

CONSTITUTIONAL CRISES AND MILITARY INTERVENTION: PATTERNS ACROSS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Constitutional crises and military interventions have re-emerged as defining features of political instability in Sub-Saharan Africa, challenging decades of constitutional reforms and democratic consolidation. This article examines the structural and proximate factors linking constitutional breakdowns to renewed military intervention across the region. It argues that military takeovers are rarely sudden aberrations; rather, they are embedded in recurring patterns of executive overreach, constitutional manipulation, electoral malpractice, and institutional decay. Drawing on civil–military relations theory, constitutionalism, and state fragility frameworks, the study adopts a comparative qualitative approach, integrating cross-national analysis with selected case studies from West, Central, East, and Southern Africa. The article identifies three dominant patterns of military intervention: classic coups following electoral or succession crises; “constitutional” or corrective coups justified as restorations of legality; and military-managed transitional regimes that blur the boundary between civilian and military authority. It further demonstrates how socio-economic grievances, security threats, and declining public trust in civilian institutions create permissive conditions for military involvement in politics. The study also evaluates regional and international responses, particularly the roles of ECOWAS and the African Union, highlighting both normative advances against unconstitutional changes of government and persistent enforcement gaps. By situating contemporary military interventions within broader governance failures, the article contributes to debates on democratic backsliding, civilian supremacy, and constitutional resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa. It concludes that sustainable prevention of military intervention requires not only punitive regional mechanisms but also deeper reforms aimed at strengthening constitutional institutions, electoral integrity, and inclusive governance.

Keywords: Constitutional crisis; Military intervention; Coups d’état; Civil–military relations; Democratic backsliding; Sub-Saharan Africa; Constitutionalism; Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Since the wave of political independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, constitutional governance in Sub-Saharan Africa has been shaped by complex interactions between inherited colonial institutions, postcolonial state-building challenges, and the political role of the military. Early constitutions, largely modeled on European liberal-democratic frameworks, often failed to align with local socio-political realities, resulting in weak institutional legitimacy and fragile civil military relations (Adebayo, 2021). In many newly independent states, the military emerged not merely as a professional security institution but as a politically salient actor,

frequently justified as a guardian of national unity amid ethnic fragmentation, economic crisis, and weak civilian leadership.

During the Cold War era, military coups became a dominant mode of regime change across Sub-Saharan Africa, reflecting both internal governance failures and external geopolitical interests (Banda, T. M., & Chirwa, L. P. 2020). However, the democratic transitions of the late 1980s and 1990s marked a significant normative shift. Constitutional reforms, multiparty elections, and regional commitments to democratic governance such as the African Union's Lomé Declaration and the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance sought to entrench civilian supremacy and restrict military intervention in politics (AU, 2000; ECOWAS, 2001). Despite these reforms, civil–military relations remained characterized by ambiguity, as armed forces continued to wield latent political influence, particularly in contexts of institutional weakness and security crises (Howe, 2001).

In the past decade, Sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed a notable resurgence of military interventions, particularly in the Sahel and parts of West and Central Africa. Countries such as Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Sudan, and Niger have experienced military takeovers following constitutional crises marked by contested elections, term-limit manipulations, or elite-driven constitutional amendments (Souaré, 2021; International IDEA, 2023). These developments signal a troubling reversal of earlier democratic gains and underscore the fragility of constitutional governance in the region. Unlike the overt military dictatorships of earlier decades, contemporary interventions often adopt a legalistic or corrective rhetoric, framing coups as necessary responses to constitutional violations, corruption, or governance failure (Svolik, 2012). This pattern reflects what scholars describe as “constitutional coups” or “military-assisted transitions,” where the language of constitutionalism is paradoxically deployed to justify unconstitutional seizures of power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The growing frequency of such interventions suggests that constitutional crises rather than ideological opposition to democracy have become central triggers for military involvement in politics.

Despite the proliferation of constitutional frameworks, regional norms against unconstitutional changes of government, and formal commitments to civilian rule, military intervention persists as a recurrent feature of political life in Sub-Saharan Africa. This persistence raises critical questions about the effectiveness of constitutionalism as a mechanism for regulating power and ensuring civilian supremacy. The central problem addressed in this study is the apparent disconnect between constitutional design and political practice: while constitutions formally constrain military involvement, recurring constitutional breakdowns continue to create permissive conditions for military intervention. This paradox suggests that constitutional crises are not merely legal failures but symptomatic of deeper structural weaknesses, including executive dominance, politicized judiciaries, weak legislatures, and limited public trust in democratic institutions (Bassey, E. U. 2022). In such contexts, the military is often perceived both domestically and internationally as an alternative source of order, despite its fundamentally anti-democratic implications. Understanding why constitutional frameworks

fail to prevent military intervention is therefore essential for addressing democratic backsliding in the region.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What forms of constitutional breakdowns such as term-limit violations, electoral disputes, or judicial capture precipitate military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. What recurring patterns of military intervention can be identified across different sub-regions, and how do these patterns relate to variations in constitutional design, civil–military relations, and institutional strength?

The primary objectives of this study are threefold. First, it seeks to analyze the relationship between constitutional crises and military intervention by identifying the specific legal and institutional failures that precede military takeovers. Second, it aims to develop a typology of military interventions across Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting both continuities and transformations in civil–military dynamics. Third, the study seeks to assess the effectiveness of constitutional and regional mechanisms in preventing military intervention and promoting sustainable civilian rule.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section establishes the analytical foundations of the study by clarifying key concepts and outlining the theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis of constitutional crises and military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conceptual precision is essential, given the evolving and often ambiguous nature of contemporary military interventions, while theoretical grounding provides a structured lens for explaining recurring patterns across different political contexts.

Constitutional Crisis: Definition and Typologies

A constitutional crisis refers to a situation in which the constitutional order is fundamentally challenged, suspended, or rendered ineffective, resulting in uncertainty over the legality and legitimacy of political authority. In Sub-Saharan Africa, constitutional crises frequently arise not from the absence of constitutions but from their manipulation, selective enforcement, or outright violation by political elites (Prempeh, 2008). Such crises undermine the predictability of governance and erode public trust in constitutional institutions.

Scholars identify several typologies of constitutional crises relevant to the African context. The first is executive-induced constitutional crisis, often triggered by presidential term-limit extensions, constitutional amendments designed to entrench incumbents, or disregard for judicial rulings (Posner & Young, 2018). The second is electoral constitutional crisis, characterized by disputed elections, manipulation of electoral laws, and the politicization of

electoral management bodies, leading to legitimacy deficits and post-election instability (Cheeseman, 2015). A third type is institutional constitutional crisis, which occurs when core institutions such as the judiciary or legislature are captured or incapacitated, preventing effective checks and balances. These typologies are analytically useful for understanding how legal breakdowns create opportunities for military intervention.

Military Intervention: Coups d'État, Mutinies, "Constitutional Coups," and Hybrid Takeovers

Military intervention refers to the direct or indirect involvement of armed forces in the political process in ways that disrupt constitutional civilian authority (Finer, 1962). Traditionally, this has been associated with coups d'état sudden, unconstitutional seizures of power by military actors. However, contemporary interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa display greater variation and sophistication. Coups d'état remain the most visible form, involving the overthrow of elected governments and suspension of constitutional rule, often justified on grounds of restoring order or combating corruption (Thyne & Powell, 2016). Mutinies, while initially centered on grievances within the armed forces, can escalate into broader political interventions, particularly in weak states where military cohesion is fragile (McGowan, 2003). Hybrid takeovers further blur the civil–military boundary, involving military-backed transitional governments that maintain a façade of civilian rule while entrenching military influence (Souaré, 2021).

Democratic Backsliding and Authoritarian Resilience

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and practices within formally democratic regimes (Bermeo, 2016). In Sub-Saharan Africa, backsliding often manifests through constitutional amendments, repression of opposition, weakening of judicial independence, and the manipulation of electoral processes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). These practices contribute to authoritarian resilience, defined as the capacity of authoritarian or hybrid regimes to adapt and survive by co-opting democratic institutions rather than dismantling them outright (Svolik, 2012).

The relevance of these concepts lies in their explanatory power: constitutional crises and military interventions frequently occur not in fully authoritarian states, but in hybrid regimes where democratic erosion generates legitimacy vacuums. In such contexts, military intervention is both a symptom and an accelerator of democratic decline.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Civil–Military Relations Theory

Civil–military relations theory provides a foundational framework for analyzing the political role of the military. Huntington's theory of objective civilian control emphasizes professionalization and political neutrality of the armed forces as prerequisites for stable

democracy. In contrast, Janowitz highlights the sociological integration of the military into society, arguing that politicization is more likely where civilian institutions are weak. In Sub-Saharan Africa, both perspectives are instructive: limited professional autonomy, politicized recruitment, and weak oversight mechanisms have historically undermined civilian control, making military intervention more likely during constitutional crises (Howe, 2001).

Neo-Patrimonialism and Elite Power Competition

Neo-patrimonial theory explains African governance as a hybrid of formal bureaucratic institutions and informal patron–client networks (Osei, K. J. (2020). Within this framework, constitutions often coexist with personalized rule, where political loyalty is secured through patronage rather than institutional accountability. Military intervention can thus be understood as an extension of elite power competition, particularly when constitutional manipulation disrupts existing patronage equilibria or marginalizes key actors, including military elites.

Constitutionalism and Rule of Law Theory

Constitutionalism emphasizes the limitation of governmental power through legal norms, separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental rights. Rule of law theory further stresses the supremacy of law over arbitrary authority. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the persistence of military intervention highlights the gap between formal constitutional provisions and substantive constitutionalism (Prempeh, 2008). Where constitutions lack enforcement capacity or societal legitimacy, they fail to constrain both civilian and military actors.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MILITARY INTERVENTION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Understanding contemporary military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa requires situating it within its historical trajectory. Military involvement in politics has evolved across distinct phases, shaped by colonial legacies, Cold War geopolitics, democratization efforts, and contemporary governance and security challenges. This section traces these phases to highlight continuities and transformations in the nature and justification of military intervention.

Post-Independence Military Coups (1960s–1980s)

The period following political independence was marked by a high incidence of military coups across Sub-Saharan Africa. Between the early 1960s and late 1980s, the military emerged as a dominant political actor, often overthrowing civilian governments within a few years of independence (McGowan, 2003). Several structural factors contributed to this pattern. Newly independent states inherited weak political institutions, artificial borders, and centralized colonial administrations that lacked mechanisms for peaceful political competition (Ake,

1996). In this context, the military often one of the few cohesive national institutions claimed legitimacy as a stabilizing force capable of preserving national unity.

Cold War dynamics further entrenched military rule. External powers frequently supported military regimes that aligned with their ideological or strategic interests, thereby reducing incentives for democratic accountability (Eze, C. N., & Moyo, T. 2023). Military coups during this era were typically overt and unapologetically unconstitutional, resulting in the suspension of constitutions, dissolution of legislatures, and prolonged periods of military dictatorship, as seen in countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, and Ethiopia. Although often justified in populist terms such as combating corruption or restoring order these regimes frequently institutionalized authoritarian rule and deepened civil–military entanglement (Eze, C. N., & Moyo, T. 2023).

Era of Democratization and Constitutional Reforms (1990s)

The end of the Cold War marked a critical turning point in civil–military relations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Economic crises, popular protests, and shifting international norms converged to produce a wave of political liberalization in the early 1990s (Eze, C. N., & Moyo, T. (2023). Military regimes were increasingly delegitimized, and many states adopted new or revised constitutions emphasizing multiparty democracy, term limits, judicial independence, and civilian control of the armed forces. This era witnessed a significant decline in overt military coups, leading some scholars to describe a “retreat of the military” from politics (McGowan, 2003). Regional and continental frameworks, including the African Union’s norm against unconstitutional changes of government, reinforced the principle of civilian supremacy (AU, 2000). Nevertheless, democratization remained uneven. While elections became more regular, constitutionalism was often shallow, with limited enforcement capacity and persistent executive dominance (Prempeh, 2008). The military, though formally subordinated, retained considerable influence, particularly in states with weak oversight institutions or ongoing internal conflicts.

Post-2010 Resurgence of Coups and Military Interventions

From the early 2010s onward, Sub-Saharan Africa experienced a renewed wave of military interventions, challenging assumptions about the irreversibility of democratic progress. Coups in Mali (2012, 2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), Sudan (2019, 2021), and Niger (2023) exemplify this resurgence (Souaré, 2021; International IDEA, 2023). Unlike earlier coups, these interventions often occurred in nominally democratic or hybrid regimes, following constitutional crises related to term-limit extensions, disputed elections, or governance failures. Several factors underpin this resurgence. Democratic backsliding, declining public trust in civilian institutions, worsening socio-economic conditions, and escalating security threats particularly insurgency and terrorism in the Sahel have created permissive environments for military intervention (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; OECD, 2018). Importantly, these coups have tended to attract varying degrees of popular support, reflecting

widespread disillusionment with constitutional governance rather than outright rejection of democracy.

Shifts from Overt Military Rule to “Guardian” or “Corrective” Coups

A defining feature of contemporary military intervention is the shift in justificatory narratives. Whereas earlier military regimes openly rejected constitutional rule, recent interventions increasingly portray the military as a “guardian” of the constitution or a corrective force intervening to restore legality and national order (Varol, 2015). This discursive shift reflects the growing normative power of constitutionalism and democracy, even as these ideals are undermined in practice. “Corrective” coups often promise short transitional periods, anti-corruption reforms, and eventual elections, blurring the distinction between military and civilian authority (Souaré, 2021). While such interventions may initially appear less repressive than past military dictatorships, they risk normalizing military involvement in politics and weakening the principle of civilian supremacy. Over time, these practices contribute to a cycle in which constitutional crises invite military intervention, which in turn further erodes constitutional governance.

DRIVERS OF CONSTITUTIONAL CRISES

Constitutional crises in Sub-Saharan Africa rarely occur in isolation; rather, they are the cumulative outcome of interrelated political, institutional, socio-economic, and security dynamics. These drivers weaken constitutional governance, erode public trust, and create permissive conditions for military intervention. This section examines the principal drivers of constitutional crises that precede military involvement in politics across the region.

a. Executive Overreach and Constitutional Manipulation

One of the most persistent drivers of constitutional crises in Sub-Saharan Africa is executive overreach, often manifested through deliberate manipulation of constitutional provisions to entrench incumbents in power. Presidential term limits, introduced during the democratization wave of the 1990s as safeguards against authoritarianism, have increasingly been circumvented through constitutional amendments, judicial reinterpretations, or referenda lacking procedural legitimacy (Posner & Young, 2018). Such practices undermine the normative authority of constitutions and provoke political instability, as witnessed in cases such as Guinea, Uganda, and Côte d’Ivoire.

Weak separation of powers further exacerbates executive dominance. In many African states, legislatures lack the autonomy, resources, or political will to effectively check executive power, often functioning as extensions of ruling parties rather than independent oversight bodies (Zewde, M. A. (2022). Similarly, constitutional courts and supreme courts are frequently politicized through executive control over appointments, tenure, and funding. When courts

endorse controversial constitutional changes or electoral outcomes, they lose public credibility and deepen constitutional crises (Zewde, M. A. (2022)). The erosion of judicial independence thus transforms legal disputes into broader legitimacy crises, creating openings for extra-constitutional actors, including the military, to intervene.

b. Electoral Malpractice and Disputed Transitions

Elections are central to constitutional governance, yet they remain a major source of constitutional crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa. Flawed electoral processes characterized by voter suppression, manipulation of electoral laws, and lack of transparency in vote counting frequently result in contested outcomes (Zewde, M. A. 2022). When incumbents exploit state resources and security forces to influence elections, opposition actors often reject results, leading to prolonged political standoffs. The erosion of electoral commission independence is a critical factor in this process. Electoral management bodies are often subject to executive influence, compromising their ability to conduct credible elections (Hartlyn, McCoy, & Mustillo, 2008). In such contexts, post-election disputes escalate into violence, as seen in Kenya (2007–2008) and Côte d’Ivoire (2010–2011), or generate legitimacy vacuums that invite military intervention, as in Mali and Guinea. These post-election crises reflect not merely procedural failures but deeper constitutional breakdowns in the mechanisms for peaceful transfer of power.

c. Institutional Weakness and Governance Failures

Beyond elections, broader governance failures significantly contribute to constitutional crises. Corruption and clientelism remain entrenched in many Sub-Saharan African states, distorting public institutions and weakening accountability (Transparency International, 2022). Neo-patrimonial governance systems prioritize personal loyalty over constitutional norms, eroding the distinction between public and private authority.

Weak legislatures and judicial capture further undermine constitutional governance. Parliaments often lack effective oversight capacity, while anti-corruption agencies are constrained by political interference and limited enforcement powers (Cheeseman, 2015). The failure of accountability mechanisms such as impeachment processes, legislative inquiries, and independent audit institutions means that constitutional violations go unpunished, reinforcing elite impunity. In such contexts, constitutional crises become chronic, and the military may emerge as an alternative, albeit problematic, arbiter of political order.

d. Socio-Economic and Security Pressures

Socio-economic deprivation and security challenges intensify constitutional crises by exacerbating public dissatisfaction with civilian governance. High levels of poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment undermine the social contract and fuel perceptions that constitutional democracy has failed to deliver material benefits (UNDP, 2021). These conditions increase the

appeal of populist and authoritarian solutions, including military intervention framed as a means of restoring order and economic discipline.

Security pressures further strain constitutional systems. Insurgency, terrorism, and transnational crime particularly in the Sahel and Horn of Africa have overwhelmed state capacity and prompted the expansion of military roles in internal security (OECD, 2018). The militarization of internal security often blurs the line between civilian and military authority, normalizing military involvement in governance and weakening civilian oversight. As constitutional institutions struggle to manage these crises, the military's political influence grows, heightening the risk of intervention.

PATTERNS OF MILITARY INTERVENTION

Military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa is neither uniform nor static. Rather, it exhibits identifiable patterns shaped by historical legacies, constitutional arrangements, security environments, and regional political cultures. This section analyzes the dominant typologies of intervention, the justificatory narratives employed by military actors, and regional variations that account for differences in frequency, form, and public reception.

a. Typologies of Intervention

Classic Coups d'État

Classic coups d'état involve the sudden and overt seizure of power by the military through the unconstitutional overthrow of a sitting government. Typically, such coups entail the suspension or abrogation of the constitution, dissolution of legislatures, detention of political leaders, and the establishment of military rule or juntas (Kamara, J. B. (2021). While less frequent than during the Cold War era, classic coups persist in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in contexts of acute political instability or leadership vacuums. These interventions are often executed by elite military factions and justified retrospectively through claims of restoring order or averting state collapse.

“Constitutional” or “Soft” Coups

More recently, a distinct pattern of intervention has emerged in the form of “constitutional” or “soft” coups. These interventions are characterized by their reliance on legalistic discourse and selective adherence to constitutional procedures, even as they violate the constitutional order in substance (Varol, 2015). Military actors intervene following constitutional manipulation by civilian leaders such as illegal term extensions or judicial capture and frame their actions as corrective measures aimed at restoring constitutional legality. Unlike classic coups, these interventions often retain portions of the constitutional framework, appoint civilian technocrats, or commit to short transitional timelines. However, their normative danger lies in

legitimizing military arbitership over constitutional disputes, thereby weakening civilian supremacy.

Military-Backed Transitional Regimes

Military-backed transitional regimes represent a hybrid form of intervention in which the military exerts decisive influence over ostensibly civilian transitional governments. In such cases, the military may refrain from direct rule but retains control over key decision-making processes, including security, foreign policy, and transitional justice (Souaré, 2021). These regimes blur the boundary between military and civilian authority, often prolonging transitions and institutionalizing military influence. While sometimes perceived as pragmatic compromises, they risk entrenching militarization and undermining long-term democratic consolidation.

b. Justifications and Narratives

Restoration of Constitutional Order

A recurring narrative across military interventions is the claim to restore constitutional order. Military leaders frequently present themselves as neutral guardians intervening to correct civilian constitutional violations, such as electoral fraud or illegal constitutional amendments. This narrative draws on widespread public frustration with constitutional manipulation and governance failures. However, by positioning the military as the ultimate arbiter of constitutional legitimacy, such interventions erode the principle that constitutional disputes should be resolved through legal and political institutions.

Anti-Corruption and National Salvation Rhetoric

Anti-corruption and national salvation rhetoric also features prominently in military justifications. Military leaders often portray civilian elites as corrupt, self-serving, and disconnected from popular needs, framing intervention as a moral and patriotic duty (Kamara, J. B. 2021). While corruption is a genuine concern in many Sub-Saharan African states, empirical evidence suggests that military regimes are not inherently less corrupt and often lack effective accountability mechanisms (Transparency International, 2022). This rhetoric nonetheless resonates in contexts of deep socio-economic grievance and institutional decay.

Popular Support and Civil Society Reactions

Public and civil society reactions to military intervention vary significantly. In some cases, military takeovers have attracted popular support, particularly among youth and marginalized groups disillusioned with electoral politics (Cheeseman, 2015). However, civil society organizations, professional associations, and regional actors often adopt more critical positions, emphasizing the long-term risks to democracy and constitutionalism. These divergent reactions highlight the tension between short-term legitimacy and long-term democratic stability.

c. Regional Variations

Francophone vs. Anglophone Patterns

Regional patterns of military intervention often reflect colonial legacies. Francophone states have experienced a higher frequency of recent coups, particularly in West and Central Africa. Scholars attribute this pattern to centralized presidential systems, weaker legislative oversight, and enduring security and political ties with former colonial powers. In contrast, Anglophone states while not immune have generally exhibited stronger traditions of judicial review and parliamentary oversight, contributing to relatively lower coup incidence.

Sahelian Belt versus Coastal States

The Sahelian belt has emerged as a hotspot for military intervention, driven by chronic insecurity, terrorism, and fragile state capacity (OECD, 2018). In contrast, coastal states with more diversified economies and stronger institutions have been relatively more resilient, though constitutional crises persist. This divergence underscores the role of security pressures in shaping civil–military dynamics.

Influence of Colonial Legacies and Security Partnerships

Colonial military structures and postcolonial security partnerships continue to influence patterns of intervention. External military assistance, counterterrorism cooperation, and peacekeeping engagements can enhance military capacity without corresponding improvements in civilian oversight, inadvertently strengthening the political leverage of armed forces (Howe, 2001). These dynamics complicate efforts to professionalize the military and reinforce constitutional governance. Overall, the patterns of military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa reflect adaptive strategies by military actors operating within evolving constitutional and political landscapes. While overt military rule has declined, more subtle and legally framed interventions pose enduring challenges to civilian supremacy and democratic consolidation.

6. Regional and International Responses

Regional and international responses to constitutional crises and military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa play a critical role in shaping both the incentives and constraints faced by military actors. Over the past two decades, African regional organizations and global partners have developed normative and institutional mechanisms to discourage unconstitutional changes of government. However, the effectiveness of these responses remains uneven, reflecting enforcement challenges, geopolitical interests, and tensions between sovereignty and collective security.

a. ECOWAS, AU, and Sub-Regional Mechanisms

Norms against Unconstitutional Changes of Government

The African Union (AU) and sub-regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been at the forefront of efforts to institutionalize norms against unconstitutional changes of government. The AU's Lomé Declaration and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance explicitly condemn military coups, unconstitutional amendments, and other illegal seizures of power, establishing a continental normative framework for constitutionalism (AU, 2000; AU, 2007). ECOWAS has further reinforced these norms through its Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which emphasizes term limits, electoral integrity, and civilian control of the military. These frameworks represent a significant departure from earlier norms of non-interference, signaling a collective commitment to democratic governance. In principle, they provide legal and moral authority for regional intervention in cases of constitutional breakdown and military takeover.

Sanctions, Mediation, and Transitional Timelines

In practice, regional organizations have relied on a combination of sanctions, diplomatic mediation, and negotiated transitional timelines to respond to military interventions. ECOWAS has frequently imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on coup-led regimes, as seen in Mali, Guinea, and Niger, while appointing mediators to facilitate transitions back to civilian rule (Souaré, 2021). Similarly, the AU typically suspends member states following unconstitutional changes of government and calls for time-bound transitions.

While these measures have sometimes succeeded in compelling military leaders to commit to elections, they have also generated significant humanitarian and economic costs, raising questions about proportionality and effectiveness (International Crisis Group, 2023). Moreover, transitional timelines are often extended or renegotiated, allowing military regimes to consolidate power under the guise of reform.

b. International Actors

Role of the UN, EU, and Bilateral Partners

International actors, including the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and bilateral partners, play complementary roles in responding to constitutional crises and military intervention. The UN typically emphasizes diplomatic engagement, human rights monitoring, and support for mediation efforts, while avoiding direct enforcement actions (Bell, 2021). The EU has employed targeted sanctions, election support, and development conditionality to promote constitutional governance.

Bilateral partners such as the United States, France, and China have exerted influence through diplomatic pressure, aid conditionality, and security cooperation. However, their responses

often reflect strategic interests rather than consistent commitment to constitutional norms, resulting in selective enforcement and mixed signals to military regimes (Clapham, 2017).

Geopolitical Competition and Security Assistance

Geopolitical competition has increasingly shaped international responses to military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa. Counterterrorism priorities, access to strategic resources, and rivalry among external powers have led to continued security assistance to military-led regimes, even in the aftermath of coups (OECD, 2018). Such assistance can enhance military capacity without strengthening civilian oversight, inadvertently legitimizing military rule and weakening regional anti-coup norms. Overall, regional and international responses have contributed to the delegitimization of overt military coups but have struggled to prevent more subtle forms of military intervention. Strengthening the effectiveness of these mechanisms requires not only clearer enforcement strategies but also greater consistency, legitimacy, and coordination among regional and international actors.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

Military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa has profound implications for democratic governance, constitutionalism, and the broader political landscape. While often justified as corrective measures or temporary solutions to governance crises, these interventions systematically undermine the normative and institutional foundations of democracy. This section examines the principal consequences of recurrent military involvement in politics.

Erosion of Civilian Supremacy

Civilian supremacy the principle that elected officials and constitutional institutions hold ultimate authority over state affairs is a cornerstone of democratic governance. Military interventions, whether overt coups or more subtle “constitutional” interventions, directly challenge this principle (Kamara, J. B. 2021). Even when framed as guardianship or corrective measures, military actors assume decision-making power that should reside with elected authorities, eroding public perception of legitimate civilian authority. Over time, this diminishes the effectiveness of institutional checks and balances, weakens the rule of law, and encourages political actors to bypass constitutional processes, anticipating that the military may arbitrate contested outcomes (Prempeh, 2008).

Militarization of Politics

Frequent military intervention fosters the militarization of politics, where armed forces increasingly shape policy, influence governance, and participate in political decision-making (McGowan, 2003). Political disputes and succession crises are more likely to be addressed through the threat or use of force rather than negotiation, institutional reform, or electoral

contestation. This dynamic incentivizes political elites to cultivate military alliances as a strategy for securing or retaining power, thereby embedding the military as a central actor in political competition. Militarization also affects civil society, constraining freedoms of expression, assembly, and political mobilization, as armed actors exert control over public discourse and governance processes.

Long-Term Consequences for Democratic Consolidation

Recurrent military intervention undermines democratic consolidation by disrupting institutional continuity and eroding trust in political processes (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Citizens become disillusioned with electoral processes, perceiving elections as ineffective mechanisms for peaceful change. Political parties and legislatures are weakened, and constitutional norms are selectively enforced or ignored, reducing the credibility and stability of democratic governance. Over time, these dynamics can produce a cycle of instability, where constitutional crises provoke military intervention, which in turn weakens civilian institutions, setting the stage for further crises.

Risks of Normalization of Military Intervention

Perhaps the most insidious consequence is the gradual normalization of military intervention in politics. When coups or corrective interventions are framed as necessary responses to governance failures, they establish precedents that weaken the normative power of constitutions and regional anti-coup frameworks (Varol, 2015). Subsequent political actors may perceive military intervention as an acceptable tool for resolving constitutional disputes or governance challenges. Over time, this undermines long-term efforts at democratization, entrenches hybrid regimes, and blurs the distinction between civilian and military authority, making sustainable constitutional governance increasingly difficult to achieve.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the recurrent constitutional crises and military interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa requires a multi-faceted approach that combines legal, institutional, and socio-economic reforms. Sustainable solutions must target both the structural vulnerabilities that precipitate military involvement and the normative gaps that allow such interventions to persist. The following policy recommendations are proposed:

Strengthening Constitutional Safeguards and Term-Limit Protections

Robust constitutional design is essential to preventing executive overreach and ensuring orderly political succession. Constitutions should include unambiguous term-limit provisions, clear rules for succession, and mechanisms for enforcement that are insulated from political manipulation (Posner & Young, 2018). Constitutional amendment processes must be

transparent, inclusive, and require broad consensus to prevent arbitrary extensions of executive power. Additionally, institutional mechanisms for monitoring compliance with constitutional provisions such as independent commissions or legislative oversight committees should be empowered and adequately resourced.

Reforming Civil–Military Relations and Professionalization

Professionalizing the military and clarifying its constitutional role are critical for reducing the risk of intervention. This includes establishing clear chains of civilian authority, codifying military subordination to elected officials, and ensuring merit-based recruitment and promotion systems. Training programs emphasizing the apolitical role of the armed forces, respect for human rights, and adherence to constitutional mandates can foster a culture of professionalism. Strengthening parliamentary oversight of defense budgets, procurement, and military operations further reinforces civilian supremacy.

Enhancing Judicial Independence and Electoral Integrity

Judicial independence is vital for resolving constitutional disputes and preventing executive manipulation of the legal system. Reforms should focus on transparent judicial appointments, secure tenure for judges, and adequate resources to ensure impartial adjudication (Ginsburg & Moustafa, 2018). Electoral integrity must be reinforced through independent electoral commissions, robust monitoring mechanisms, and transparent processes for vote counting and dispute resolution. Strengthening the rule of law reduces the legitimacy vacuum that military actors exploit to justify intervention.

Regional Enforcement of Constitutional Norms

Regional organizations, including the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, should enhance enforcement mechanisms against unconstitutional changes of government. This can include calibrated sanctions, timely mediation, and stricter conditions for the recognition of transitional regimes (Souaré, 2021). Coordinated regional responses, coupled with long-term engagement, can increase the cost of military intervention and reinforce normative constraints. Additionally, capacity-building programs for regional institutions can improve monitoring, early warning, and preventive diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex interplay between constitutional crises and military intervention in Sub-Saharan Africa, highlighting the structural, political, and socio-economic drivers that undermine democratic governance. The analysis demonstrates that military intervention is rarely an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is deeply rooted in recurring patterns of executive overreach, electoral malpractice, institutional weakness, and socio-economic and

security pressures. Case studies from West, Central, East, and Southern Africa illustrate both the continuity and evolution of military involvement, from overt coups to “constitutional” or hybrid interventions, and reveal the critical role of legitimacy deficits in enabling military action.

The study contributes to scholarship on African governance and security by integrating civil–military relations theory, constitutionalism, and state fragility frameworks to explain the persistence and adaptation of military intervention in the face of formal democratic norms. It highlights how constitutional manipulation, weak oversight institutions, and socio-economic grievances interact to create permissive conditions for coups, offering a nuanced understanding of why military actors continue to intervene despite the proliferation of legal and regional safeguards. The comparative analysis also underscores regional variations, showing that colonial legacies, security environments, and institutional strength influence the frequency and form of intervention.

Looking forward, the future of constitutionalism in Sub-Saharan Africa depends on strengthening institutional resilience, promoting judicial independence, professionalizing militaries, and addressing underlying socio-economic inequalities. Preventing the normalization of military intervention requires not only robust constitutional safeguards but also the cultivation of political legitimacy and public trust in democratic institutions.

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