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EMERGING MILITARY POPULISM
IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

A Background Paper

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Introduction

In recent years, Africa has witnessed a troubling resurgence of military rule, often framed as necessary interventions to rescue nations from corruption, insecurity, and perceived neocolonial influence. In almost all the countries that have experienced them in recent times, military takeovers are increasingly celebrated by sections of the population, largely amplified through social media and Pan-Africanist rhetoric. These narratives portray the military coup leaders as heroic defenders of national sovereignty and African interests. However, behind this growing rhetoric lies a deeper erosion of democratic structures, human rights, and press freedom.

Between 2020 and 2023, Africa experienced a striking resurgence of military coups, with seven countries Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Chad, Sudan, Niger, and Gabon undergoing successful military takeovers. In the Sahel region particularly, these events unfolded against a backdrop of entrenched insecurity, state fragility, and the growing menace of jihadist insurgencies. Far from being isolated incidents, coup d'états signal a broader crisis in postcolonial state formation, wherein formal democratic institutions have failed to secure legitimacy, deliver public goods, or respond effectively to escalating violence and economic distress.[1]

West Africa's regional democratic architecture, often celebrated in multilateral forums, has proven illusory for many citizens who feel excluded from political and economic life.[2]

[1] Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010 : A New Dataset," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (2011): 249–59.
[2] Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 85–120

Traditionally, military coups in Africa are often viewed as symptomatic of deeper legitimacy vacuums.[3] This view challenges the often-simplistic characterisation of coups as democratic backsliding. These interventions, however fraught, are increasingly framed not as simple ruptures from hollow political orders, but as interruptions of democratic processes.

Following the recent coups across the continent, post-coup trajectories have diverged significantly. In Gabon and Chad, transitional elections have been used to confer a semblance of constitutional legitimacy with the respective coup leaders winning. In Sudan, the country slipped into a brutal civil war, with different parts of its military fighting each other to take control of the country. In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, a distinct political experiment is underway. Rather than seeking immediate electoral validation, or restituting power back to elected civilians, the military leaders have consolidated power through discourses of anti-imperial rupture and national rebirth. They have formed a confederation called the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), reoriented foreign policy away from traditional partners such as France, and implemented expansive narratives of sovereignty, resistance, and regeneration[4], including the scrapping of the electoral commission and extension of tenure of military juntas for unlimited five-year term without recourse to election.

These regimes present themselves not merely as transitional authorities, but as revolutionary vanguards, engaged in

[3] Leonardo A. Villalón, "Political Legitimacy in the Sahel: Crisis, Repression, and the Breakdown of Order," African Affairs 122, no. 486 (2023): 1–22.
[4] Rahmane Idrissa, "Mali, the Sahel and the Crisis of Liberal Interventionism," Journal of Modern African Studies60, no. 2 (2022): 185–205.

existential battles to reclaim national dignity and reconstitute the state.[5] This form of regime consolidation blends authoritarian control with appeals to popular identification, bypassing liberal norms while invoking the moral authority of postcolonial emancipation. The result is a novel ideological formation, one that seeks in the short term to replace the performance of electoral ritual with what it portrays as authentic sovereignty grounded in sacrifice and struggle.

In this sense, we define military populism as a legitimising strategy in which military rulers claim to embody the popular will of the disillusioned citizens while positioning themselves against discredited political elites, foreign actors, and liberal-democratic institutions. This background paper draws on a broader multi-disciplinary literature that examines populism not only as a style of politics but as a "logic of articulation" that divides society into antagonistic camps: the *pure people* versus the *corrupt elite*.[6] In the Sahel, this cleavage of populism is further extended to include neocolonial powers – chiefly France – as external enemies responsible for domestic suffering. Military populism, thus, becomes a hybrid tool that merges populist claims to authenticity, nationalist appeals to sovereignty, and militarised images of protection and order.[7]

In the next 8 months, our research team from CDD West Africa and OIDH in Côte d'Ivoire will produce a series of bi-monthly reports and statements to explore, with evidence from francophone and anglophone West Africa, the tactics and

[5] Ousmane Sagara, "Le populisme militaire et la quête de souveraineté au Mali," Politique Africaine 166, no. 2 (2022): 87–108
[6] Ernesto Laclau, On Populist Reason (London: Verso, 2005), 39–47
[7] Ruth First, The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'État (London: Penguin, 1970), 223–40.

approaches for promoting military populism on social media. This research includes how military populism is evolving to remain relevant, adapting new technologies, interacting with or being supported by foreign actors, attempting to manipulate events in the region, such as elections, and targeting domestic and foreign audiences. It will identify and analyse the types of narratives that are promoted and their apparent or hidden objectives, as well as their origin, where it is possible to discern.

This project aims to develop evidence-informed and targeted recommendations for how to combat authoritarian propaganda. This may include identifying and flagging for social media platforms where there are clear cases of inauthentic behavior that violate their terms of service; indicating for journalists and civil society the areas to focus their efforts related to identifying manipulated information; promoting positive stories and narratives of tolerance and democracy; and providing governmental decision-makers with clear information about the nature of the threat to the information space so they can take informed decisions.

In the series of reports to be generated, we will research and highlight the increasing convergence between populism and what Steven Feldstein calls digital authoritarianism.[8] We are particularly interested in how military populists leveraged social media platforms to amplify their narratives, mobilise public support, and further delegitimise opposition voices. The use of patriotic imagery, anti-Western slogans, and emotionally

[8] Steven Feldstein, The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology Is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 98–132.

charged videos often produced or amplified by online influencers creates a parallel information space where state legitimacy is no longer derived from elections, but from perceived authenticity and performative resistance.[9] We are interested not in the randomness of the these information campaigns, but the actors (domestic and foreign) that assure their smooth coordination.

Our research team uses a multidisciplinary approach to examine the structure, dissemination, and impact of military populist narratives in francophone West Africa, with a comparative reference to other subregions. The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What ideological themes and narratives are deployed by military regimes to legitimise their rule?
2. How are digital media platforms used to disseminate these narratives and construct popular support?
3. What is the role of foreign actors—state and non-state—in amplifying or facilitating these propaganda efforts?
4. How do military regimes use political events (elections, diplomatic summits, public protests) as narrative opportunities to reinforce legitimacy?

[9] Iginio Gagliardone et al., Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: The Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 45–71.

Methodological Approach

To address the above questions, our team adopts a comparative and cross-national research design combining qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and social media monitoring. This approach includes four key data collection methods: First, we systematically sample and analyse public speeches, social media content, and official communiqués. Secondly, we track the online engagement metrics (hashtags, shares, video virality) across social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Telegram. In analysing media content, this study adopts the ABCD framework—Actor, Behaviour, Content, Degree—to monitor and assess the identified propaganda campaigns. Within this framework, the Actor (A) refers to the source or entity involved in the creation, dissemination or amplification of content. Behavior (B) assesses how the content is promoted or circulated, focusing on patterns of amplification, network structures, and the tactics or techniques employed to increase visibility or influence. Content (C) involves a detailed thematic and discursive analysis of what is being communicated, including the message, visuals, narrative frames, language, and tone, while also assessing whether the content is factual, manipulated, satirical, emotive, or deceptive. Finally, Degree (D) evaluates the extent to which the content influences its environment by measuring reach, engagement levels, and the potential for social or political harm. This framework allows for a structured and comparative assessment of how strategic media narratives operate across digital platforms.

Thirdly, we deploy semi-structured qualitative interviews with regional experts, journalists, digital rights advocates, and civil society actors. Finally, we review the archives of electoral and policy developments since the coup in each of the selected countries of focus of this study. In documenting the rise of military populism, this paper does not only contribute to the emerging literature on authoritarian adaptation and digital politics in Africa, it also offers timely insights for policymakers, civil society, and international organisations seeking to respond to the region's shifting political landscape.

This background paper sets the tone of this project by conceptually examining the historical and ideological foundations of military populism in Africa, tracing the legacy of colonial militarism, the post-independence pattern of coups, and the enduring image of the military as a saviour of the nation. Secondly, the paper maps out the discursive architecture of military populism, focusing on themes of national redemption, anti-Western resistance, and the militarisation of sovereignty. Thirdly, it explores the tactics and technologies of propaganda in the digital age, analysing how social media platforms are weaponised to reinforce power, shape domestic and international opinions, and build transnational echochambers with foreign support. Fourth, it evaluates the threats this phenomenon poses to the regional information space, including the risks to democratic transitions, the shrinking civic space, and the normalisation of authoritarian narratives.

Historical & Ideological Foundations

The concept of militarism stems from the Latin word militaris, meaning “pertaining to soldiers,” and entered the English language via the French militarisme in the 19th century. It broadly refers to a political and ideological orientation that emphasises the centrality of military values, institutions, and actors in the organisation of state and society. The Oxford English Dictionary defines militarism as “the belief or desire of a government or people that a country should maintain a strong military capability and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interests.” In political science, militarism also entails the penetration of military logic, discipline, hierarchy, and force into civilian domains, often resulting in the subordination of democratic institutions to military control.[10]

In the context of Francophone West Africa, militarism must be understood not only as a doctrinal belief but also as a historical inheritance. French colonial rule established highly militarised systems of governance in the region, notably through the creation of military recruitment systems such as the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, a corps of African soldiers used both for colonial warfare and domestic repression.[11] These forces were essential to France’s imperial project, but they also served as training grounds for a generation of colonial African military elites who would later emerge as political actors in the post-independence period.

[10] Shaw, M. (1991). *Post-Military Society: Militarism, Demilitarization and War at the End of the Twentieth Century.* Temple University Press
[11] Echenberg, M. (1991). *Colonial Army in French West Africa.* Ohio University Press

The colonial military apparatus embedded certain ideological norms, including loyalty to centralised authority, a distrust of civilian rule, and the use of force as a legitimate instrument of governance that persisted after independence. The French approach to governance in West Africa blurred the lines between military and civil authority, resulting in a militarised conception of statehood.[12] After independence, many Francophone states inherited not only the personnel but also the institutional DNA of these colonial security systems. In countries like Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where civilian governance quickly proved fragile, the military came to occupy an outsized role in the political sphere, frequently justifying its interventions as necessary correctives to corruption, disorder, or external interference.[13] This militarisation of the political imagination, where the armed forces are viewed not just as protectors but as saviours of the nation, has become deeply ingrained in the region's political culture. The next sections of this paper explore how this legacy evolved through repeated coups and how the myth of the military as a redeemer continues to influence popular attitudes and political developments in contemporary Francophone West Africa.

French colonial rule in West Africa was built on a foundation of militarised governance. From the late 19th century onward, the colonial administration embedded military logic into every aspect of rule, treating the colonies as territories to be controlled through coercion rather than consent. Unlike the British model that co-opted traditional authorities, the French

[12] Ginio, R. (2006). *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa.* University of Nebraska Press
[13] Decalo, S. (1990). *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style.* Yale University Press; Bayart, J. F. (1993). The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly. Longman

centralised power under military officers and administrators, merging civil and military functions and establishing a hierarchical control system that endured into the postcolonial state.[14] A cornerstone of this system was the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, African infantry units formally established in 1857 to project French power throughout West Africa. These regiments fought in both World Wars and other colonial campaigns. While celebrated for their loyalty and martial service, they also endured systemic racial discrimination: stricter discipline, lower pay, and fewer opportunities for promotion compared to French soldiers.[15] Beyond their immediate military role, the *tirailleurs* system functioned as an instrument of socialisation. Recruits underwent rigorous training that inculcated discipline, obedience, and allegiance to the French command. This process produced African military elites steeped in militarised norms, many of whom would later assume leadership roles in post-independence armies.[16]

Underlying this militarisation was the French assimilationist ideology, which aimed to "civilise" colonial subjects. African officers were incorporated into this system through military schools and officer training modelled on French military culture. While this created a small cadre of elite African soldiers aligned with metropolitan values, it also reinforced broader patterns of exclusion and hierarchical control.[17] In newly sovereign Francophone West African states, the military

[14] Alice L. Conklin, A Mission to Civilize: *The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford University Press, 1997).
[15] Michael A. Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (James Currey/Ohio University Press, 1991).
[16] Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006).
[17] Emily Lynn Osborn Schmidt, *Cold War and Decolonization in Guinea*, 1946–1958 (Ohio University Press, 2007).

remained one of the most structured and capable institutions. It retained the emphasis on hierarchy, centralised command, and militarised discipline, laying the institutional and ideological groundwork for subsequent military interventions in politics.

The first decade following independence, spanning approximately the 1960s to early 1970s, was characterised in Francophone West Africa by the steady erosion of civilian political institutions and a corresponding ascendancy of military actors within the state apparatus. Many postcolonial states inherited not only fragile bureaucratic infrastructures but also unresolved tensions between modern state-building and traditional governance. In the absence of strong institutions and inclusive political processes, the military, often the best-organised and most disciplined entity in the state, quickly emerged as a powerful political force.[18] In countries such as Togo, Benin, Niger, and Burkina Faso, the pattern of military intervention was particularly pronounced. Togo witnessed West Africa's first post-independence coup in 1963, when President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated by soldiers led by Étienne Eyadéma (later known as Gnassingbé Eyadéma), who would go on to rule for nearly four decades.[19] In Benin, the military repeatedly overthrew civilian governments between 1963 and 1972, culminating in the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist regime under Major Mathieu Kérékou. Niger and Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) experienced similar instability, with successive coups that justified military takeovers as

[18] Decalo, S. (1990). *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style.* Yale University Press.
[19] Decalo, S. (1990). *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style.* Yale University Press, pp. 45–52

necessary responses to corruption, political paralysis, or ethnic fragmentation.[20]

These post-independence coups were not simply opportunistic power grabs; rather, they were legitimised by the military's inherited colonial identity as the institutional guardian of order and discipline. Colonial military structures emphasising hierarchy, loyalty, and technocratic command had trained generations of African officers to view themselves as more capable than elected civilians in delivering governance. As Jean François Bayart notes, many African states played "politics of the belly," where informal networks of patronage and corruption undermined state legitimacy and created vacuums that militaries exploited.[21]

The persistence of French military cooperation after independence further entrenched this dynamics. Under the doctrine of *Françafrique*, France maintained deep ties with its former colonies through defence agreements, arms transfers, and military training programmes. French troops were stationed in African capitals, and French officers continued to exert influence within local armies. While presented as a stabilising force, these arrangements enabled and, at times, even facilitated military regimes that aligned with French geopolitical interests, often at the expense of democratic development.[22] The legacy of military dominance in Francophone West Africa cannot be understood without accounting for the dual inheritance of colonial militarism and

[20] Decalo, S. (1990). *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style.* Yale University Press, pp. 88–103.
[21] Bayart, J.-F. (1993). *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly.* Longman.
[22] Verschave, F.-X. (2000). *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République.* Stock.

postcolonial political fragility. The military, socialised to act as both protector and manager of the state, repeatedly stepped into governance roles, often with popular support or indifference from citizens disillusioned with weak civilian rule.

In post-independence Francophone West Africa, military regimes have consistently invoked the narrative of the armed forces as the nation's ultimate saviour, stepping in during moments of acute political crisis to rescue the state from decay. This myth has proven remarkably durable, rooted in colonial legacies that positioned the military as a disciplined and modernising force, distinct from the perceived inefficiencies of civilian elites. In contemporary political discourse, this narrative resurfaces during each military intervention, often framed as a response to insecurity, corruption, or state collapse. Recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have deployed similar justifications, portraying the military as the only viable institution capable of salvaging national sovereignty and restoring dignity to the state.[23]

Central to this myth is the moral distinction that military leaders draw between themselves and elected politicians. Whereas civilians are portrayed as corrupt, inept, or beholden to foreign interests, military rulers present themselves as patriotic, self-sacrificing actors acting in the best interest of the people. In Niger's 2023 coup, for instance, General Abdourahamane Tchiani justified the overthrow of President Mohamed Bazoum as a necessary intervention to prevent "the

[23] Niang, A. (2023). Militarized Nationalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the Sahel. *African Affairs*, 122(488), 25–47.

gradual and inevitable demise" of the country.[24] Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the military junta that emerged in 2022 claimed its actions were imposed by the civilian government's failure to respond effectively to jihadist violence, arguing that military rule was essential to save the republic.[25] These appeals to duty, sacrifice, and national survival reinforce the perception of the military as a neutral force above the fray of civilian politics. What distinguishes the current wave of military takeovers is how this saviour narrative is increasingly embedded in anti-imperialist and populist rhetoric. Coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have all been accompanied by strong denunciations of France's role in the region and broader Western influence. Military leaders have not only expelled French troops and advisors but also cultivated new geopolitical alignments, particularly with Russia. This strategic pivot has been framed as a reassertion of national sovereignty and a rejection of neocolonial dependency.[26] In the streets of Ouagadougou and Bamako, demonstrators have waved Russian flags and chanted slogans in support of Russian President Vladimir Putin, equating military rule with a new form of liberation. These regimes thus fuse authoritarian consolidation with populist performance, presenting themselves as champions of a long-overdue anti-colonial rebirth.[27]

This blending of militarism, nationalism, and populism creates a potent ideological cocktail. It not only legitimises the seizure of

[24] Thurston, A. (2022). The Political Lives of Sahelian Coups. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.* https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/01/political-lives-of-sahelian-coups-pub-87864
[25] Decalo, S. (1990). *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style*. Yale University Press, pp. 95–102.
[26] Bojang Jr, S. (2023). "Coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso: Less Geopolitics, More Personal." *The Africa Report*. https://www.theafricareport.com/352802
[27] Afriques en Lutte. (2023). West African Coups: Just Changing Masters? https://www.afriquesenlutte.org

power but also reframes authoritarian rule as the fulfilment of popular will. In doing so, these regimes exploit deep-seated public disillusionment with democracy's failures, especially in contexts where elections have produced neither stability nor development. As Niang observes, this form of military populism harnesses both historical memory and emotional resonance, crafting a vision of governance that is militarised, anti-elite, and post-liberal.[28] Rather than promising democracy, these regimes offer authenticity, resistance, and sovereignty a dangerous redefinition of political legitimacy in the region.

In the foregoing context, militarism in Francophone West Africa is not merely a legacy of past coups, but a deeply embedded political logic rooted in colonial governance and reinforced through decades of institutional fragility. The enduring perception of the military as a moral and national saviour has allowed armed forces to recurrently justify interventions, amidst crises of legitimacy and insecurity. As recent developments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger show, this logic continues to shape political trajectories, often to the detriment of democratic consolidation. Addressing this challenge requires more than opposing coups it demands sustained efforts to rebuild civilian institutions, reinforce democratic norms, and restore public confidence in non-military forms of governance.

[28] Niang, A. (2023). Militarized Nationalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the Sahel. *African Affairs*, 122(488), 25–47.

Continuities & Discontinuities of Military Intervention in West Africa

The military populism trend is not new in Africa. The growing pattern and ideology dates back to the 1960s/70s, in countries such as Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Togo, Congo-Kinshasa, and Dahomey (Benin). These coups often arise from a mix of ethnic factionalism, economic scarcity, and struggles for power rather than clear class-based conflicts.

The military populism of the 1990s and 2020s have largely remained the same and characterised by the same practices of coups and growing public support for military rule. For instance, in Mali, the coup led by Colonel Assimi Goita in August 2020 justified their overthrow based on the rising insecurity, corruption and resistance of neo-colonialism (anti-French). This is similar to the justification of Burkina Faso and Niger coup leaders. Some other instances include the 2021 Guinea and 2023 Gabon coups, which were justified by electoral fraud and constitutional manipulation. Across these countries, the military rulers have ceased to relinquish power, indicating a similar pattern to the 1960s/70s.

The ideological foundation of military populism rides on the wave that military leaders are adopting populist strategies, presenting themselves as the true representatives of the people's will and often positioning themselves as saviours against corrupt and/or ineffective civilian governments. This trend is gaining traction (again), particularly in parts of Africa, due to the increasing inability of civilian governments to deliver good governance and development to the citizens.

This increasing trend of military leaders seizing power and presenting themselves as champions of the people, in response to widespread dissatisfaction with democratic governments, has resurfaced in the 2020s and remains particularly prominent in West and Central Africa.

Historically, military leaders have continuously championed the idea of African unity, self-determination, and resistance to external domination. In their resolve to popularise their illegitimate military takeover, military populist leaders have often invoked Pan-African rhetoric to legitimise their rule and appeal to popular aspirations for continental solidarity.

This is evident in the style of leaders like Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso and Jerry Rawlings of Ghana. During their rule, they positioned themselves as champions of Pan-African ideals, advocating for African unity, economic independence, and collective resistance to foreign influence and exploitation. This same pattern is recurring among current leaders such as Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso whose sympathisers frequently reference as Pan-Africanist, to justify their actions, presenting military intervention as a means to protect national and continental sovereignty against internal and external threats.

Central to military populism ideology is also anti-imperialism tenets, portraying the military leaders as defenders of national sovereignty and the “hero” against colonial powers who are unrelenting in extending their neo-colonial practices. Since there exist gaps such as continuous economic dependency, military and political interventions on these (former) colonial leaders, these military sympathisers and leaders are filling that gap to resonate with the people’s frustration.

For instance, the coups across Africa are accompanied by strong anti-imperialist sentiments, especially against France in the case of Niger and Burkina Faso. In fact, the military leaders are accusing these French and Western powers of directly supporting corrupt practices, destabilising local governance and fuelling underdevelopment across Africa. Hence, their resolve to seize power is to put an end to all these abysmal practices according to their logic.

Therefore, the emerging and growing wave of military populism has historical antecedents, and it is deeply rooted in pan-African, anti-imperialist, and anti-neocolonial discourses, shaping both the justification for military interventions and the broader struggle for sovereignty and self-determination on the continent.

The Crisis of Liberal Democracy & Militarised Sovereignty

Military rule is gaining prominence across Africa, and the military leaders are putting all efforts towards legitimising their illegitimacy. Captain Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso has announced military transition and delayed elections. Colonel Mamady Doumbouya of Guinea has also promised transition, all in a bid to legitimise their takeover. Every of their actions are tailored towards portraying themselves as principal guarantors of state authority and national integrity.

At the centre of this militarised sovereignty is the crisis of liberal democracy whereby, liberal democratic governments have struggled to provide dividends of democracy and to address growing grievances among the people. That is, the failure of liberal democracy to guarantee security of lives and property, and provide for the welfare of the people has led the military to pose as saviours. It is to this extent that the people see and accept/welcome the men in uniform as saviours. Therefore, issues such as insecurity, corruption, and service delivery have created a fertile ground for military interventions, and when the military men mount their campaigns and justification on these issues, they gain the people's acceptance. This acceptance leads to growing popularity.

So, the liberal democracy centres around the supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, periodic elections, separation of power and protection of human rights which negates the principle of militarised sovereignty. Opposingly, militarised sovereignty centres around military force, imposing order, and defending the sovereignty of the nation.

Therefore, even though opposing, militarised sovereignty is posed as a reaction to the inability of liberal democracy to meet the basic expectations of governance in many fragile states across Africa.

Repression of Freedom of Press & Normalisation of Authoritarian Narratives

One of the most immediate and dangerous consequences of military regimes is the clampdown on press freedom. The media, tasked with speaking 'truth to power,' holding leaders accountable, and amplifying citizen voices are made a prime target in the consolidation of authoritarian rule. For example, in Mali, the transitional military government suspended international broadcasters *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) and *France 24* in 2022 after they reported on alleged abuses by the Malian army and foreign mercenaries.[29] The ban was not only a blow to international reporting but it also sent a chilling message to local journalists, many of whom now operate under the threat of surveillance, harassment or arrest. This environment fosters self-censorship and undermines the media's role in promoting transparency.

While the crackdown on media during the military junta is mostly focused on traditional media operations, social media in recent times has also faced censorship. Being a platform used for civic engagement and protest in the digital age, social media also faces restrictions by military-led governments. This is often done by restricting internet access or surveilling online activities to silence dissent. In Burkina Faso, following the military coup in January 2022, internet outages became more frequent, especially during moments of unrest or public demonstrations.[30] This intentional information blackout limits

[29] Public Media Alliance (2022). Mali: Suspension of France 24 and RFI must be revoked https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/mali-suspension-of-france-24-and-rfi-must-be-revoked/
[30] Access Now. (2022). Burkina Faso must immediately end its internet shutdown, not extend it. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/burkina-faso-internet-shutdown/

citizens' ability to organise, report abuses, or express dissatisfaction, thus effectively muting democratic discourse.

Military regimes in Francophone West Africa have increasingly delayed or distorted electoral processes under the pretext of restoring national security, implementing institutional reforms, or reclaiming national sovereignty. In Mali, the junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta postponed elections originally scheduled for February 2022, then again in 2023, citing technical and security concerns.[31] In Burkina Faso, following the 2022 coup by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, the junta extended the transition timeline by an additional five years in 2024, following a national consultation process that critics argued lacked broad representation.[32] In July 2025, the Junta scrapped the country's electoral commission for cost-saving and sovereign control reasons. The justifications for electoral delays, while often couched in the language of national renewal, serve to entrench military rule and delay democratic accountability.

Beyond electoral postponements, military regimes have actively manipulated legal frameworks to retain control. In Mali and Guinea, constitutions were suspended and replaced with transitional charters that expanded executive power and weakened checks and balances.[33] In several cases, new electoral commissions were created under transitional arrangements, often staffed with appointees loyal to the military leadership. These commissions lack independence and

[31] International Crisis Group. (2023). *Mali: Avoiding a Dead-End in the Transition*. Africa Report No. 307.
[32] Reuters. (2024, May 25). Burkina Faso extends junta rule by five years. https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-extends-junta-rule-by-five-years-2024-05-25/
[33] IDEA. (2023). *Annual Review of Constitutional and Electoral Changes in Africa*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

transparency, further undermining public trust in future elections. In some instances, transitional leaders hint at contesting elections themselves once civilian rule is restored, blurring the line between interim stewardship and self-legitimisation through rigged democratic processes.[34] These dynamics erode citizens' belief in elections as reliable and peaceful mechanisms for leadership succession.

The implications are far-reaching. ECOWAS, once seen – especially since the adoption of its 1993 Revised Treaty, as a strong normative actor for democratic governance in West African region, now struggle to enforce credible timelines for transitions.[35] Its inability to deter repeated coups or reverse unconstitutional changes has weakened its legitimacy and influence. The apparent success of juntas in consolidating power without significant international or regional pushback risks normalising military interventions across the region. In turn, this contributes to a broader crisis of democratic legitimacy, particularly in contexts where electoral institutions were already fragile.

Military regimes in Francophone West Africa have consistently targeted civil society actors as part of broader strategies to consolidate power and silence dissent. In the aftermath of the July 2023 coup in Niger, the junta suspended the activities of several prominent civil society organisations, imposed restrictions on public gatherings, and issued vague decrees

[34] Al Jazeera. (2022, March 7). Guinea junta head says he may run for president after transition. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/7/guinea-junta-leader-says-he-may-run-for-president

[35] Darracq, V. (2023). "ECOWAS and the Limits of Regional Diplomacy in West Africa's Military Transitions." *African Affairs*, 122(488), 73–94.

criminalising "subversive speech."[36] In Burkina Faso, the government under Captain Ibrahim Traoré has similarly cracked down on civic actors, detaining activists critical of the transition process and banning protests deemed "threats to public order."[37] These actions not only curtail freedom of association and expression but also disrupt the ability of citizens to organise, demand accountability, or influence governance outside formal state structures.

Independent journalism has also come under increasing threat. Military authorities across the region have used a mix of censorship, intimidation, and legal harassment to silence the press. In Mali, authorities suspended the broadcasting licenses of *Radio France Internationale* (RFI) and *France 24* in 2022, accusing them of spreading "false information" and undermining national morale.[38] Journalists in Burkina Faso and Guinea have faced arbitrary arrests, threats from security forces, and frequent internet disruptions aimed at suppressing the flow of information.[39] In some cases, military regimes have replaced independent media voices with state-controlled outlets that promote regime narratives and discredit opposition actors. These tactics mirror broader patterns of authoritarian resilience, where control over information is as central to regime survival as control over territory.

Beyond overt repression, military-led governments increasingly

[36] Human Rights Watch. (2023, August 10). Niger: Junta Cracks Down on Civil Society." https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/10/niger-junta-cracks-down-civil-society
[37] Amnesty International. (2024). *Burkina Faso: Civic Space Shrinking under Military Rule.* https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2024/04/burkina-faso-civic-space/
[38] Reporters Without Borders (RSF). (2022, March 17). "Mali suspends RFI and France 24." https://rsf.org/en/news/mali-suspends-rfi-and-france-24
[39] Committee to Protect Journalists. (2023). "Guinea, Burkina Faso: Journalists Face Threats Amid Military Crackdowns." https://cpj.org

deploy legal and rhetorical tools to delegitimise civil society and independent journalism. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that receive foreign funding or advocate for democratic reforms are often branded as “agents of foreign interference” or as collaborators with external enemies.[40] This nationalist framing allows regimes to justify restrictions under the guise of defending sovereignty, while simultaneously eroding the credibility of the very institutions tasked with holding them accountable. Such trends significantly diminish civic space, limit political pluralism, and reduce public access to independent sources of information, all of which are vital to democratic life.

Military regimes in Francophone West Africa increasingly rely on discursive strategies that frame authoritarianism as a patriotic and morally necessary response to national crises. In their various narratives, military rulers are cast as defenders of sovereignty, protectors of the people, and correctors of civilian failure. The image cultivated is one of principled, apolitical soldiers intervening reluctantly but heroically to save the nation from collapse. In Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, coup leaders have portrayed themselves as morally superior to corrupt political elites, often drawing contrasts between their discipline and selflessness and the greed or incompetence of ousted civilian governments.[41] By framing authoritarian rule not as a betrayal of democracy but as its preservation or purification, these regimes cultivate legitimacy rooted in sacrifice and national redemption.

[40] Freedom House. (2023). Nations in Transit: *West Africa Regional Overview*. https://freedomhouse.org
[41] Niang, A. (2023). “Militarized Nationalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the Sahel.” *African Affairs*, 122(488), 25–47

This normalisation of authoritarianism is reinforced through strategic control of media and digital platforms. State-aligned television, radio, and online channels promote nationalist rhetoric and vilify external actors, particularly France and ECOWAS as neocolonial forces seeking to destabilise or recolonise the region.[42] In Burkina Faso and Mali, pro-Russian imagery such as the public waving of Russian flags and chants of "Vive Putin" (Long live Putin) has become increasingly visible in demonstrations and official communication, often presented as symbols of resistance against Western hypocrisy.[43] Social media influencers and online activists sympathetic to military regimes help amplify these narratives, spreading hashtags, viral videos, and patriotic slogans that portray the juntas as embodiments of popular will. This digital ecosystem creates an alternative moral economy where democracy is devalued and sovereignty is equated with strong military leadership.

The long-term consequence of this narrative shift is the erosion of democratic norms and expectations. As authoritarian rhetoric becomes normalised, younger generations may increasingly view elections, civic pluralism, and institutional accountability as secondary to the idea of national stability under military stewardship.[44] By reshaping public imagination around governance, these regimes do more than seize power; they reframe what legitimate power looks like. Left unchallenged, this ideological entrenchment risks creating a

[42] Thurston, A. (2022). "The Political Lives of Sahelian Coups." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/09/01/political-lives-of-sahelian-coups-pub-87864
[43] Bojang Jr, S. (2023). "Coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso: Less Geopolitics, More Personal." *The Africa Report.* https://www.theafricareport.com/352802
[44] Freedom House. (2023). *Nations in Transit: West Africa Regional Overview.* https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2023/west-africa-overview

durable form of post-democratic authoritarianism in West Africa, with implications far beyond current transitions.

The disruption of democratic transitions, the systematic erosion of civic space, and the normalisation of authoritarian narratives form a mutually reinforcing ecosystem that entrenches military rule in Francophone West Africa. Each element weakens institutional and societal resistance to authoritarianism, making it progressively more difficult to restore democratic norms or organise credible transitions. By simultaneously dismantling electoral safeguards, silencing dissent, and reshaping public perceptions of legitimacy, military regimes in Francophone West Africa are not merely ruling by force, they are reshaping the political terrain to sustain their dominance. In such a context, the pathway back to democratic governance becomes increasingly narrow, uncertain and contested.

Conclusion

This background paper argues that militarism in Francophone West Africa is rooted in colonial legacies that embedded military values, hierarchy, and coercion into governance, serving both imperial aims and shaping early postcolonial elites. After independence, fragile civilian institutions and unresolved political tensions enabled the military — perceived as disciplined and nationalistic — to justify repeated coups as guardians of order and sovereignty. The resurgence of military populism today, in which juntas portray themselves as patriotic saviours combating corruption, insecurity, and neocolonial domination closely resembles that historical pattern. These regimes exploit widespread disillusionment with the failures of liberal democracy, invoking pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist rhetoric to legitimise their rule. Simultaneously, they erode democratic structures by delaying elections, repressing civil society and the press, and normalising authoritarian narratives through state media and digital propaganda. This militarised sovereignty reframes governance as a moral duty of the armed forces, fostering a durable post-democratic order that threatens long-term democratic consolidation in the region.

This paper launches an urgent, policy-relevant research agenda led by CDD-West Africa and its partners, aimed at illuminating the evolving phenomenon of military populism in West Africa. As this form of authoritarianism gains traction across the region — often cloaked in anti-establishment, anticolonial, and sovereignty rhetoric and digital propaganda — there is a pressing need for evidence-based analysis to inform national, regional, and international responses. Over the next eight months, our team will undertake a series of studies that explore

the ideological framing, digital communication strategies, and legitimisation tactics used by military-led regimes. A particular focus will be placed on the convergence between military populism and *digital authoritarianism*, with attention to how social media is leveraged to manufacture consent, marginalise opposition voices, and reshape narratives of legitimacy.

To capture the complexity and transnational scope of the phenomenon, the research will use a comparative cross-national approach combining four methods: discourse analysis of official and social media content; digital media monitoring across social media platforms; interviews with journalists, civil society actors, and regional experts; and archival review of political and institutional shifts following recent military takeovers. The approach will ensure that our findings are empirically rigorous, regionally grounded, and practically relevant. By documenting these trends, the research seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on authoritarian resilience and digital politics in Africa. More importantly, it will provide timely insights and early-warning signals to policymakers, civil society, and development partners seeking to engage constructively with the region's shifting political landscape and democratic backsliding.

About CDD-West Africa

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) was established in 1997 as an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation working to promote democratic governance, human security, and sustainable development across the West African sub-region.

With a core mandate to serve as a catalyst for change, CDD-West Africa brings together policymakers, civil society actors, academics, and development partners to advance evidence-based solutions to the region's most pressing challenges. The organisation's work spans rigorous research, strategic policy analysis, advocacy, capacity building, and civic engagement.

Through its programming, CDD-West Africa has led pioneering initiatives in election monitoring, anti-corruption, peacebuilding, countering disinformation, and strengthening democratic institutions. Its thematic focus areas include governance and transparency, peace and security, digital democracy, political inclusion, and the rule of law.

Headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria, with a strong regional network, CDD-West Africa plays a critical convening role in shaping democratic discourse and policy in West Africa. The Centre remains committed to amplifying citizen voices, defending civic space, and building a resilient, just, and democratic future for the region.

About OIDH

The Observatoire Ivoirien des Droits de l'Homme (OIDH) is a Côte d'Ivoire–based civil society organisation dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights. Founded on principles of justice, accountability, and inclusive governance, OIDH works to advance democratic values through research, advocacy, and community engagement.

OIDH's core focus areas include governance, access to justice, and social cohesion. Through its monitoring, documentation, and capacity-building efforts, the organisation plays a vital role in strengthening civic space, promoting transparency, and supporting national reconciliation processes. OIDH actively collaborates with national institutions, grassroots actors, and international partners to ensure that human rights remain central to political and social development in Côte d'Ivoire and the wider West African region.

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