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REGIONAL STABILITY IN THE SAHEL STATES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF POST-COLONIAL THEORY: FROM ECOWAS TO THE ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES

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Abstract
Since the early 2000s, the Sahel region has been beset by insecurity, political instability, and humanitarian crises. Traditional regional architectures such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been central to efforts to maintain stability. However, recent military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) have catalysed the formation of a new regional bloc, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This article examines the persistent challenges to regional stability in the Sahel region through the lens of post-colonial theory. It focuses on the interplay between historical legacies, unequal relationships, and contemporary governance issues. The enduring influence of colonialism, particularly through France's economic, political, and military interventions, is analyzed as a critical factor shaping the socio-political and economic dynamics of the region. Using post-colonial theory, it underscores the necessity of dismantling neo-colonial structures, empowering marginalized communities, and fostering genuine local agency. The transition from ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) is presented as a critical moment in the Sahel's quest for stability, autonomy, and sustainable development. By analyzing the historical and contemporary dynamics of power in the Sahel, the article provides valuable insights into the limitations of existing regional cooperation frameworks and the potential for new approaches to foster peace and development. It concludes that the Sahel states must prioritize inclusive governance and sustained collaboration to break free from the constraints of their colonial past and build a more equitable and resilient future.

Keywords; Sahel, Post-colonial theory, Neo-colonialism, Regional stability, Governance.

1. Introduction

The increase in violent conflicts across sub-Saharan Africa has led scholars and policymakers to raise questions about the correlations between colonial history or inequality and security. Recently in the Sahel region, peace and security have been threatened by increasing internal and cross-border security challenges. These challenges include armed conflicts from terrorist attacks by jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, or ISIS-affiliated groups, and the separatist Tuareg rebels and organized criminals, European Parliament (2021). Generally, a large part of the region has observed a devastating increase in terrorist attacks with countries such as Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso witnessing terrorist-related casualties increasing five-fold since 2016 (UN News, 2020). The situation is further exacerbated by environmental degradation, poor governance, and a massive influx of migrants from other sub-Saharan African states.

The Sahel region is a semi-desert belt traversing central Africa. It emerged as a hotspot for debates on regional stability due to escalating conflicts, and socio-economic hardships. Stretching across northern Africa, it lies between the Sahara Desert and the savanna. Its emergence as a hub for Islamist terrorist activities prompted the establishment of multinational and international military bases in Mali, along with permanent bases in Niger, and Chad. These bases aimed to stop the spread of terrorism within Africa and even outside especially to Europe. However, this anti-terrorism alliance failed the Sahel region (King, 2023) due to the persistence of the conflict and terrorism. Additionally, the region continues to experience substantial casualties, particularly among Malian civilians and military personnel, with over 2.5 million people displaced (King, 2023). These failures have sparked criticisms about the relevance of these international military interventions and the sovereignty of Sahel states, exemplified by widespread protests in Mali against foreign troops.

Given Sahel's multifaceted security and socio-economic challenges, this article employs post-colonial theory to analyze regional insecurity and instability. Through the exploration of the historical impacts of colonialism on the current state of conflict, it examines the legacy of French colonialism and its continuing influence, as well as the structural limitations of regional organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The perception of the disadvantages of this dependent relationship underpins the exit of the Sahel states from ECOWAS and their decision to form the Alliance of Sahel States (L'Alliance des États du Sahel, AES). This transition to an AES alliance is also scrutinized to understand its implications for regional governance and stability.

The article seeks to answer questions, how did the regional instability affect the transition from ECOWAS to the AES by the postcolonial Sahel states? What are the main factors affecting this process? These questions are important to understanding and explaining the current political situation that is unraveling in the Sahel region currently. The article is based on the assumptions that: the level of political instability in the Sahel region affected the transition from ECOWAS to the AES by the Sahel states, and that there is the influence of French colonialism on the instability in the region.

The article starts with an introduction before examining the concept of region stability and post-colonial theory. This was done as both a conceptual and theoretical framework for the analysis made in the article. After that the unequal relationship between France and the Sahel states was analysed. Thereafter, it looked at the implication of the legacies of colonialism. And then an appraisal of the postcolonial theory and the Sahel region, before a conclusion.

ConceptualClarification

RegionalStability: Regional stability refers to the relative condition of peace, security, and predictability within a specific geographical region. In the Sahelian context, it entails the absence of or reduction of violent conflict, terrorism, transnational crime, political instability, and humanitarian crises that undermine governance and socio-economic development.

SahelStates: Countries situated along the semi-arid belt south of the sahara desert. The core Sahel states include Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania. In this study the focus is specifically on Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger countries who collectively formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES).

ECOWAS: The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), established in 1975, is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising of 15 member states. Its mandate spans economic integration, conflict prevention, and political governance.

AllianceofSahelStates (AES): the AES was created in September, 2023 by Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Niger though the Liptako-Gourma Charter. Initially conceived as a mutual defence pact, the Alliance later evolved into confederation of Sahel States. It emphasises collective security against terrorism, political autonomy from western influence, and stronger economic and diplomatic cooperation among its members.

Sovereignty: denotes the authority of a state to govern itself without external interference.

2. Post-Colonial Theory and Regional Stability in the Sahel

Postcolonial theory emerged in the second half of the 20th century as a critical intellectual response to the political, cultural, and economic legacies of colonialism. Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Achille Mbembe, Homi Bhabha were among the proponents of this theory and they have highlighted how postcolonial states are caught between aspirations for sovereignty and the constraints of structural dependencies created by colonial legacies. The Postcolonial theory is a multifaceted body of theories and practices that opposes the cultural and political determinism of Western civilisation or power. However, the specific strand of post-colonial theory we chose in the work is mainly concerned with the long-lasting consequences of colonialism on the states they colonised. It serves as an important framework for unpacking and understanding the socio-political complexities of the Sahel states. It highlights how colonialism's enduring legacies continue to shape state structures, identity politics, and governance, especially in the Sahel region of Africa. According to the theory, "the arbitrary borders drawn during colonial rule have fueled ethnic tensions and conflicts, that undermine the legitimacy and cohesion of post-colonial states…" Mamdani, (1996) especially in Africa. The Berlin Conference of 1884 paid little attention to the demographic and cultural differences among the various countries that emerged from its partition of pre-colonial Africa. Scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Achille Mbembe argue that colonialism's residual effects influence power dynamics, cultural identities, and economic dependencies. This perspective exposes the critical interplay between local grievances and external interventions that complicate governance and peacebuilding in the Sahel.

Another important tenet of the post-colonial theory is the phrase "neo-colonialism," which opposes the continued influence of former colonial powers through economic dependence, cultural hegemony, and political manipulation. In the Sahel, neo-colonialism has perpetuated weak state institutions, deepened ethnic divides, and maintained economic reliance on primary commodities, Langan (2018). The common perception is that these vulnerabilities were exacerbated by foreign interventions and thus hindered meaningful efforts at fostering regional stability. This creates a process of unequal relationship that keeps these states dependent on their former colonial masters. To counter this scenario, post-colonial states usually come together to form regional organisations to reject the colonial tendencies of European powers.

Accordingly, the ECOWAS was initially envisioned as a platform for pan-African solidarity and self-reliance. It has long been viewed as a model of integration and collaboration in Africa, Afriyie, (2024). Ironically, its effectiveness to deal with regional crises has been undermined by the structural weaknesses of member states and the pervasive influence of external powers. So, in the context of the post-colonial theory, political stability is not merely the absence of violence but the dismantling of systemic inequalities, fostering local agency, and reducing neo-colonial dependencies. However, these variables that are currently in short supply in the region. Hence, the Sahel's persistent instability reflects internal governance challenges and external constraints, demanding a re-examination of neo-colonial power dynamics and the regional bloc.

Furthermore, the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS is a significant setback for this regional bloc. This withdrawal diminishes ECOWAS in terms of its size, population, and economic impact, thereby further weakening it as a regional authority. It also creates divisions among the remaining members, who may hold differing views and interests concerning how to address the situation of the departing nations (Michael, 2024). By contextualizing the Sahel's historical and geopolitical dynamics, the theory explores the lingering influence of France in the region. It evaluates the transition of the Sahel states from ECOWAS to the AES. This analysis reveals the shortcomings of existing mechanisms in achieving genuine stability and suggests pathways for more effective regional cooperation.

In a nutshell, the post-colonial theory fundamentally argue that the enduring effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism provide a framework for understanding the current predicaments of the states in the region. It offers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for the Sahel in building resilient and self-sustaining governance structures. This is because of the inequality in the relationship between some of the states in the region and their former colonial masters, notably France.

2.1. Unequal Relations between France and the Sahel states

The post-colonial relationship between France and its former colonies in the Sahel region illustrates the complex dynamics of dependency and influence. While independence was formally achieved decades ago, many of the Sahelian states remain economically and politically linked to France, perpetuating the concept of "Françafrique" (The Times, 2023). This neocolonial relationship fosters power inequalities whereby French interests frequently override the domestic needs of the people. For instance, the enduring French military presence, justified as a counter-terrorism strategy, has provoked debates about sovereignty and self-determination. Economic policies influenced by France often prioritize external objectives over internal development, deepening socio-economic disparities and fuelling unrest in the region. These unequal dynamics contribute to instability, as disenfranchised populations increasingly use violence to challenge systemic injustices.

Similarly, France's continued economic and political influence in the Sahel highlights the persistence of neocolonialism. Mechanisms such as the CFA Franc, bilateral military agreements, and political interventions grant France substantial leverage over its former colonies, Chansa, Phiri, Sain, Gilbert, Shogbesan, & Mulenga, (2024). While these ties are often portrayed as partnerships, they reinforce dependency and undermine the autonomy of Sahelian states. French military interventions, including 'Operation Barkhane', for instance, have faced criticisms for aligning more closely with France's strategic interests than addressing the core drivers of regional insecurity, Avila & Quinn (2023). Issues like poverty, weak governance, and ethnic tensions remain unresolved. This parasitic approach has intensified anti-French sentiment, as evidenced by protests and the rise of patriotic movements advocating for alternative alliances, including closer ties with Russia.

Similarly, the unequal 'Franco-Sahelian' relationship has far-reaching implications for regional stability. By fostering dependency and marginalizing local initiatives, France's involvement often exacerbates rather than alleviates crises. The recent formation of the AES demonstrates the growing rejection of these neocolonial arrangements, as some Sahelian countries seek to assert their agency and redefine their paths to stability (Petidis, 2024). Indeed, public opinion in Mali reflect these sentiments, to a large extent.

For instance, survey research conducted in 2017 by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation revealed that few of respondents were satisfied with Operation Barkhane, Mali-Mètre (6 June 2017).

Also, anti-French protests, which have occurred regularly since 2013, underscore widespread dissatisfaction. Patriotic groups advocating for the withdrawal of French forces and exploring alternatives, including Russian intervention, have gained popularity. By 2019, anti-French sentiment had reached unprecedented levels, with people floating conspiracy theories about France's role in regional crises, highlighting a deepening trust deficit (The Times, 2023). This anti-French sentiment led to several military coups, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The coup leaders criticised and opposed French interference and exploitation in their countries. This underscores the complexity of the security dynamics of the region as well as the unequal and exploitative relationship between the countries of West Africa and the colonial powers who deployed their soldiers there.

2.2. From ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)

The withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger from ECOWAS and the establishment of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) represent a major change in West African geopolitics. It was claimed to be

> because of their frustration with ECOWAS's perceived collusion with France, and its inability to effectively address urgent security issues, particularly the threats posed by jihadist insurgencies and the political interference resulting from the organisation's opposition to military coups (Smith, 2024).

The exit of these countries diminished the strength, unity, and credibility of ECOWAS, posing serious economic, political, and security challenges for both the Sahelian nations and the West Africa region.

Guide Red (AES states) Green (ECOWAS

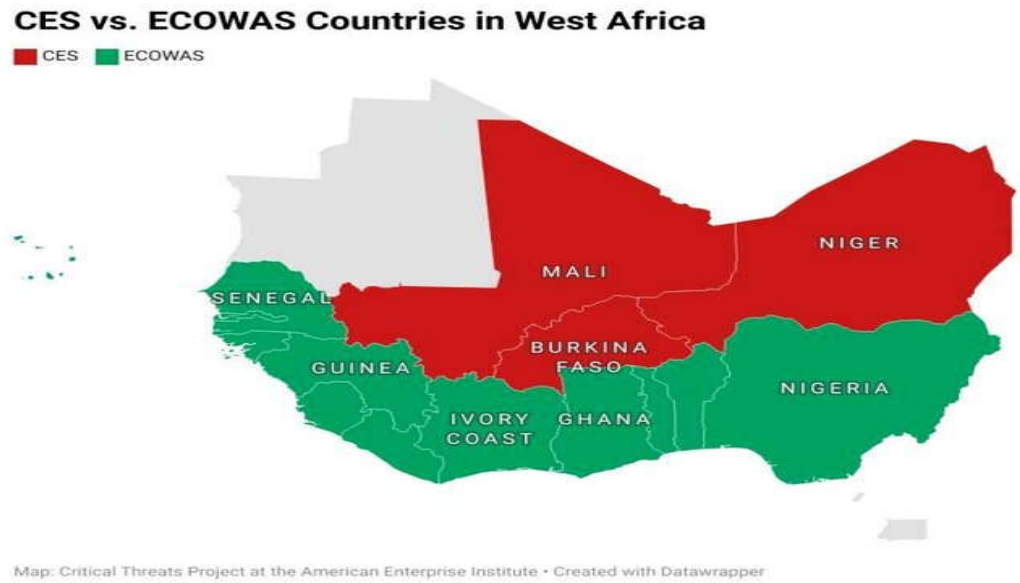


Figure 1. Map of West African states (ECOWAS) source, Datawrapper.

For context, ECOWAS was established in 1975 to foster regional integration and cooperation. However, it has expanded its mandate to include peacekeeping and conflict resolution. In addition, in 2001, ECOWAS established a protocol promoting democracy and good governance, which sets out governance standards and enforces sanctions for non-compliance. This was applied in 2017 when ECOWAS intervened militarily to remove Gambian President Yahya Jammeh after he refused to accept electoral defeat (Liedholm

Ndounou, 2024). Also, after the military coup in Niger Republic ousted President Mohammed Bazoum, ECOWAS threatened to intervene to restore democracy in the country. As a result of this threat, on September 16, 2023, the military regimes of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger announced the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (L'Alliance des États du Sahel, AES) (Aljazeera 2023). This move was allegedly due to their "growing discontent with ECOWAS and its perceived failure to combat security threats from jihadist groups" in the region effectively.

The AES represents a significant departure from the ECOWAS framework. Dissatisfaction with ECOWAS's perceived ineffectiveness and alignment with dominant member states' interests has driven Sahelian countries toward this new coalition. Emphasizing mutual solidarity and sovereignty, the Alliance seeks solutions to regional security challenges. However, its success hinges on overcoming internal divisions and the neocolonial legacies that have historically hindered regional cooperation.

2.3. Regional Stability and the Limitations of ECOWAS

While ECOWAS has made notable contributions to conflict resolution, its state-centric approach often neglects the complexities of local dynamics. Reliance on military interventions and sanctions sometimes cause tensions, undermining long-term stability. Furthermore, the organization's alignment with the interests of dominant member states, such as Nigeria, and its susceptibility to external influence, particularly from France, have eroded its legitimacy (Abbas, A. 2022). So, the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States offers a potential alternative, prioritizing localized governance and collaborative security strategies. However, achieving these goals requires addressing structural weaknesses, fostering trust, and developing sustainable responses to the region's fundamental challenges. The Sahel's condition indicates the need for innovative and inclusive regional cooperation frameworks that can resolve the historical and contemporary complexities.

Appraising the current state of regional stability in the Sahel requires an understanding of the interplay between historical legacies, unequal relationships, and contemporary challenges. The post-colonial context sheds light on the power dynamics and resistance strategies that continue to shape the region. Regional organizations like ECOWAS and the Alliance of Sahel States offer frameworks for cooperation, yet their effectiveness depends on their capacity to address the entrenched inequalities and systemic power imbalances that undermine progress. For these frameworks to foster genuine stability, they must adopt inclusive approaches that empower marginalized communities and address the historical context shaping the Sahel's political and social realities (Michael, 2024).

The spread of violent extremism in the Sahel has been a major destabilizing factor. The proliferation of armed groups, combined with the fragile state capacities in countries like Mali and Libya, has worsened security challenges (Idahosa et al., 2018). International interventions, such as France's Operation Serval, have been critiqued for perpetuating neocolonial dynamics without addressing the root causes of instability. As Nkrumah warned in his book, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, "external economic and political interference often lays the groundwork for prolonged conflicts". Despite international involvement, governance deficits and socio-economic challenges persist, as highlighted in the "Realities and Myths of the 'Triple Nexus': Local Perspectives on Peacebuilding, Development, and Humanitarian Efforts." This ongoing instability questions the efficacy of international strategies and underscores the role of colonial legacies in shaping current dynamics.

The shift from ECOWAS to the AES indicates a broader struggle for agency and self-determination in the post-colonial landscape. While ECOWAS has made some contributions to regional stability, its shortcomings reveal the need for alternative approaches tailored to local conditions. The new Alliance, with its focus on localized solutions, holds the potential for addressing the unique challenges of the Sahel. However, its success may also hinge on overcoming internal divisions, effectively mobilizing resources, and resisting external pressures that may compromise autonomy.

3. Appraisal of the postcolonial theory and the Sahel region

Post-colonial theory explores how colonialism's cultural, political, and economic imprints shape post-independence states. For the Sahel, colonial administrations were not structured for self-sufficient governance but for resource extraction and control. The decolonization process did little to undo these systemic structures, leaving Sahel states with weak institutions and fragmented societies (van de Walle, 2021). This fragmentation became a focal point of exploitation by extremist groups who present themselves as better alternatives to the colonial state institutions.

This is also because in a lot of ways, they created a system of cultural alienation, where colonial powers imposed European administrative systems, alienating indigenous governance methods and creating a disconnect between the state and its citizens. This legacy explains the limited legitimacy of Sahelian governments today. Most of the population in this region are Muslims and they tend to view the western culture from a critical religious perspective, thus affecting their loyalty to the state. Therefore, there tend to be a social and cultural divide among the people if the same country. And this division is partly responsible for the uprising and rebellion currently going on in the rural areas of the Sahel states.

Furthermore, there is the problem of economic dependency. The colonial economic system focused on cash crops and resource extraction. This means that their economies were vulnerable to global price shocks. So, the postcolonial states are now struggling to break free from this dependency, resulting in chronic underdevelopment. In addition, the states' inheritance of artificial borders of diverse ethnicities and cultures, leads to weak national identities and persistent ethnic rivalries. These factors contribute to the series of crises and instabilities that characterise the states in the Sahel region since the period after colonial rule (Petidis, 2024).

3.1. Colonial Legacies and State Formation in the Sahel

The consequence of the above factors is that the fragility of Sahelian states stems from colonial systems that prioritized centralized authority for exploitation rather than democratic governance or state-building. This fragility manifests in governance deficits, weak rule of law, and systemic corruption. Firstly, the centralized systems left behind by colonial powers lacked mechanisms for accountability or inclusivity. These systems were easily co-opted by post-independence political elites, perpetuating authoritarianism and corruption. Similarly, the arbitrary division of territories ignored pre-existing ethnic and cultural boundaries, sowing seeds of conflict. Examples include the Tuareg insurgencies in Mali and Niger, fueled by exclusion and marginalization. Finally, these create economic imbalances that distort the socioeconomic structure of the society and unequal development among states. Consequently, this unequal development results in regional disparities, with some areas (e.g., resource-rich zones) receiving disproportionate share thus fostering resentment and unrest.

The Sahel region has become synonymous with persistent instability, characterized by fragile governance, armed conflicts, terrorism, and socioeconomic challenges. Despite various international and regional interventions, the region's stability remains problematic. Post-

colonial theory offers a compelling perspective to analyze these issues by emphasizing the enduring impact of colonialism on state formation, sovereignty, and regional dynamics in the Sahel. This theoretical perspective sheds light on how colonial legacies, external interventions, and internal power structures have perpetuated cycles of instability. Indeed, the region's enduring instability cannot be divorced from its colonial past. Post-colonial theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the root causes of the region's challenges and crafting solutions that prioritize African agency and long-term sustainability.

4. Conclusion

Examining regional instability in the Sahel through the post-colonial theory highlights the intricate interplay of historical legacies, unequal relations, and modern challenges. Colonial influences, particularly in the context of France's continued engagement with its former colonies, persist as key factors shaping the region's political and economic landscape. While regional organizations like ECOWAS and provide essential cooperation frameworks, their potential remains constrained by historical inequalities and the lack of genuinely inclusive approaches. The Sahel's quest for stability reflects broader struggles associated with post-colonial governance. The region's transition from ECOWAS to the Alliance of Sahel States underscores the necessity of addressing both internal challenges and external dependencies.

Post-colonial theory offers a critical perspective for analyzing these dynamics, emphasizing the necessity of addressing historical inequalities and fostering local agency. By challenging neo-colonial structures and prioritizing the needs of local populations, the Sahel states can find a path towards sustainable and inclusive development. This requires dismantling systemic barriers to sovereignty and adopting policies that align with the realities of the region's diverse communities.

Since ECOWAS, despite its contributions to regional integration and conflict resolution, has faced criticism for internal divisions, external interference, and a failure to address the root causes of instability, such as poverty, governance deficits, and social inequality, the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States signals a significant shift in regional politics, reflecting a localized approach to addressing security and development challenges. However, its success will also depend on its ability to overcome internal divisions, foster collaboration, and resist external pressures. In essence, the Alliance represents a significant step toward regional autonomy, but its long-term success depends on sustained collaboration, effective governance, and tackling the root causes of instability. By prioritizing inclusive governance and confronting historical inequalities, the Sahel states can break free from the constraints of their colonial past. And thus build a future characterized by resilience, equity, and sustainable development.

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