 171-173).

Note that Popper does not deny that democracies can fail. On the contrary, his theory presupposes the inevitability of political error. However, failure becomes catastrophic only when institutional mechanisms of correction are disabled. In such contexts, political power becomes personalised, criticism is criminalised, and leadership becomes effectively irremovable. The open society degenerates into a closed one, and the distinction between democratic governance



and authoritarian control collapses. It is under these conditions that non-democratic actors (such as the military) may present themselves as alternative agents of political correction.

2.2 Popper's Critique of Historicism and Political Messianism

A central pillar of Popper's political philosophy is his sustained critique of historicism - the belief that history unfolds according to discoverable laws that determines the inevitable course of social and political development. In *The Poverty of Historicism*, Popper (2002) defines historicism as the doctrine that "the task of the social sciences is to lay bare the laws of social development in order to predict the future" (*Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3). He rejects this view as both epistemologically flawed and politically dangerous. For Popper, historical processes are shaped by the growth of human knowledge, which is inherently unpredictable; hence, any claim to foresee historical destiny is illusory and invites authoritarian control. Popper's opposition to historicism is not merely methodological but deeply normative. He argues that historicist thinking legitimises political coercion by portraying present suffering as a necessary sacrifice for a predetermined future good. When leaders claim to act in accordance with the "logic of history," dissent becomes irrational or even treasonous, since opposition is framed as resistance to historical necessity (Popper, *Open Society*, 2002). In this way, historicism provides a powerful ideological foundation for authoritarianism, allowing rulers to insulate themselves from criticism while claiming moral superiority.

Closely connected to historicism is what Popper describes as political messianism- the belief that a particular leader, class, or institution is uniquely positioned to redeem society and usher in a new political order. He considers this a Utopian logic, which is extremely dangerous. Popper (2002) explains:

If I were asked to express in a single sentence what I consider to be the most dangerous of all the potentialities of rationalism, I should say: the potentiality of using reason for large-scale planning, or of Utopian social engineering. The Utopianist believes that he can find a rational way to the realization of his ultimate political aims, and that this makes it a duty to use power for their realization. And he believes that he possesses the secret of the true aims of history (*Poverty of Historicism*, p. 64).

Messianic politics rests on the assumption that social problems have comprehensive, final solutions and that extraordinary authority is justified to implement them. Popper traces this mentality to the philosophical traditions of Plato and Hegel which he accuses of subordinating individual freedom to abstract historical or metaphysical ends. In modern politics, this messianic impulse manifests in revolutionary movements, charismatic leadership cults, and regimes that claim exceptional legitimacy in times of crisis.

From a Popperian perspective, military coups frequently draw upon historicist and messianic narratives to justify their seizure of power. Coups are often presented as unavoidable responses to historical decline, national decay, or moral degeneration, with the military cast as the sole institution capable of restoring order and rescuing the state (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2022). Such narratives frame military intervention not as a contingent political choice but as a historical



necessity, thereby bypassing democratic deliberation and constitutional constraints. The language of national salvation, transition, and rebirth mirrors precisely the kind of deterministic reasoning Popper warns against.

Furthermore, Popper (2002) argues that historicism encourages utopian social engineering, the attempt to redesign society according to a comprehensive blueprint. He posits:

The holistic or Utopian critic may... say that a reform is a step in the right direction, but that it is too small; that a great reorganization of the whole of society is needed. ... But the Utopianist must prove that the small step is not only a step in the right direction, but that it will also lead to the ultimate goal. ... And since nobody can do this, the Utopianist must try to win power to enforce his aim. ... Power is needed for the enforcement of the Utopian plan; and power politics, once entered upon, leads to dictatorship (Poverty of Historicism, pp. 64-72).

Such projects, he argues, inevitably require repression, since social reality resists total planning. Military regimes, even when initially committed to reform, often resort to coercion to enforce unity, suppress opposition, and maintain control over complex societies. In doing so, they reproduce the conditions of political closure that Popper identifies as the defining feature of closed societies.

2.3 Piecemeal Social Engineering and Institutional Correctability

Karl Popper's concept of piecemeal social engineering represents a central normative alternative to revolutionary and utopian approaches to political change. Developed as part of his broader critique of historicism, piecemeal social engineering emphasises gradual, reversible, and critically assessable reforms rather than comprehensive societal redesign. For Popper (2002), the fundamental task of political action is not to realise an ideal society but to reduce concrete social evils through institutions that permit continuous learning and correction. As he puts it, "the piecemeal engineer will... adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good" (*Open Society*, p. 158). He contrasts piecemeal social engineering with utopian social engineering, which seeks to impose a total vision of the good society through sweeping transformations. Utopian projects, he argues, require the concentration of power and the suppression of dissent, since social reality rarely conforms to abstract plans. Popper (2002) warned that "The Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which is therefore likely to lead to a dictatorship" (*Open Society*, p. 161). In political practice, this leads to coercion, authoritarianism, and the erosion of democratic accountability. Piecemeal reform, by contrast, accepts human fallibility and treats political institutions as experimental mechanisms whose outcomes must remain open to criticism and revision.

At the heart of piecemeal social engineering lies the principle of institutional correctability. Institutions are justified not by their alignment with ideological ideals but by their capacity to detect and correct errors without violence (Shearmur, 1996). Elections, constitutional courts, legislative oversight, and administrative accountability are therefore instruments of political



learning rather than mere expressions of popular will. When such mechanisms function effectively, dissatisfaction can be addressed within the system, reducing the temptation for extra-constitutional intervention.

Popper's emphasis on correctability has profound implications for democratic stability. Political systems collapse not primarily because they produce imperfect outcomes, but because they lack reliable means for self-correction. Where leaders entrench themselves, undermine judicial independence, manipulate electoral processes, or silence opposition, political error accumulates without remedy (Christiano, 2008). Under such conditions, political frustration is redirected away from institutional channels and towards radical alternatives, including military intervention. Therefore, from a Popperian standpoint, coups emerge not as solutions to governance failure but as indicators of systemic breakdown in institutional learning. Beware that Popper does not equate gradual reform with political conservatism or inertia. Piecemeal social engineering can involve significant and even radical changes, provided they are implemented incrementally and remain subject to public criticism and reversal. What Popper rejects is the belief that social transformation must be achieved through decisive ruptures or exceptional authority. Political patience, in this sense, is not passive acceptance but a commitment to democratic experimentation under conditions of uncertainty.

This framework also exposes the normative weakness of military coups, which represent the antithesis of piecemeal reform. Coups typically suspend constitutions, dissolve legislatures, and concentrate power in executive or military councils. Such actions eliminate precisely the institutional mechanisms through which political errors can be identified and corrected. Even when regimes arising from coups promise transition or reform, their methods rely on coercion rather than criticism, and their legitimacy rests on claims of necessity rather than accountability (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Popper's theory further cautions against the romanticisation of revolutionary politics. While coups are sometimes celebrated as popular uprisings against corrupt elites, Popper insists that the replacement of one unaccountable authority with another does not constitute democratic progress. The absence of peaceful exit mechanisms renders revolutionary regimes structurally resistant to correction, increasing the likelihood of repression and instability. In this sense, coups are not merely interruptions of democratic order but structural regressions into political closure.

3.1 The Phenomenology of Coup d'Etat in West Africa

The contemporary wave of coup d'etat in West Africa exhibits recurring patterns that invite philosophical as well as empirical analysis. Since 2020, military takeovers have occurred in Mali (twice, in 2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (twice, in 2022), and Niger (2023), with attempted or threatened interventions elsewhere in the region (e.g., recently in the Benin Republic). While differing in immediate triggers, these coups share common justificatory narratives, modes of execution, and post-coup political trajectories. Rather than isolated anomalies, they constitute a recognisable political phenomenon rooted in systemic governance failures and institutional fragility (Powell & Thyne, 2011). A defining feature of these coups is the language through which they are legitimised. Military actors typically frame their intervention as a response to corruption, insecurity, constitutional manipulation, or civilian



incompetence. Public addresses following coups often emphasise national decline, moral decay, and the urgency of rescue, portraying military rule as a temporary but necessary corrective measure. As Afrobarometer (2024) surveys indicate, some of the strongest support for intervention is voiced in the continent's new military dictatorships, including Mali (82%), Guinea (68%), and Burkina Faso (66%). This rhetoric resonates with segments of the population, particularly where civilian governments are perceived as unresponsive or predatory. Popular celebrations following coups in parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger reflect not an endorsement of military authoritarianism *per se*, but deep frustration with the perceived closure of democratic avenues for change.

Another recurring characteristic is the suspension of constitutional order. Coups in West Africa typically involve the dissolution of elected institutions, the abrogation or suspension of constitutions, and the concentration of power in military councils or transitional authorities (Powell & Thyne, 2011). These actions are often justified as prerequisites for reform, stability, or national dialogue. Yet from a Popperian perspective, such measures immediately disable the institutional mechanisms of criticism and correction that define democratic governance. The promise of future elections functions as a justificatory narrative rather than an institutional guarantee.

The temporal logic of these coups further reveals their phenomenological similarity. Military regimes frequently announce transitional timelines that are subsequently extended, renegotiated, or rendered ambiguous. Delays are justified by reference to security threats, administrative incapacity, or the need for “deep reforms” (Freedom House, 2024). This pattern reflects a broader tendency towards political exceptionalism, wherein normal constitutional constraints are suspended indefinitely under claims of necessity. As Popper warns, such appeals to necessity often mask the consolidation of unaccountable power.

Civil-military relations in West Africa also shape the form coups take. In many states, the military remains one of the most organised national institutions, enjoying corporate cohesion and access to coercive resources unmatched by civilian actors (Decalo, 1990). Weak legislative oversight, politicisation of military leadership, and the absence of effective civilian control create conditions in which the armed forces can plausibly present themselves as guardians of national interest. This self-conception aligns closely with what Popper describes as the “guardian myth,” wherein a privileged group claims superior rationality and moral authority over society. This, for Popper, is an attribute of a closed society, and is therefore undemocratic.

3.2 Institutional Closure and the Breakdown of Democratic Correctability

From a Popperian perspective, the recurrence of coup d'état in West Africa is best understood as a consequence of institutional closure - the gradual erosion of mechanisms through which political error can be identified, criticised, and peacefully corrected. Democratic governance fails not simply because leaders govern poorly, but because institutions cease to function as channels of accountability and learning. When institutional correctability collapses, the distinction between democratic rule and authoritarian control becomes increasingly blurred, leaving societies vulnerable to cycles of frustration and rupture.



One of the most visible dimensions of institutional closure in West Africa is the manipulation of electoral processes. Elections, which should function as primary mechanisms for the non-violent removal of governments, are frequently undermined through incumbency advantage, selective enforcement of electoral laws, intimidation of opposition candidates, and contested electoral commissions (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). Incumbents often deploy state resources to skew competition while flawed voter registers and ballot irregularities further erode trust. Where electoral outcomes are perceived as predetermined or meaningless, citizens lose confidence in democratic turnover. In Popperian terms, elections no longer operate as instruments of error correction but as rituals that legitimise entrenched power, perpetuating governance failures without remedy.

Judicial erosion constitutes another layer of institutional closure. Courts in several West African states have increasingly been subjected to executive pressure, politicised appointments, and selective obedience to judicial rulings (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Special tribunals or *ad hoc* courts are sometimes established to target opponents while constitutional rulings on term limits or electoral disputes are ignored or overridden. Constitutional courts that legitimise term-limit extensions or decline to challenge executive overreach weaken the principle of constitutional supremacy. For Popper, the rule of law is indispensable precisely because it constrains power impersonally but when legal institutions become subordinated to political authority, criticism is neutralised and political mistakes become insulated from correction.

Legislative marginalisation further contributes to democratic breakdown. Parliaments often function as extensions of executive authority rather than as sites of genuine deliberation and oversight. Patronage networks, party dominance, and weak opposition capacity reduce legislatures to rubber-stamp institutions (Barkan, 2009). Budgetary processes lack transparency, and legislative initiatives rarely challenge executive priorities. This concentration of power violates Popper's insistence on dispersed authority and institutional checks. Where legislatures fail to scrutinise governance effectively, policy failures accumulate without public accountability deepening public alienation from formal politics.

The contraction of civic space represents a particularly damaging form of institutional closure. Restrictions on media freedom, harassment of journalists, repression of civil society organisations, and the criminalisation of protest diminish the capacity for public criticism (Freedom House, 2024). Internet shutdowns during elections, arbitrary licensing for NGOs, and laws criminalising "false or fake news" further silence dissent. Popper regards criticism as the lifeblood of the open society; without it, political error persists unchecked. In such environments, public frustration intensifies while legitimate avenues for dissent disappear, increasing the appeal of extra-institutional intervention and rendering peaceful reform improbable.

Together, these processes generate what may be described as procedural hollowness - a condition in which democratic forms persist but democratic functions are disabled. Constitutions remain formally in place, elections are periodically held, and parliaments convene, yet the institutional logic of correctability is absent. From a Popperian standpoint, such systems are democracies in name but closed societies in practice. Political authority becomes increasingly personalised, insulated, and irremovable through peaceful means, fostering resentment among citizens who



perceive no viable path to change. It is within this context of institutional closure that military coups acquire superficial plausibility. When democratic mechanisms no longer offer credible paths for political change, the military presents itself as an alternative corrective force. However, Popper's framework reveals this as a profound misdiagnosis. The military does not restore correctability; it suspends it altogether. By dissolving civilian institutions and ruling through decrees, coup regimes deepen political closure rather than reverse it.

4.1 Coup, Revolutionary Rule versus Institutional Reform

At the core of Karl Popper's political philosophy lies the principle of critical rationality- the idea that social and political progress depends on the free contestation of ideas, policies, and authorities. As Popper articulated it, "the way in which knowledge progresses, and especially our scientific knowledge, is by unjustified (and unjustifiable) anticipations, by guesses, by tentative solutions to our problems, by conjectures. These conjectures are controlled by criticism: that is, by attempted refutations" (Popper, *Conjectures*, 33). In the political realm, this principle is institutionalised through democratic mechanisms that protect criticism, dissent, and opposition. From a Popperian standpoint, any political arrangement that suppresses criticism undermines the very conditions of rational governance. Military coups, by their nature and practice, represent a direct assault on this foundational principle, closing off the avenues of debate and experimentation essential to human advancement.

Popper's critique of authoritarianism is rooted not primarily in moral outrage but in epistemology. He argues that political power becomes dangerous when it claims immunity from criticism, since error then persists unchecked. "No rational argument will have a rational effect on a man who does not want to adopt a rational attitude," (Popper, *Open Society*, p. 225). Popper observed, highlighting how closed systems reject the very dialogue required for correction. This is why military rule cannot be a corrective to the same abuse of power that inspired it since it is not naturally open to criticism and dialogue.

Karl Popper's critique of revolutionary politics provides a decisive framework for evaluating military coups as modes of political change. Central to this critique is Popper's rejection of utopian social engineering- the attempt to restructure society according to a comprehensive blueprint enforced through concentrated authority. Revolutionary rule (whether led by civilian ideologues or military juntas) presupposes that political problems admit of final solutions and that exceptional power is justified to implement them. From a Popperian standpoint, this assumption is both epistemologically flawed and politically dangerous, as it overestimates human foresight and underestimates the complexity of social systems. Coups exemplify revolutionary rule in practice. By suspending constitutions, dissolving representative institutions, and ruling through decrees, military regimes seek to reset political order in a single decisive act. Such ruptures are justified as necessary responses to systemic decay, insecurity, or moral collapse. However, Popper insists that political knowledge is inherently provisional and that large-scale social transformations cannot be reliably predicted or controlled. He notes, "We cannot rationally plan the future of society as a whole, because we are ignorant of the future development of science and technology, and of many other factors" (Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 71). Revolutionary interventions, therefore, eliminate the very safeguards



required to detect and correct unforeseen consequences, often producing outcomes far removed from initial promises. Institutional reform, by contrast, operates on the principle of piecemeal change. Rather than dismantling existing structures wholesale, it seeks to modify specific institutions in response to identifiable failures, while preserving mechanisms for feedback and revision (Shearmur, 1996). This approach reflects Popper's fallibilism where reforms are treated as hypotheses to be tested, not doctrines to be enforced. Democratic legitimacy, on this account, derives not from the ambition of change but from its reversibility, allowing societies to learn from mistakes without catastrophic disruption.

The revolutionary logic of coups also relies heavily on exceptionalism. Military rulers often claim that ordinary constitutional procedures are inadequate to address extraordinary crises. Popper cautions that such reasoning undermines the rule of law by normalising the suspension of constraints in moments of political stress. Once power is justified by necessity rather than accountability, there is no principled limit to its extension. The transitional rule thus risks becoming permanent domination, as timelines extend and reforms stall amid consolidating authority. Moreover, revolutionary regimes typically prioritise unity over pluralism. Political opposition is framed as obstruction, and dissent is suppressed in the name of national cohesion. This homogenising impulse reflects what Popper (*Open Society*, 2002) identifies as the collectivist temptation to subordinate individual freedom to abstract social goals. Institutional reform, by contrast, presupposes pluralism and disagreement. It recognises that democratic improvement emerges from the contestation of perspectives (not their elimination) thereby sustaining the critical dialogue essential to rational progress.

Empirically, revolutionary rule has rarely delivered durable democratic outcomes in West Africa. Military regimes that promised renewal have often reproduced patterns of corruption, repression, and institutional decay (Arriola & Lyons, 2016). Popper's theory explains this recurrence not as moral failure but as structural inevitability, remarking that regimes that suppress criticism lack the capacity for self-correction. Institutional reform, though slower and less dramatic, preserves the conditions under which learning and accountability can occur, building resilience against recurring crises.

4.2 The Problem of Legitimacy and Political Accountability

The question of legitimacy lies at the heart of debates surrounding coup d'état in West Africa. Military interventions are frequently defended on the grounds of popular approval, regime failure, or national necessity. In some cases, public demonstrations following coups appear to signal widespread consent. From a Popperian perspective, however, legitimacy cannot be reduced to popularity, necessity, or intention. Rather, it is grounded in institutional accountability- the capacity of citizens to criticise, restrain, and peacefully remove those who govern them. This institutional foundation ensures that power remains contestable and responsive, preventing the accumulation of unchecked error. Karl Popper draws a decisive distinction between democratic legitimacy and moral justification. For Popper, the defining feature of democracy is not that rulers are chosen because they are good, wise, or popular, but that they can be removed without violence (*Open Society*, 2002). Legitimacy, therefore, depends on procedures rather than outcomes. Coups violate this principle at its foundation because they remove governments



through force and replace institutional accountability with discretionary authority. Even when coups target corrupt or incompetent regimes, they fail to satisfy Popper's minimal democratic criterion, as the new regime lacks the very mechanisms that allow for non-violent correction and renewal.

Popular support for military takeovers poses a particular challenge to normative evaluation. In West Africa, public enthusiasm often reflects deep frustration with electoral manipulation, economic hardship, and elite impunity. Afrobarometer (2024) surveys reveal that while Africans overwhelmingly prefer democracy in principle, dissatisfaction with its performance has grown, leading to increased tolerance for military intervention in countries affected by recent coups. Yet Popper explicitly warns against equating mass approval with democratic legitimacy. Majorities can endorse authoritarian measures, especially in moments of crisis, but such endorsement does not establish accountability. Without institutional mechanisms to contest, revise, or withdraw consent, popular support becomes politically inert and normatively insufficient, often evaporating as repression sets in. Military regimes often attempt to bridge this legitimacy deficit by invoking transitional accountability. Promises of future elections, constitutional reform, and anti-corruption campaigns are offered as evidence of democratic intent. Empirical studies of transitional military rule in Africa show that such promises frequently fail to materialise, with timelines extended indefinitely amid security pretexts (Arriola & Lyons, 2016). From a Popperian standpoint, however, as Shearmur (1996) notes, deferred accountability is not accountability at all. Legitimate power must be subject to continuous criticism and removal, not hypothetical future judgment. Where military authorities control the timeline, rules, and conditions of transition, they remain effectively unaccountable; thus, perpetuating closure rather than openness.

International and regional responses further complicate the legitimacy discourse. While organisations such as ECOWAS formally condemn coups, their engagement with military regimes (through negotiations, sanctions relief, or transitional frameworks) can inadvertently normalise unconstitutional rule (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016). Recent analyses highlight how ECOWAS's challenges in enforcing transitions (evident in prolonged juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) undermine its credibility as a defender of constitutionalism (Nwagbo & Ofoke, 2025). From a Popperian viewpoint, legitimacy cannot be conferred externally through recognition or pragmatic accommodation. It must arise internally from institutionalised accountability and openness to criticism.

Coups also undermine long-term accountability by weakening civilian supremacy. Once the military establishes itself as an ultimate arbiter of political failure, elected governments govern under implicit threat. This dynamic distorts democratic incentives, discourages institutional reform, and entrenches a closed political system, where force rather than criticism becomes the final corrective mechanism (Day & Khisa, 2022). Scholarly examinations of civil-military relations in the region emphasise how politicised militaries exploit governance voids, perpetuating cycles of intervention (Akinola and Ratidzo Makombe, 2024).

5.1 Popperian Pathways for Democratic Resilience in West Africa



Having established that coup d'état fails the Popperian tests of democratic legitimacy, accountability, and rational governance, the task now is constructive: to identify alternatives consistent with the principles of the open society. For Karl Popper, the response to political failure is not revolutionary rupture but institutional learning. Democratic resilience is achieved not by seeking perfect rulers or radical resets, but by strengthening the mechanisms through which error can be identified and corrected without violence. This section advances a Popperian framework for democratic renewal in West Africa grounded in institutional reform, critical openness, and constitutional restraint.

5.1.1 Strengthening institutional correctability

At the heart of Popper's democratic theory lies the concept of institutional correctability, which refers to the ability of political systems to remove bad rulers and revise failed policies through established, non-violent procedures. Popper (*Open Society*, 2002, p. 158) himself emphasised that "the piecemeal engineer knows, like Socrates, how little he knows. He knows that we can learn only from our mistakes," underscoring the need for reversible reforms that allow societies to adapt through trial and error. Democratic breakdown in West Africa is best understood not as the absence of elections *per se*, but as the erosion of institutions that make elections meaningful. The *V-Dem Democracy Report* (2025) highlights persistent autocratization in Sub-Saharan Africa, with many countries experiencing declines in judicial constraints on the executive and electoral credibility, creating environments where governance failures accumulate without remedy. In countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (now withdrawn from ECOWAS amid prolonged military rule) these erosions have directly contributed to institutional fragility and recurring coups.

Electoral commissions, courts, legislatures, and anti-corruption agencies should be insulated from executive domination if they are to function as instruments of political correction. Where incumbents manipulate electoral outcomes or undermine judicial independence, public confidence collapses and extra-constitutional solutions gain appeal. Recent events within West Africa show that executive capture of electoral bodies remains a systemic issue, with flawed processes in several states exacerbating perceptions of predetermined results (Afrobarometer, 2024). A Popperian response prioritises procedural reform over moralistic condemnation, focusing on enforceable term limits, transparent electoral administration, and credible adjudication of disputes. Strengthening independent electoral management bodies, as demonstrated in cases where robust commissions have facilitated peaceful power transitions, provides a model for rebuilding trust (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Incremental measures (such as depoliticising appointments through multi-stakeholder panels and enhancing funding autonomy) align with piecemeal engineering by targeting specific vulnerabilities without wholesale upheaval.

More so, institutional correctability requires that no office or actor (civilian or military) be exempt from accountability. Civilian supremacy over the military should be constitutionally entrenched and practically enforced. Military professionalism, within a Popperian framework, entails strict subordination to civilian authority and legal sanction for political intervention. Empirical studies on civil-military relations reveal how weak oversight and politicised



promotions perpetuate praetorian risks, yet targeted reforms (professional training programs, transparent budgeting for defence, and parliamentary committees with real oversight powers) can embed democratic norms. In the Sahel region, where insecurity has justified extended military rule, reinforcing these boundaries is crucial to prevent force from supplanting institutional channels. Popper warned that without such constraints, power becomes insulated from criticism, leading to accumulated errors and instability.

5.1.2 Protecting critical dissent and the public sphere

Popper's defence of the open society is inseparable from his defence of critical dissent. A society that cannot tolerate criticism, he argues, is incapable of learning from its mistakes. "I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth" (*Open Society*, p. 226), Popper wrote, capturing the essence of rational discourse through open debate. In West Africa, shrinking civic spaces, media repression, and the intimidation of opposition voices have contributed significantly to democratic fragility. CIVICUS's *People Power Under Attack* (2025) report reveals that over 80% of Sub-Saharan Africans live in countries rated "Repressed" or "Closed," with widespread detentions of journalists and protesters marking a severe contraction of freedoms. Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* (2025) similarly documents ongoing restrictions on expression and association, exacerbating political closure in post-coup contexts.

A Popperian strategy for democratic resilience requires robust protection of press freedom, academic autonomy, and civil society engagement. Criticism must not be treated as disloyalty or subversion but recognised as a democratic resource. Where governments suppress dissent in the name of stability, they generate precisely the conditions Popper associates with political irrationality and eventual collapse. Reports from 2025 highlight escalating violations, including arbitrary arrests of media workers and restrictive laws on NGOs, which silence alternative viewpoints and hinder policy correction (Afrobarometer, 2024). In nations under military juntas, blanket bans on protests and online censorship further entrench unaccountable rule, illustrating how closure breeds stagnation.

Legal frameworks governing national security, misinformation, and public order should be narrowly tailored to prevent abuse against critics. Independent media regulators and judicial oversight are essential to maintaining a balance between security and freedom. In Popperian terms, the vitality of democracy depends less on consensus than on the continuous testing of power through public criticism (Popper, *Conjectures*, 2002). Afrobarometer (2024) data from recent surveys indicate that while citizens value free speech, perceived restrictions correlate with declining trust in institutions, underscoring the need for safeguards that enable fearless dissent. Expanding protections could involve decriminalising defamation, establishing rapid-response mechanisms for journalist safety, and funding independent fact-checking initiatives to counter disinformation without state overreach.

Civil society plays a pivotal role in this ecosystem. Strengthening associations through simplified registration, tax incentives for advocacy work, and protection from harassment fosters a vibrant public sphere. Academic freedom, safeguarded by university autonomy and anti-intimidation policies, ensures intellectual criticism informs public debate. Digital spaces, now increasingly



vital, require regulations that prioritise openness; resisting shutdowns and surveillance while promoting access. Piecemeal reforms here might begin with pilot safe-harbour laws for online expression, evaluated for efficacy before broader adoption.

5.1.3 Piecemeal reform versus political messianism

One of Popper's most enduring contributions to political philosophy is his critique of political messianism, which is the belief that society can be redeemed through a single transformative intervention. Coups often thrive on this logic, promising moral renewal, national rebirth, and total reform. Popper rejects such visions as epistemically arrogant and politically dangerous. "The Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, demands a strong centralized rule of a few, and which is therefore likely to lead to a dictatorship" (*Open Society*, p. 161), Popper warned, highlighting how such ambitions inevitably concentrate power and suppress alternatives. In West Africa, recent military takeovers have frequently invoked messianic narratives of salvation from corruption and insecurity, yet these promises rarely yield sustainable governance, often reproducing cycles of repression and instability.

Piecemeal reform offers an alternative grounded in humility and realism. Rather than attempting comprehensive reconstruction, governments should target specific institutional failures (electoral malpractice, judicial inefficiency, security-sector corruption) while preserving the broader constitutional framework. Reforms should be incremental, reversible, and open to revision in light of experience. Popper described this as "searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good" (*Open Society*, p. 158). This method allows for testing policies on a limited scale, monitoring outcomes, and adjusting without risking widespread catastrophe. In contexts marked by governance crises, piecemeal approaches (such as phased electoral reforms or targeted anti-corruption measures) enable learning from unintended consequences while maintaining institutional continuity. This approach is particularly suited to plural societies such as those in West Africa, where ethnic, religious, and ideological diversity make consensus on grand visions unlikely. Piecemeal reform allows for experimentation without catastrophe and correction without violence. It aligns democratic governance with Popper's fallibilism- the recognition that all political solutions are provisional and subject to improvement. Events of recent times underscore the region's persistent challenges with autocratization, where sweeping changes have exacerbated fragility rather than resolved it (V-Dem, 2025). Incremental strategies, by contrast, build resilience by addressing concrete grievances such as flawed elections or executive overreach through evidence-based adjustments, fostering trust and stability over time.

Political messianism, embodied in coup rhetoric, often seems appealing amid profound disillusionment. Citizens frustrated with persistent inequality and insecurity may initially embrace promises of radical renewal. However, Popper's analysis reveals the structural flaws: messianic projects demand unquestioned authority, viewing dissent as betrayal and justifying coercion to achieve the envisioned ideal. In practice, this leads to suspended constitutions, curtailed freedoms, and extended transitions, as observed in prolonged military rule across the Sahel. Piecemeal reform counters this by prioritising openness, permitting criticism to expose



errors and guide adaptation. Where messianism closes society, piecemeal engineering sustains the conditions for rational progress.

Applying this framework to West Africa requires targeting identifiable evils: strengthening electoral integrity through practically independent commissions, enhancing judicial autonomy via merit-based appointments, and reforming security sectors with civilian oversight. These steps, implemented gradually, avoid the pitfalls of utopian rupture while advancing correctability. Regional experiences demonstrate that abrupt overhauls often fail to address root causes, whereas incremental successes such as improved electoral processes in select states build momentum for broader change. Popper's emphasis on fallibilism reminds us that no reform is final; ongoing evaluation ensures responsiveness to evolving needs.

Conclusion

This paper set out to provide a philosophical exposition of coup d'état in West Africa through the lens of Karl Popper's theory of the open society. Against interpretations that view military intervention as a corrective response to democratic failure, the paper has argued that coups represent not a remedy but a deepening of democratic breakdown. From a Popperian perspective, the central problem is not the moral quality of rulers or the intensity of popular dissatisfaction, but the erosion of institutional mechanisms that enable the peaceful removal of bad governments and the continuous correction of political error. By grounding democratic legitimacy in institutional accountability rather than intention, popularity, or necessity, Popper's political philosophy offers a rigorous standard against which military interventions must be judged. The analysis demonstrated that coups systematically fail this standard. They suppress critical rationality, dismantle constitutional constraints, and replace fallibilist governance with coercive authority. Even when motivated by genuine grievances, military takeovers undermine the very conditions required for democratic learning and reform.

This paper further showed that the appeal of coups in West Africa is symptomatic of institutional closure rather than democratic incapacity. Weak electoral credibility, compromised judicial independence, restricted civic space, and unchecked executive power create environments in which extra-constitutional solutions appear plausible. However, Popper's critique of utopian social engineering reveals why revolutionary ruptures (whether civilian or military) are epistemically arrogant and politically destabilising. Sustainable democratic renewal cannot be imposed through force; it must emerge through institutions capable of self-correction.

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