

Revisiting French Influence in Francophone Africa: A Case of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger

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Abstract

Citizens of Francophone African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, publicly demonstrated support through civil protests to the military juntas that took over power in these countries. The protesters pressured the juntas to expel French military personnel from the countries. The expulsion of French military and diplomats from these countries is a demonstration of the decline of France's influence in Francophone Africa. The decline is triggered by a rise in anti-French sentiment across Francophone Africa. Francophone African countries remain the most underdeveloped countries in Africa. The level of underdevelopment has stimulated mal governance which has rendered the struggle for power across Francophone Africa to become intense, to the point that it overshadows the pursuit of democratic stability because of frequent military coups. This chapter, therefore, seeks to answer the following questions; What is the root cause of the decline of French influence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Why did the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only take place during the military coups? Were the civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger an expression of pro-coups? Answers to these questions are obtained through an extensive literature review of secondary data that comprise of journal articles, government publications, websites, books and other relevant sources. The study found that because citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger protested against French military presence in these countries does not mean that they are pro-coups. Anti-French sentiments existed in these countries prior to the recent military coups. The protest, therefore, took place during the military coups because both the juntas and the people had one common aspiration, which is the withdrawal of French military personnel from these countries.

Keywords: Francophone Africa; military junta; coups d'états; civil protests; underdevelopment; anti-French sentiment

1. Introduction

Francophone Africa refers to African countries where French is used as the official medium of communication (Le Vine 2004; Clark 2018). French became the official language in these countries post the Berlin conference of 1884–1885 that saw the partition of Africa and the establishment of French colonial administration in the territories it claimed after the partition (Austin 1984). In similar ways English was the official language in former British colonies in Africa hitherto (Daniels et al. 2011).

Nonetheless, before the Second World War (1945–1948) (Bethell and Roxborough 1988) that preceded the Cold War (1941–1945) commenced (Davis 2015), sparks of resistance already existed against colonial rule that came with the independence of Ethiopia after defeating Italy in 1941 (Abate 1980). The defeat of Italy signalled a blueprint to end colonial rule in Africa. Hence, by 1950, Africa experienced increasing agitations to end colonial rule in the continent (Mekoa 2005). The agitations took place across Africa's political landscape and culminated into resistance movements with nationalism at the heart of it.

The movements resisted colonial rule until an increasing number of African countries gained independence from former colonial masters between the 1950s and 1980s (Mekoa 2005), except for Namibia and South Africa that had gained independence from colonial rule in the 1990s (Saunders 2016). Among the African countries that gained independence in the 1950s was Ghana. Ghana gained independence from the British on 6 March 1957 (Aryeetey and Kanbur 2017). The independence of Ghana increased the desire for liberation from colonial subjugation across the continent after Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah proclaimed, 'the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent' (Nugent 2012: 7).

However, while the quest for political liberation increased in Africa and many countries were gaining independence, Africa's political leadership did not have a common vision on the political future of the continent, post-independence (Alemazung 2010). There was discord regarding the political future of the continent, which led to the emergence of two schools of thought (the Monrovia- and the



Casablanca groups) (Adula 2022). The Casablanca group, for example, advocated for political unification or federation as opposed to the Monrovia group that advocated for co-existence among independent African states without political federation (Adula 2022).

2. Background

While African leaders continued to engage with each other on the future of the continent, the future of Africa was simultaneously reimagined by its former colonial powers who lingered around former colonies because they had created socioeconomic and political structures of governance that were not African centric (Gumede 2017). As newly independent states, African political leaders needed to rely on former colonial powers to understand how to integrate the global socioeconomic and political structures without much disruption (Gumede 2017). The reliance on former colonial masters led to neocolonialism (Nkrumah 1965).

Kwame Nkrumah describes neocolonialism as the last and the most dangerous stage of colonialism (Nkrumah 1965). The reason being, neocolonialism used economic, political and cultural pressures to control Africa with the help of African political leaders. It also brought the newly independent African countries into Euro-North American ideological struggle. The struggle that was aimed at global dominance opened the door for deeper reflection on neocolonialism in an increasingly divided world (Mekoa 2005).

The world experienced further division after the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 (Lebow and Center 2000). The crisis is described as the most serious military confrontation during the Cold War era (Lebow and Center 2000). The world was mainly divided along ideological lines. The ideological division coincided with the reconstruction of Western Europe after it was destroyed in World War II (WWII) (Milward [1984] 2003). The United States, the leader of an ideological faction, put the Marshall plan in action for the reconstruction of Western Europe (Steil 2018).

The Marshall plan provided financial and material “support/aid” towards the reconstruction of Western Europe. The gesture strengthened the bond that existed between the United States and Western Europe (Lee 2017). It also paved the way for the smooth integration of Western Europe as a political bloc—the European Union (EU) (Yesilada and Wood 2015). Arguably, due to the role that the United States played in the reconstruction of Western Europe, Western Europe did not hesitate to align itself with the ideological faction led by the United States against the Soviet Union (Cooper 1989).

In relation to Africa, some countries of Western Europe (former colonial powers) that have vested interests in their former African colonies needed to “keep an eye” on the socioeconomic and political affairs of their former colonies until they aligned themselves with the ideological leadership of the United States which was all about global dominance (Cooper 1989). Western European countries needed to dominate their former colonies because their future survival depended on the level of access they have to exploit Africa’s mineral resources (Mazrui 2004: 54). Drieghe (2020) and Moss (2019) attest that former colonial powers did not only strive to have access to Africa’s resources, they wanted to have full control of it. The implication of having full control of Africa’s resources would give former colonial masters the power to preside over the future of Africa (Moss 2019; Drieghe 2020).

The fight to maintain a close relationship with Africa added complexity to the fragile relationship existing between Western and Eastern Europe (specifically the Soviet Union) (Bruno 1992), which was helping some African countries to resist European colonialism by propagating communism which was a disdain to the United States. Communism had made inroads into countries such as Angola, Mozambique and South Africa (Asante 2014). The spread of communism in these countries increased the ideological struggle between the United States and Western Europe against the Soviet Union, that is, until the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Marples 2016).

Prior to the demise of the Soviet Union, Western Europe countries that were involved in colonial projects had intensified their relationship with former colonies through organisations such as the European Economic Community (EEC). The EEC was formed in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome (Lumb 1961). It gathered former African and Caribbean colonies in the capital of Togo in 1975 to sign the Lomé Convention (Moss 2019; Drieghe 2020). The principal aim of the Lomé Convention was to allow agricultural and mineral exports from Africa and the Caribbean to enter the EEC free of duty (Minta 1984).

¹ The Lomé Convention was a partnership agreement between the EEC and former colonies of the EEC member states in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific (ACP) in 1975. The convention introduced ground-breaking features such as nonreciprocal market access and several mechanisms to stabilise ACP countries’ export revenues (Drieghe 2020).

3. Conceptual framework

Prior to the Lomé Convention, France was already a step-ahead in its effort to deepen relationship with its former colonies. France created an Intergovernmental Organisation for Cooperation called ‘L’Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (ACCT)—Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation (ACTC) in 1970 (Thérien 1993). Members of the ACTC included a few Asian and European countries (Thérien 1993). However, following several reforms the ACTC was transformed into L’Agence intergouvernementale de la Francophonie (AIF)—Intergovernmental Agency of Francophonie (IAF) in 1985 (Barraquand 2004).

The IAF was later transformed into L’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)—Francophone International Organisation (FIO) in 1998 (Barraquand, 2004),² which Tréan (2006) coined ‘La Francophonie’, meaning—people who share French as a common language. The aim of La Francophonie was to bring former French colonies in Africa and elsewhere together. Morris and Bouillon (2001) assert that Francophone African countries who are members of OIF are countries whose governments have adopted French as the official language and the people of these countries use French in daily communication and transactions (Morris and Bouillon 2001).

However, it is imperative to interrogate whether the adoption of French as the official language in an African country is what qualifies such a country as a member of La Francophonie. In a similar way, it is vital to understand whether the use of French as a medium of communication in an African country is enough reason to label such a country a Francophone African state (Mazrui 2004). The precedent viewpoints are important, because African countries such as Equatorial Guinea, Egypt and Cape Verde, who are members of La Francophonie (Mazrui 2004), do not have French as their official language.

Instead, these countries use Spanish, Arabic and Portuguese respectively, as official languages. The citizens do not use French in daily communication and transactions (Mazrui 2004). This adds complexity to the homogenous description of La Francophonie as a reflection of countries using French in daily communication. In addition to the contradiction, a former French colony, Algeria, which has French as an official language, is not a member of La Francophonie (Mazrui 2004). Similarly, Mazrui (2004) argues that the reason non-French speaking countries are members of La Francophonie is because of the political, economic and cultural ambition of France to expand French dominance in Africa and beyond (Mazrui 2004).

Notwithstanding, irrespective of the complexity involved in membership of La Francophonie (Cogneau et al. 2021), the organisation remains one that is originally French with Francophone Africa as its primary niche, because French is ‘the lingua franca in government offices, judiciaries, legislatures and academia’ (Mazrui 2004: 6). The dominant use of French in Francophone Africa has heightened the socioeconomic and political influence that France exerts over Francophone African countries. France often makes decisions and acts on behalf of Francophone African countries without conducting due diligence (Tardy 2020).

4. Revisiting French influence in Francophone Africa

The dominant use of French as the medium of communication and transaction in Francophone Africa and the inability of the governments of these countries to switch to an African language, exacerbated the influence of France in the region (Kaninya 2020). French remains the channel which France uses to transfer its custom, tradition and political philosophy, even to new generations of Francophone Africans hitherto (Kaninya 2020). The severity of French as a force to reckon with in the influence of France in Francophone Africa is explained by Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2005), who argues that the European language used in an African country creates the lens through which citizens of African countries view the world.

In addition, the influence of France in Francophone Africa increased because of its colonial policy of assimilation which treated former African colonies as an integral part of France—France outre mer (Fallers 2017). Francophone Africans were given rights to elect representatives to the French parliament, to have a free press, trade unions and political parties. In a nutshell, assimilation was aimed at transforming citizens of Francophone African countries into “Frenchmen” (Crowder 2023).

The consequence of assimilation was that it influenced Francophone Africans to support French colonial and neocolonial projects at the expense of their emancipation and self-determination (Crowder 2023). Garuba (2001) argues that even today; to understand the influence of France on Francophone Africa, one must observe the influence of French in terms of how citizens of Francophone African countries use it as an enabler for in-group solidarity when interacting with fellow Africans from other exoglossic linguistic backgrounds (Fardon and Furniss 1994).

² Community of countries using French as official language (Barraquand 2004)

Furthermore, the influence of France in Francophone Africa allowed France to maintain privileged political, cultural, economic and military relations with the former colonies (Vallin 2015). France became the “gendarme of Francophone Africa.” It provided military and technical assistance to these countries with the purpose of getting Francophone African countries to support and promote France’s global agenda (Vallin 2015). France uses its influence to transform its relationship with Francophone Africa to one of patronage—a relationship based on hierarchy which allows Francophone African countries to exercise limited sovereignty even after independence (Vallin 2015). Francophone African countries did not have the right to adopt any policy that affects the interest of France in these countries or elsewhere.

Therefore, for France to maintain a lasting influence in Francophone Africa, it needed to position itself in supranational organisations in a way that it has a high international status as a superpower (Vallin 2015). This is how France advocated and obtained a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1945 with the intention of quenching any form of agitation against French dealings in Francophone Africa at the level of the UNSC (Vallin 2015), as well as guiding politics related to Francophone Africa to its own advantage within the UNSC (Vallin 2015).

The ascension of France to a permanent seat at the UNSC allows France to determine the balance of power in Francophone Africa. France was allowed to use military force in any Francophone African country (if needed) to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Africa (Vallin 2015). Hence, France instigated several military coups in Francophone Africa. The coups were against Francophone African political leaders who tempered with French interest such as Modibo Kéita of Mali who withdrew the country from the African Financial Community (CFA) in 1962 (Zolberg 1965).

In another instance, Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso was accused of jeopardising foreign relations with France and assassinated in 1987 by Blaise Compaoré who was supported by France (Dolcerocca 2016). France made it clear that it would crush any political leader who stands in its way (Ziankahn 2011). It had resources to unconstitutionally change governments in any country in Francophone Africa. This increased the “fear of France” across Francophone Africa. It transformed Francophone African political leaders to “puppets” of French regimes who place the interest of France above that of the people they govern (Good 1964).

In addition, France increased “foreign aid” in its foreign policy to Francophone African countries to increase the level of dependence that these countries have on France (Yates 2018). France (until the economic rise of China) was Francophone Africa’s principal provider of foreign aid to increase its influence (Yates 2018). Foreign aid was used by France as a “carrot and stick” when dealing with its former African colonies (Yates 2018). By the end of the twentieth century, France provided foreign aid to the tune of more than €10 billion annually (Yates 2018), of which, Francophone African countries were the primary beneficiary (Yates 2018).

However, the foreign aid that Francophone African countries received from France could not achieve significant development objectives for two reasons; first, the aim of foreign aid was to create dependence instead of independence (Yates 2018). Second, Francophone African countries were created to supply primary products to French manufacturing industries (Yates 2018) and to consume the finished products that were often expensive. France intentionally did not provide the technical know-how needed to transform raw materials into finished products, in order to maintain its influence in Francophone Africa (Yates 2018).

Consequently, a large portion of the financial aid received in the form of grants, loans or direct investments were mostly spent on the importation of consumer products from France (Yates 2018) which resulted in Francophone African countries suffering with a huge burden of debt. The debt owed to France placed Francophone African countries at a vulnerable and precarious position when negotiating trade deals with France (Yates 2018). France had leverage over these countries and therefore, was the main decision-maker when signing agreements with Francophone African countries (Yates 2018).

That is why, even when it was inconvenient, France influenced several Francophone African countries to accept austerity measures which did not help in the economic growth of these countries (Powers 2019). Instead, the austerity measures weakened the socioeconomic and political steps that these countries have made after independence (Yates 2018), as it increased the level of unemployment and poverty in Francophone Africa (Yates 2018). These countries’ debt increased, thereby rendering the countries unstable.

When the local currency (Franc CFA) used in Francophone African countries was devalued in an attempt to stabilise the economies of these countries (Yates 2018), not much was achieved, because Francophone African countries are deprived of financial freedom, as the foreign currency reserves of Francophone African countries are kept in a Bank in France (Yates 2018). This has generated a polemic situation because of the irrationality involved in such an action. The Franc CFA is, therefore, perceived as an instrument of French influence in postcolonial Francophone Africa (Yates 2018), the reason being that French neocolonial influence in Francophone Africa has imposed Francophone African governments to allow France to decide on monetary policies affecting these countries. The Bank of France is the

main driver of the monetary policies of Francophone Africa (Yates 2018). As a result, there is presently much agitation against France in Francophone Africa, since France controls key economic activities in these countries (Majumdar 2019).

In the case of Francophone African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the agitations led to military coups (Hansen 2024). The coups came with new dynamics of military coups in what analysts describe as “a coup in a coup” in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali. The motives behind the military coups that took place in Francophone Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seem to be different from the motives that fuelled the military coups in that region in the twenty-first century. In the twenty-first century, the primary reason why military coups were plotted and succeeded without the help of France, is because of the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa. In line with the precedent point of view, this study seeks to answer the following: What is the root cause of the decline of French influence in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger? Why did the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only take place during the military coups? Were the civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger an expression of pro-coups? Answers to these questions were obtained by the following methodology.

5. Methodology

Answers to the research questions in this study were obtained through qualitative research design using secondary data comprising of journal articles, government publications, websites, books and other relevant sources. Subsequently, content analysis was employed to analyse the root cause of military coups in Francophone Africa in the twenty-first century; the reason why the public demonstration of anti-French sentiment only took place during military coups; and whether civilian protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were expressions of pro-coups. This was done with a view of proffering understanding to whether the citizens in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger acted out of self-will or an internal or external influence.

6. Findings

6.1. *The decline of French influence in Francophone Africa*

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several scholars (Julienne 1988; Pouemi 2000; Migani 2008; Granvaud 2015) have attested to the fact that France was the most influential foreign power in Francophone Africa. The reason being, France’s ability to create lingo-cultural, economic and political dependence in Francophone Africa (Mazrui 2004). Campbell (2008), however, argues that France was the most influential power in Francophone Africa during that time, since China has not achieved sufficient recognition as an economic superpower.

That is why when China became Africa’s largest trading partner, surpassing the United States in 2009 (less than a decade into the twenty-first century), the French influence in Francophone African started declining gradually (Sun 2014). African countries in general increasingly turn towards China (Wekesa 2021). The reason African countries lean towards China is because they were confronted with new challenges in the twenty-first century. The century came with intense climate change and agricultural productivity challenges, livelihoods and wellbeing, youth unemployment and persistent poverty, increasing crime and violence, weak institutions and poor governance and the rising threat of jihadists and Islamic extremist movements (Owonikoko and Momodu 2020).

The latter added complexity in the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa (typically its influence in the countries of the Sahel), because of the failure of France to eradicate jihadists and Islamic extremist groups in the Sahel after its promise to the respective governments (Erforth 2019). However, the reason why the large-scale military operations of France in the Sahel was not successful, was because the military operations were expensive in terms of finances and material supply (Yates 2018).

Even though the success of the operation in the Sahel would have maintained France’s image as a great power and preserve its reputation in the world system, France was overburdened (Yates 2018; Erforth 2019), and it could not completely eradicate terrorism at the height of high insecurity in the Sahel. By ignoring France’s efforts in the region (Dakono 2022), conspiracy theories turned into accusatory discourses in Sahel countries like Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, who accused France of aiding jihadist movements instead of eradicating them (Cheriet 2023). Architects of accusatory discourses in the Sahel claim France is negotiating with terrorist organisations in order to preserve French interest (Cheriet 2023).

The accusation not only damaged France’s reputation in the region, but also made citizens question the nation’s capabilities (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger leveraged on the resentment that citizens of these countries evince towards France and found it to be wanton. It was, therefore, concluded that France’s military presence is no longer needed in these

countries (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024), Hence, the diplomatic and military cooperation signed with France was severed (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

France was forced to exit from the said countries. The expulsion of French military and diplomats by the juntas remains a clear indication of the decline of its presence in the Sahel and shows the return of military coups in Francophone Africa two decades into the twenty-first century (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). As countries such as Guinea Conakry and Gabon also experienced successful military coups. The military coups across Francophone Africa echoes the level of distrust existing between governments and people of many Francophone African countries vis-à-vis France (Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

One point of note regarding the decline of French influence in Francophone Africa and the military coups, is the fact that the coups that took place in Niger in July 2023 (Olayinka 2023), Mali in May 2021, Burkina Faso in January and September 2022, Guinea Conakry in September 2021, Chad in April 2021 and Gabon in August 2023 as a result of the decline of French influence, were without bloodshed (Taruvinga, 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye, 2024). The reason there was no bloodshed is partly because the coups capitalised on the anti-France demonstration of the people. Growing anti-France sentiment is, therefore, part of the reason of the decline of the influence of France in Francophone Africa.

Nonetheless, while it is important to note that anti-France sentiments and the rising presence of China in Africa are among the reasons behind the decline of the influence of France in Francophone Africa, it is imperative to further explore the triggers of military coups in the Sahel. This is important, because no matter how appealing military coups may appear to be (Lynch and Crawford 2013), the consequences of military coups are overwhelming, as it interrupts democratic processes and reverses the democratic gains that have been made over time (Lynch and Crawford 2013). As a result, constitutions and democratic institutions are often suspended.

Lynch and Crawford (2013) further claim that occasionally, military coups install military rulers that often become authoritarian and corrupt in nature. The historical experience of military coups in Francophone Africa attest to the fact that military leaders are not better than elected civilians. In most cases, they become worse. This is attributed to the paradoxical relationship that exists between democracy and military coups (Lindberg and Clark 2008). France is guilty in this regard, since it orchestrated several military coups in Francophone African countries. Thus, deforming the democratic process that some of these countries embarked on after independence.

The distortion of democratic process in Africa is what renders the continent continually vulnerable to military coups, as political leaders get stronger than democratic institutions. It has been observed that countries with a high level of democratisation have lesser chances of experiencing military coups (Lindberg and Clark 2008), because military coups are a result of disentrancement of democracy, corruption and family dynasties, as the was the case with Gabon and Togo (Ogueri 1973; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024).

The military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger all invoke the question of a national security threat as the main reason of their actions. The question of national security in the Sahel is salient, since it is the primary reason why France built military bases in those countries. Therefore, for France to not be able to end Islamic jihadists movements, violent extremism and irregular armed groups not only demonstrated the decline of the influence of France (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024), it also highlights the double standard of the security approach in the region.

France was joined by United States at a military base in the Sahel. The inability of France and the United States to eradicate armed groups in the Sahel left the governments of that region in disbelief. The governments could not understand how France with all its military prowess could not eliminate the security threat in the region (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024) as well as France's inability to end terrorism in the Sahel which cast doubts on national democratically elected governments of the region. The governments appeared weak and incompetent (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The political leaders were accused of complicity with France, at the expense of the security of their citizens.

This was another argument that the juntas used to justify why the governments were overthrown in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Taruvinga 2023; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). They insisted the elected governments failed to provide security for the people and cast doubts on the determination of French and United States military to eradicate terrorist groups (Bourgeot 2020; Adeyeye and Adeyeye 2024). The juntas accused the French and United States forces as being tools which are used to gain more control and access of the mineral resources of the countries (Dunn 2013).

The foreign ministers of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger who were appointed by the juntas, repeatedly accused France of returning weapons that the national military seized from terrorist groups (Moreno-Cosgrove 2022). The precedent argument was echoed by anti-French protesters. Notwithstanding, it was observed that during the anti-French protests, some protesters were seen waving the Russian

flag, while others burnt the French flag (Elischer 2021). The role that the Russian state-funded private military group, the Wagner Group, has played in eliminating the security threat in Central African Republic also played a role in the decline of France's influence in Francophone Africa (Harkins 2021).

Francophone African governments were exposed to other viable alternatives in matters of national security, as opposed to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries where their options were limited.

The military juntas and the citizens of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were confident to express the importance of inviting Russia as a partner in the efforts to counter threats of insecurity (Mensah and Aning 2022; Engels 2023). They echoed such sentiment confidently on international media, because they believe the Wagner mercenaries have a better strategy of eliminating Islamic jihadists and other terror groups, since they have no regard for Western wartime morals and ethics (Bourgeot 2020). However, amidst such opposing views, it is important to determine why the public demonstrations of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel only took place during the military coups, and whether the civilian protests in these countries were expressions of pro-coups in the region.

7. Public demonstration of anti-French sentiment

Francophone African countries are rich in mineral resources (Avom et al. 2022). This is partly why these countries are attractive to the rest of the world. Katoka and Dostal (2022) attest that mineral resources in Francophone African countries have contributed to economic growth in Africa. Paradoxically, citizens of Francophone African countries are the poorest in the world (Mamo et al. 2019), with some citizens found to be living in extreme poverty (living on less than USD\$1.00 per day) (Ilyas et al. 2023).

Extreme poverty in Francophone African countries is the root cause of crises that have created a high level of insecurity in these countries (Taylor 2019). Sometimes, in response to the crises and insecurity in these countries, foreign governments and institutions often set up programmes to improve socioeconomic and security conditions of the citizens of these countries (Bagayoko 2022). These efforts have not resolved the crises and security issues. Instead, the security situation, for example, is worsening (Bagayoko 2022), which led scholars to interrogate the relevance and effectiveness of the programmes (Bagayoko 2022).

The ineffectiveness of the socioeconomic and security interventions in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger has rendered these countries vulnerable to protest actions as a demonstration of public disaffection of resource governance in these countries (Loada 2021). Citizens of these countries are aggrieved at the level of corruption and political nepotism in their countries (Loada 2021). The citizens have also shown their discontent towards French involvement in these countries through anti-French protests from urban to rural areas while displaying frustration that was also incited by the social media (Bamako AFP, 2021).³

For example, protestors in Burkina Faso and Niger were seen on social media hindering a large French military supply convoy that was travelling from the Ivory Coast to Mali (France24 2021). Even though local forces intervened to escort the trucks, it took more than a week for them to navigate their way through Burkina Faso. Many people got injured in the resistance. The actions were uploaded on social media which increased the level of agitation in Burkina Faso (Loada 2021). Also, in Western Niger, two people were murdered when a convoy of foreign troops attempted to escape protesters (Loada 2021). This added "salt to the wound" as the incident provoked the local population and increased the level of anti-French sentiment across the Sahel (Loada 2021), which resulted in public demonstrations, demanding the end of French military presence in the Sahel (Loada 2021).

During the anti-French protests, protesters were seen waving Russian flags, holding posters praising Russia to step in while publicly burning French flags (Engels 2023). A French diplomat who felt the frustration of the protesters said that, 'many local people did not understand how jihadists could make such gains when French troops are present in the Sahel' (France24). The Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maiga, even accused France of training a terrorist organisation in the north of Mali (France24).

It is clear that the level of anti-French sentiment in the Sahel is immeasurable. Nonetheless, the protests imposed on the politics of the region which saw the military seizing power of Mali in August 2020, Burkina Faso in January 2022 and again in October 2022 and Niger in July 2023. The juntas immediately considered hiring Russian paramilitaries private-security firm, the Wagner Group, to bridge the gap as they requested the departure of French troops (Issaev et al. 2022). This increased tensions with France (Issaev et al. 2022).

³ <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211130-french-military-facing-growing-protests-in-sahel>

Nonetheless, there is a need to conduct further research to scientifically understand why the protests against the French presence in the Sahel became publicly intense during the military coups. This is important, because there is the need to understand whether the protests were instigated by Russia or the military juntas (Issaev et al. 2022). In addition, one must understand whether actions of the protesters were truly pro-military coups and Russia (Miles 2024). Addressing these concerns would help to dismiss controversies and conspiracy theories (if any).

8. Protests and coup d'états in the Sahel

African countries including those in the Sahel region (specifically Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) answered to the call of democratisation in the early 1990s (Villalón 2023). However, the political events surrounding individual African countries' transition to democracy varied according to domestic and international factors. Regarding domestic factors on the one hand, citizen political empowerment, a culture of fair democratic process, responsive policies and social cohesion among ethnic groups guaranteed the future of democracy in many African states (Cheema and Maguire 2002).

On the other hand, in terms of international factors, colonial legacy played a key role in democracy that is practiced in African countries. For example, looking at stable democracies in Africa, former British colonies are more democratic than previous French colonies (Lee and Paine 2019). Francophone Africa has experienced more military coups than Anglophone or Lusophone Africa, because of the interference of France in the political affairs of these countries (Lee and Paine 2019). Consequently, Paine (2019) asserts that former French colonies have little to offer in terms of democratic institutions.

Nonetheless, democracy was welcomed across Africa, including in countries of the Sahel, because it was portrayed as a system of governance where state power is vested in the citizens of the country. The citizens are called upon to exercise their power through universal suffrage (the right for every citizen to vote in an election) (Singh 2017). The United Nations Organisation supported the spread of democracy across the globe, as it believed it would provide an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms where citizens freely express their will, and their choice of political leadership is respected (Singh 2017).

However, the paradox of democracy is that for it to succeed, there must be a high level of socioeconomic development (Cilliers 2016). The latter is absent in Africa. The reason a high level of socioeconomic development is absent in Africa is because governance capacity is lacking, the quality of electoral democracy is thin and the rise of neopatrimonialism which undermines electoral democracy across the continent (Cilliers 2016). The precedent factors have made it possible for democracy in Africa to continually experience a regression (Cilliers 2016).

Democratic regression in Africa has created room for corruption which tend to undermine state institutions, thereby increasing the level of illicit financial flow and money laundering out of a country (Atabongwoung 2022). According to Mugarura (2010), illicit financial flow and money laundering undermines the stability of the national economy, as they constrain the government's ability to provide public amenities to citizens (Albouy et al. 2020). The lack of access to public amenities in most of the Francophone African countries has been a major source of public agitation and protests in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

Therefore, to affirm that the protests in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were expressions of pro-coups or pro-juntas is problematic. The reason being, it remains unclear whether the anti-French protesters in the Sahel were instigated or encouraged by an external force. The reason is that history has shown that citizens in countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali have always look forward to building resilient state structures that allow for a functional democracy to exist (Villalón 2023). Therefore, military coups have never been known to encourage democracy (Pion-Berlin 2016).

9. Conclusion

Military coups reverse democratic achievements anywhere in the world, because coups involve an unconstitutional ascension to political power. A military coup is always accompanied by the suspension of the country's Constitution. The military junta often imposes laws that forbid public demonstration to stabilise the country. These laws are sometimes an infringement on the political rights of the citizens. This is a recipe for agitations, since citizens are never willing to give up their freedom.

In the case of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, however, the citizens demonstrated support for the juntas. They even manifested the willingness to sacrifice their political rights to afford the juntas an opportunity to prove themselves. The citizens did that because the previous elected government did not resolve some of the crises confronting them, such as extreme poverty, food crises, poor governance,

crime, corruption as well as security threats. It is important to note that the security threat in the Sahel remains a cause of concern for the whole continent and beyond.

It appears that the anti-France protesters of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had no option other than to give the juntas the “benefit of the doubt”. Therefore, it means that even though the anti-France protests took place alongside the military coups, the protests are by no way an expression of pro-coups. Anti-French sentiments existing in these countries and elsewhere in Francophone Africa, has been growing since before military coups in the Sahel. The protesters were only seen demonstrating alongside the military juntas, because at the time of the military coups, both the juntas and the protesters shared a common aspiration, which was the expulsion of French military personnel from the region.

The protesters and juntas believe that the political systems that led the countries of the Sahel was only beneficiary to the ruling political elites who they believe assisted French companies to plunder the mineral resources of these countries without showing empathy towards the economic hardship of the citizens. Therefore, the frustration of living in poverty without prospects of improvement and the disparity between political leaders and the people was conducive enough for military coups or armed rebellions. The citizens could not vote incompetent leaders out of office, because democracy in Francophone Africa, like elsewhere in the continent, remains flawed with massive electoral fraud.

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