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LEGITIMACY CRISIS AND MILITARY INTERVENTION IN THE WEST AFRICAN SUB-REGION

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Abstract
This article examines the resurgence of military intervention in the West Africa sub-region between 2020 and 2023, through the lens of legitimacy crises and the ensuing military interventions in West Africa; a period marked by political instability, governance challenges and escalating security threat to the entire sub region. Using qualitative research approach; hence, secondary source of data was used for the study. Explanatory method of data analysis was adopted in analyzing the data. The result of the study revealed that the underlying drivers of the recent domestic military intervention, which include widespread corruption, insecurity, socio economic disparities, manipulative democratic practices, France economic policy and Western influence on African politics. The study recommends that in other maintain stability and legitimacy, elected democratic leaders must provide its citizens with good governance by strengthening democratic institutions, by increasing its regional cooperation, address socio economic disparities, provide security, avoid electoral fraud, alleviate economic hardship and respect its citizens constitutional rights.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary historical narrative of the West African sub-region's political landscape has been tainted by political turmoil, military coups d'état or domestic military interventions, legitimacy crises, and governmental struggles for control. Between 2020 and 2023, the African continent has experienced seven (7) successful military coups since August 2020 (Africa.news, 2023). The Francophone nations of Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger in West Africa have successfully executed four (4) of these seven (7) military take over's despite the rapid rise of democracy in Africa. What may be the cause of these military coups, particularly in the West African sub-region? Some democratically elected governments in West Africa have not been legitimately elected; instead, they have used corrupt practices, manipulated election results through the use of weak state institutions, extended their terms in office through constitutional manipulation, and are frequently utilized by the former French colonial master rather than the electorate. Thus, the emergence of an illegitimate government, lack of political skills, as well as manipulation of election results, may precipitate a coup or encourage a counter coup (Ufuoma & Eseoghene, 2023).

Since the early 2000's liberal democracy has spread all over Africa and other third world countries, bringing an end to the era of military dictatorship. However, the question is what has gone wrong with Democracy? What are the issues challenging well-established democracies? Some academics are of the opinion that deteriorating confidence in politics and the erosion of political support, aims to explain why we don't trust government or even why we despise politics. Other have argued that the military never left, for instance, in Nigeria,

since the return to civil rule in 1999, former military Generals have largely led the country. Similarly in Sierra Leone, former military Head of State such as Brigadier Maada Bio returned as elected civilian president in 2018 (Laniran, 2023). Regardless of one's stance, legitimacy is critical to democracy because it guarantees citizens' adherence to the law, which makes it easier to resolve issues involving collective action and improves the democratic system's stability. Hurd refers to legitimacy as the acceptance of a government's authority by its citizens and the international community (Hurd, 1999). A position where citizens of a particular nation consider the political authority in power as legitimate and is been recognized globally. Legitimacy in a democracy is a system where political authority is based on the consent of its citizens, even if it doesn't benefit their individual interests.

A crisis of legitimacy arises when the public perceives the government as lacking the moral or legal right to govern. Political legitimacy relies on the belief that a ruling authority's laws and policies are valid and should be followed. In West Africa, factors such as government performance, adherence to democratic principles, constitutional compliance, and protection of civil liberties are crucial for maintaining legitimacy. When these expectations are violated through electoral fraud, corruption, repression, or security failures, the government risks losing public support and legitimacy, Hammou cite weak institutions, rising insecurity, and popular frustration with civilian governments to explain coups (Hammou, 2025). These factors are what the coup leaders pointed out to be their reasons of taking over power in West Africa between (2020-2023).

When it comes to domestic military intervention or takeover of power from a democratically elected government, legitimacy is also a key component of the coup risk measure developed by Belkin and Schofer; in other words, non-democratic political system can be legitimate as long as citizens endorse the right of the political authority (for example, a monarch) to rule (Thomassen & Van Ham, 2017). An ineffective regime, for instance, may lose its legitimacy in the eyes of the military and its citizens due to its poor performance. Furthermore, "erosion of popular support" is a prerequisite for intervention (Powell, 2012). Most cases of military intervention in West Africa have resulted in the seizure of power or the overthrowing of the current democratically government, resulting in the suspension of the constitution and the legislature. It is always done by a small group of conspirators. In a coup, power runs through the barrel of the gun against the ballot box in a domestic setting (Nwagbol & Innocent, 2025). To prevent resistance dissidents are repressed and all top current government leaders are detained or removed from power. The state's current constitution is always suspended by the military.

Succinctly, this study offers insights on 'legitimacy crisis and military intervention' in the West African sub-region; thereby, highlighting the interplay between legitimacy crises and how it can lead to military intervention. The rationale for the study is further informed by the challenges associated with electoral crisis, insecurity, corruption, constitutional manipulation, economic hardship and human right abuses. These listed factors have seen a surge in military coup plots in West Africa resulting in the change of power from democratic elected government to military rule from 2020 to 2023. Therefore, this paper's central argument is that Africa leaders need to win the trust of its people by providing its people with strong institutions, good governance, security, credible elections and favourable economic environment

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Legitimacy Crisis: The intellectual debate on the concept, of what is and what is not legitimacy crisis, shows the multifaceted definition of the concept, however for this study, legitimacy crisis is adopted as the increased deterioration in trust towards a nation leadership. Increased indication of corruption, anti-social and repressive policies, and institutional failure of the state to respond to the fundamental needs failure of its citizens, thus, the conceptual clarification avoids the ambiguities that could arise in understanding the concept of legitimacy crisis as a concept

Early Greek thought contains some of the earliest explanations of legitimacy (Morns, 2001) Aristotle is primarily concerned with government stability; while he claims that government legitimacy is dependent on constitutionalism and consent, he contends that political stability is dependent on the validity of rewards. In his book "Politics", Aristotle believes that how rewards are allocated is found within politics, and distributive justice is what keeps a government stable (Christian, 2009)). In contemporary times, German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas was the first to use the term Legitimacy crisis (Jürgen, 1975).

A legitimacy crisis is an identity crisis that develops from a lack of faith in administra tive institutions, even while they still have legal capacity to govern. Friedrich defines legitimacy crisis as widely perceived to exist based on polls of public attitudes reflecting a precipitous decline in confidence in societal leadership increasing manifestations of illegal, anti-social and repressive behaviour or policies, and the demonstrable structural failure of the state to respond to fundamental human needs (Friedrichs, 1979).

Military Intervention: The scholarly contest on what is and is not military intervention, whether foreign or domestic, reveals the ambiguity in the definition of the concept; yet for this study, military intervention is adopted as both domestic and foreign. Thus, the conceptual explanation eliminates the uncertainties that could come in viewing the concept of military intervention as foreign intervention alone, but should also be regarded as domestic involvement (a coup).

Military intervention, in Clausewitz terms, is a situation where states use military force to attain political objectives. The key focus of this effort is on identifying the primary political objective for which a state employed military force and evaluating whether the objective was attained.(Chojnacki, 2006)

Foreign military intervention is defined as the movement of troops or military forces by one independent country (or a group of countries in concert) across the border of another independent country, or actions by troops already stationed in the target country.(Pearson, 1974) Military intervention is defined as active violent intervention (involving military personnel) in an ongoing war from outside by at least one member of the state.(Chojnacki, 2006).

Domestic military intervention is the use of a country’s own armed forces to influence or resolve issues within its own borders, such as suppressing civilian unrest, changing government leadership (coup d'état) or addressing economic instability. This intervention is a domestic policy tool but it differs from international military intervention because it involves a nation’s military acting within its own sovereign territory to address internal matters rather than interfering in another country’s affairs (science direct.com, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

This study will focus on qualitative analysis, drawing on a variety of sources including books, academic journals, and credible online sources to help understand the interplay between legitimacy and military intervention in the region. This study will adopt the qualitative research design allowing for in-depth exploration complex social phenomena related to legitimacy and military intervention in the West African Sub-region. This approach will facilitate the understanding of context, perceptions and motivations that instigate military interventions in the sub-region; case studies of West African countries experiencing legitimacy cries that led to military interventions will be used to illustrate direct links between issues of legitimacy and decisions of military involvement. The information gathered will be analyzed for content and context allowing for interpretation of how legitimacy is portrayed and understood in the literature and sources regarding military intervention. Furthermore, by comparing different case studies, the researchers will elucidate patterns and divergences on how legitimacy crises manifest and lead to military interventions across West African nations. The study recognizes potential limitations, including: the availability and accessibility of credible sources, especially for conflict related regions and subjectivity in qualitative data interpretation. By synthesizing data from diverse sources and employing qualitative analysis this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in the regions

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

West Africa continues to be grappled by several challenges that impact on its geo-political landscape; the region is marked by a complex inter-play tied to its historical, economic and social factors; influencing the geo-political environment where questions of political legitimacy and military intervention are crucial. This study adopts the **"political legitimacy theory"** which is a key theory in understanding the political dynamics of the West African sub-region.

Political Legitimacy Theory: The study of political legitimacy dates to at least Thomas Hobbes (1651), who famously argued in the leviathan that any ruler who could provide the basics of safety and security is legitimate and should be followed. In this conception coercive power begets legitimacy; so long as the coercive power of the state provides safety to its people, the government is legitimate. The political legitimacy theory, according to Weber (1964) who posit that, if a political regime is legitimate it means that its participants have certain beliefs or faith (legitimitätsglaube) in regards to it: the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige (Weber, 1964).

Political legitimacy theory focuses on the effectiveness of political system. It follows that an authority that shows that it can deliver good governance (e.g. protects property rights, deliver public goods), will be viewed as more legitimate by the population (Bruce, 2006). Because legitimacy is the popular assistance of a government's authority making it crucial for a states stability and survival. It is the foundation upon which citizens trust their institutions and obey laws voluntarily.

Aragón (2008) Extensive empirical research found that there are at least five important dimensions of political legitimacy that are relevant for the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes:
(i)Support for the political community;
(ii) support for the core regime principles, norms and procedure;
(iii) assessment of the regime performance;

(iv) support for the regime institutions;
(v) support for the authorities.

Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study in the sense that the theory highlights the features of what makes a government legitimate, and what would give elected democratic government the stability the need. It is important to note that, legitimacy stems from governments ability to promote justice, protect lives and property, allow popular participation through good governance, which is the core of political legitimacy theory. But when trusts erode through corruption, unfairness, or poor performance government faces legitimacy crisis, leading to protests and instability. Thus, this theory remains relevant in understanding the activities of West African leaders who need to focus on what will continue to make their government legitimate by providing the legal framework that would convince its citizens to voluntarily accept its rule thereby reducing the possibility of a domestic military intervention in the sub-region.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Detailed case analysis of Military intervention between 2020-2023

COUNTRY	DATE OF COUP	KEY TRIGGERS	IMMEDIATE OUTCOME	PUBLIC RESPONSE
MALI	August 2020 May 2021	-Electoral Crisis -Insecurity -Corruption	Military Junta replaces Democratic government	Despite mixed reaction most Malians supported the coup because the army came out to do what the protesters were demanding
GUINEA	September 2021	-Constitutional Manipulation -Economic Hardship	Military Junta replaces Democratic government	-Guineans massively saluted military's coup. Thousands of people in Conakry and other cities came on the streets to celebrate Conde's removal -Opposition parties published a collective statement supporting the army
BURKINA FASO	January 2022 September 2022	-Insecurity -Corruption -Human Right	-Military Junta replaces Democratic	On the 24th January, several residents in the

		Abuses	government -Military Junta replaces Military Junta	capital were seen showing their support for the coup plotters in the streets by burning tires, playing music, singing and blowing horns to show their solidarity
NIGER REPUBLIC	July 2023	-Insecurity -Corruption	-Military Junta replaces Democratic government	After the lifting of the imposed curfew by the new military regime, about 1,000 pro-coup demonstrators took to the street flying Russian flags, voicing support for the Wagner Group and denouncing French presence

Factors Responsible for Legitimacy Crisis and Military Intervention in West Africa Between 2020-2023

Several interlocking factors contributed to the acute legitimacy crises in the West African sub region between 2020 and 2023. Though in trying to understand the causative factors that have led to military interventions in West Africa Sylla (2024) argued that most of the literature are devoid of historical contextualization and wrongly assumes that:

i. That there is a growing trend towards military putsches.
ii. That these coups affect different parts of the continent indiscriminately;
iii. That they are mostly due to causes internal to African countries;
iv. That these unconstitutional changes are events that hinder Democracy in the countries where they occurred.

But research reveals that the following factors are responsible for military intervention in the West Africa sub-region from 2020 to 2023, and they are as follows:

Escalating insurgencies, terrorism and communal violence: in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger further eroded citizens trust in the democratic civilian governments' ability to provide security (Kasambala, 2023) The January 2022 Burkina Faso coup d'état was triggered by the government's inability to control the jihadist insurgency, leading to the overthrow of President Kaboré and the installation of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (France, 2022).Many Burkinabes originally applauded the January 2022 coup headed by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, as the previous government had become profoundly unpopular as a result of its failure to cope with the insurgency (Maclean, 2022). Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba's junta failed to crush insurgents, losing territory to Jihadists and terrorist

groups, resulting in 40% control of Burkina Faso by September 2022.Meanwhile, Damiba sacked his Defence minister and took over the role himself (France, 2022). Several commanders who had supported the January coup became disgruntled with Damiba's leadership, subsequently stating that he had not concentrated sufficiently on eliminating the insurgents and had instead pursued his personal ambitions (Ndiga & Mimault, 2022).

Economic hardship and perceptions of entrenched corruption: The gap between governing elites and the public in African countries like Mali and Guinea has deepened due to accusations of security, economic failures, and corruption directed at democratically elected governments (Reuters, 2023). Worse still, the relationship between French political leaders and their allies in Africa was often corrupt, creating a powerful and wealthy elite at the expense of African citizens. (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005)

Electoral and Constitutional manipulation: The African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance supports free and fair elections as well as democracy. However, electoral fraud is common in Africa. Elections across the continent are tainted by violence, bigotry, fraud, and invalid votes. However, many African governments have remained in power for decades through manipulated constitutional amendment processes, electoral fraud, and opposition suppression. For instance, in Guinea the 'third term crisis' and electoral manipulation which led to wide spread disenchantment amongst Guineans (A Center for Democracy & Development in West Africa, 2023). Led to the coup of September 5, 2021, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya (41 years old), which was considered "an extension to the erosion of democracy" in the country under 11 years of rule by President Alpha Condé, who controlled all aspects of the state(A.usip.org, 2021).

France Neo-Colonial Policies: The challenges to Africa's unity stem from a lack of effective leadership. Unlike European unity, preceded by well-established nations, African unity tends to be hampered by the fact that the continent is comprised of developing countries that exist largely through foreign support. Besides perpetuating corruption, foreign aid compromises the ability of African governments to act on their own accord. African governments are thus encouraged to pledge even stronger allegiance to their foreign benefactors (Reuben & Hannah, 2025). François-Xavier Verschave, a prominent French economist, coined the term "Françafrique" to refer to a neocolonial relationship hidden by "the secret criminality in the upper echelons of French politics and economy". These ties, he alleged, resulted in large sums of money being "misappropriated". (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005) Causing general grievances amongst the general populace of the former French colonies; historical record provides some support for these grievances. French colonial rule established political systems designed to extract valuable resources while using repressive strategies to retain control. (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005) to sustain its neo-colonial policies, France also forged defence agreements that saw it regularly intervene militarily on behalf of unpopular pro-French leaders to keep them in power. (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005) Although recent French governments have sought to distance themselves from Françafrique, there are constant reminders of the problematic relations between France, French business interests and Africa, including a number of embarrassing corruption cases. (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005). In Niger, which neighbors both countries, allegations that President Mohamed Bazoum was a puppet for French interests were used to legitimize his removal from power, and five military deals with France have since been revoked by the junta led by Gen Abdourahmane Tchiani. Partly as a result, the coup was followed by popular protests and attacks on the French embassy (Leonard & Cheeseman, 2005).

Western Influence on African Politics: Elections can be tense affairs in countries with authoritarian legacies or ethnic divides. And poverty can make people susceptible to vote buying or selling. In Africa, elections are often merely a tool for elites to gain power through intimidation, fraud, and manipulation of tribal and religious allegiances. As Western powers pursue their own interests; their influence in African elections results in the appointment of puppet leaders opposed to popular opinion (Reuben & Hannah, 2025).

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

Recommendations

The ongoing legitimacy crisis in the West African sub-region between 2020 and 2023 has underscored the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address governance deficiets and restore public trust in state institutions and democratic governance. To mitigate the risk of military intervention and foster sustainable democratic governance, it is recommended that the following actions be undertaking.

1. **Strengthen Democratic Institutions:** West African leaders should prioritize the strengthening of democratic institution by ensuring transparent electoral processes, promoting political participation of the populace, implementing measures to combat electoral fraud and ensuring accountability.
2. **Regional and International Cooperation:** the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and international organizations must play a proactive role and not reactive roles. The strengthen of its role as a regional watch dog to see that it focus on regional stability, conflict prevention and the legitimate transition of government amongst member states.
3. **Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities**: to diminish the grievances that fuel legitimacy crisis, it is important to tackle underlying socio-economic disparities by providing employment and economic policies that will reduce economic hardship.
4. **Provide Security of Lives and Properties**: the continuous increase in terrorism and insurgency in the sub-region is a pointer to West African citizens that its government is doing little or nothing, thus West African leaders need to invest in insecurity and empower its security operatives.
5. **Elections Should be Free and Fair**: West African leaders need to ensure that election is free and fair, this will help them gain the trust of its citizens reducing the risk of protests and the military capitalizing on electoral fraud to take over
6. **Alleviate Economic Hardship and respect the constitutional right of the citizens:** A popular adage states that a hungry man is an angry man; West African citizens have continued to witness and increase in hardship with most families purchasing power below a dollar in a day, this has most times led to widespread discontentment and protest; during the course of these protests some West African states security operatives, have engaged in human right abuses which cause the citizens to develop grievances towards the government. West African leaders should ensure that they listen to the plight of its citizens rather than aggravating it.

Conclusion

The legitimacy crisis and corresponding military intervention in the West Africa sub-region from 2020 to 2023 present a complex interplay of political, social and economic factors. The erosion of public trust, corruption, constitutional manipulation, electoral fraud and economic hardship has created fertile ground for military interventions, undermining the region's stability. However, the recommendations outlined above will offer a path way towards restoring legitimacy and the fostering of democracy. The West African sub region can navigate and overcome the present challenges it is faced with, but for that to be achieved, its

leaders need to come in terms with current realities and challenges that the African people will no longer sit and watch its leaders come into power through illegitimate practices. West African

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