

Research Briefing

18 September 2023

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Coups and political stability in West Africa



Summary

- 1 Recent developments in West African states
- 2 Rise in the number of coups
- 3 Strength of democracy
- 4 Insecurity and violence
- 5 Popular protests
- 6 Regional response
- 7 UK's response to coups and political instability
- 8 International presence in the region

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Summary

In the last three years, military coups have forcibly removed the elected presidents of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger from office.

Rise in number of coups

Coups since 2020

2023 Niger

2022 Burkina Faso
(twice)

2021 Mali, Guinea

2020 Mali

There have been [six successful and two attempted coups](#) in West Africa since 2020. A study by two US researchers, Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, shows there has been a [decline in the number of coups across Africa since 2000](#), compared with the high numbers in the second half of the last century when many countries were gaining independence from colonial rulers. However, the number of coups in the last few years has increased.

Every coup is different and driven by each country's own domestic circumstances. However, recent analysis from Saferworld, a non-governmental organisation focused on conflict prevention, [suggests governance failures and ongoing insecurity are major contributing factors](#).

State of democracy

In 2020, Freedom House, a non-governmental organisation which tracks democracy worldwide, said [the region with the fastest decline in political rights and civil liberties was West Africa](#).

The decline has led some commentators to question the underlying strength of democracy and democratic institutions in some countries on the continent. Nigerian President Bola Tinubu has called on fellow West African leaders to "[strengthen our democratic institutions and ensure the respect for human rights and the rule of law](#)" to help prevent further coups.

Opinion polls show declining satisfaction with the way democracy is working across Africa. Joseph Asunka, the head of the Ghana-based research network Afrobarometer, says the [failures of governments and elected leaders to meet popular democratic aspirations](#) have "led to a decline in popular confidence in democratic governance and an increasing attraction to military rule and intervention".

Concerns that insecurity could spread

The Sahel region is the “epicentre of terrorism” worldwide, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace, which measures the impact of terrorism globally. The institute found that nearly half of deaths globally caused by terrorism were in the Sahel. The Sahel region stretches across Africa and includes the West African states of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

UK ministers and regional officials have been warning of the risk that insecurity in the Sahel could spread to West African coastal states. In 2022, James Heapey, the Armed Forces Minister, talked about the risk of “contagion” of insecurity in Mali into coastal states in West Africa, including Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. UK armed forces were deployed to Mali with the UN peacekeeping mission from 2020 to 2022.

The top UN official in the region has said "the southward expansion of insecurity [from the Sahel] remains a potent threat". Following the coup in Niger, Abdel-Fatau Musah, the commissioner for political affairs, peace and security for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), said the bloc was concerned about “contagion” of coups to other countries in the region.

Regional and international response to coups

The UK Government has condemned the forceful removal from office of leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. The Government has endorsed an African and regionally led approach to helping these countries return to democratic and constitutional order.

ECOWAS has suspended all four countries and imposed sanctions, among other actions. ECOWAS has taken a notably stronger line in response to coups since Nigerian President Tinubu became its chair in early July 2023. At a meeting in August, ECOWAS heads of state agreed to activate its standby force, although so far it has not taken the step of intervening militarily.

The number of coups in Francophone countries in recent years, and the anti-French sentiment expressed by coup leaders and in public demonstrations, has also prompted a fresh look at the legacy of French colonial rule in West Africa.

1

Recent developments in West African states

This section surveys recent political developments in countries in West Africa. Sources include [BBC News country profiles](#) and [Freedom House](#), an NGO which tracks democracy worldwide.

For the purposes of this paper, West Africa is defined as the fifteen members of ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo.

Benin

President Patrice Talon was re-elected for a second term in 2021. Freedom House says that while Benin has been among the most stable democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, in recent years new electoral rules, a crackdown on political opponents and other restrictions on civil liberties “have become increasingly problematic in recent years.”¹

A rise in militant attacks on its northern border with Burkina Faso prompted the government to recruit additional soldiers to combat the Islamist regional insurgency.²

Burkina Faso

There were two coups in Burkina Faso in 2022. Captain Ibrahim Traoré led the second, ousting Lt Col Damiba in September, who had ousted the democratically elected president in January 2022. Both men cited the country’s failure to address the Islamist insurgency. In recent years, Burkina Faso has replaced Mali as the [epicentre of Islamist violence in the Sahel](#), according to Heni Nsaibia, an analyst for ACLED (the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, an NGO that collates data on political violence worldwide).³

¹ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023](#) (p12), March 2023 and [Country profile: Benin](#), accessed 8 September 2023

² [How Benin is beating back jihadists against all odds](#), The Times, 4 June 2023

³ Al Jazeera, [How has Burkina Faso changed since the insurrection?](#), 21 November 2020

Further background and context are available in Commons Library paper [Burkina Faso: Second coup of 2022](#) (CBP 9633).

Cape Verde

Cape Verde consists of several islands off the west coast of Africa. Cape Verde is led by President Jose Maria Neves, who was elected in October 2021. BBC News says Neves' PAICV party and the opposition MPD have dominated politics since independence from Portugal in 1975, and have alternated in power since multi-party democracy was introduced in 1991.⁴

Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

President Alassane Ouattara has been in office since 2010. He was controversially re-elected in October 2020; opposition candidates boycotted the poll in protest at what they called an unconstitutional third term. The UK Government condemned electoral violence and spoke out in support of Ivoirians' right to demonstrate and protest peacefully.⁵

Library briefing paper [Côte d'Ivoire: 2020 presidential election](#) (CBP 9050) provides a short background to the country, the candidates and main political parties, and the election campaign.

The next Presidential election is not due until 2025, but possible contenders are already jostling for position, including potentially former President Gbagbo, who was President during the civil war (the war lasting from 2002 to 2007).

The Gambia

President Adama Barrow caused a shock upset in 2016 when he ended the 22-year rule of President Yahya Jammeh. Barrow was re-elected in December 2021. The elections were considered peaceful, credible, transparent and inclusive by election observers.⁶ In December 2022, the Government said it had foiled a military coup attempt, later charging eight soldiers with treason.⁷

⁴ BBC News, [Cape Verde country profile](#), 9 March 2023 [accessed 10 August 2023]

⁵ [HL13461 \[Côte D'Ivoire: Politics and Government\]](#), 8 March 2021

⁶ The Commonwealth, [Commonwealth releases final observer report on Gambia's 2021 presidential election](#), 1 June 2022

⁷ Al Jazeera, [Four soldiers arrested after alleged coup attempt in The Gambia](#), 21 December 2022; Reuters, [Gambia charges eight soldiers over foiled coup](#), 7 January 2023

Ghana

Ghana has held competitive multiparty elections since 1992, with the two main political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and New Patriotic Party (NPP) transferring power.⁸ President Nana Akufo-Addo (NPP) was re-elected in December 2020, defeating former president John Mahama (NDC).

The government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after facing a severe economic and financial crisis since early 2022, receiving a US\$3 billion, three-year arrangement. Theophilus Acheampong, an economist at the University of Aberdeen, suggests that despite the IMF deal “Ghana isn’t out of trouble yet.”⁹

87% of Ghanaians think their country is heading “in the wrong direction”, with 77% feeling that the level of corruption had increased in the previous year. These were the findings of Afrobarometer’s survey conducted in 2022.¹⁰

Guinea

Lt Col Mamady Doumbouya, the commander of the country’s special forces, overthrew President Alpha Conde in a coup in September 2021. Conde was elected in 2010 but faced protests when he changed the constitution to enable him to run for a third term, which he won in 2020.

In October 2022 the ruling National Council of the Rally for Development (CNRD) agreed a 24-month timeline to transition to civilian rule, after ECOWAS rejected previously proposed timeframes of 39 and 36 months.¹¹ Issaka K Souaré, of the South African-based Institute for Security Studies, says the new agreement includes a “results-based transition timeline and agenda that can easily be monitored.”¹²

However, opposition parties said that two years on from the coup, no action has been taken to restore constitutional order: “there is still no draft constitution, no electoral code, no election management body, no

⁸ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Ghana](#), March 2023

⁹ Theophilus Acheampong, [Ghana and the IMF have struck a deal, but hard choices lie ahead](#), The Conversation, 30 May 2023

¹⁰ Afrobarometer, [Ghana](#), accessed 2 August 2023

¹¹ Reuters, [Guinea proposes shorter transition timeline of 24 months](#), 22 October 2022; France 24, [Guinea announces three-year transition period before restoring civilian rule](#), 12 May 2022; France 24, [Guinea junta leader Doumbouya announces 39-month transition to civilian rule](#), 1 May 2022; Al Jazeera, [Guinea opposition condemns 39-month move to civilian rule](#), 1 May 2022

¹² Issaka K Souaré, [Could Guinea’s current military transition be its last?](#), ISS Today, 16 March 2023

technical operator, no electoral register and no realistic election budget."¹³

Guinea Bissau

Guinea Bissau has seen nine coups or attempted coups since 1980, according to the BBC. The most recent occurred in 2012, when an army mutiny “plunged the country into chaos”.¹⁴ Jose Mario Vaz, elected in 2014, was the first president to complete his term without being overthrown.¹⁵

President Umaro Sissoco Embaló was elected in December 2019, the first president to be elected without the backing of the long-governing PAIGC party. He survived a reported coup attempt in February 2022 when gunmen attacked government buildings.¹⁶

A coalition of opposition groups, led by PAIGC, won a majority of seats in legislative elections held in June 2023, defeating Embaló’s Madem G15 party.¹⁷

Liberia

Presidential elections in October 2023 are expected to be hotly contested, with incumbent George Weah seeking a second-term but facing strong challenges from former vice-president Joseph Boakai of the former ruling Unity Party and Alexander Cummings of the Collaborating Political Parties.¹⁸ Alex Vines, Africa specialist at Chatham House, says worsening living standards and austerity measures are a key theme in the elections.¹⁹ In April, political parties signed an accord to prevent violence ahead of the elections, and committing signatories to use constitutional means if they are dissatisfied with the electoral process and outcomes.²⁰

The EU will send an election observation mission, which it says, “confirms our long-standing commitment to supporting competitive,

¹³ BBC Monitoring, [Guinea opposition to resume anti-junta protests in September](#), 27 August 2023

¹⁴ BBC News, [Guinea Bissau country profile](#), 14 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

¹⁵ BBC News, [Guinea Bissau country profile](#), 14 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

¹⁶ France 24, [Guinea-Bissau launches probe into botched coup that killed 11](#), 2 February 2022

¹⁷ Al Jazeera, [Guinea-Bissau opposition wins majority in parliamentary polls](#), 8 June 2023; France 24, [Guinea-Bissau holds legislative elections one year after president dissolved parliament](#), 5 June 2023

¹⁸ BBC News, [Liberia parties sign peace pact ahead of October polls](#), 5 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

¹⁹ Alex Vines, [Democracy in Sierra Leone and Liberia](#), Chatham House, 14 July 2023

²⁰ BBC News, [Liberia parties sign peace pact ahead of October polls](#), 5 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

transparent and peaceful elections in Liberia, the oldest democracy in Africa.”²¹

Mali

The current military leadership, which took power in Mali in June 2021, is led by Colonel Assima Goïta. In June 2022, under pressure from ECOWAS, the transitional Malian authorities announced a [revised election timetable for the transition to end in 2024](#). The first stage, a referendum on a revised constitution, was held in June 2023. According to the referendum, 97% of votes favoured the new constitution, which will give the president more powers. Turnout was given at just under 40%. Insecurity prohibited voters in the north from participating.²² Legislative elections are scheduled for the end of October 2023, with a presidential election planned for February 2024.

In June 2023, the UN Security Council agreed to end its decade-long peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, at the request of the Malian authorities. The call to leave followed rising tensions between the authorities and the UN mission, in recent years.

Further analysis of developments in Mali can be found in Commons Library paper [Mali: Why have elections been delayed until 2024?](#) (CBP 9636) and [UN ends peace-keeping force in Mali](#) (CBP 9827).

Further background is also available in [UK military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022](#) (CBP 9634), [UK deployment and recent political challenges in Mali](#) (CBP 8903), September 2020 and [Mali: June 2016 update](#) (CBP7614).

Niger

In July 2023 military officers forcibly removed the democratically elected president of Niger, the sixth coup in West Africa in three years.²³

The military has held power for long periods in Niger, interspersed with civilian rule.²⁴ However, Niger has been considered relatively stable in recent years, compared to its neighbours in the Sahel. In early 2021, Niger held its first democratic transfer of power since 1960, with the

²¹ EU, [Liberia: The European Union deploys an Election Observation Mission](#), 11 August 2023

²² Al Jazeera, [Mali votes in constitutional referendum to pave way for elections](#), 18 June 2023; [Malians approve amendments to constitution in referendum](#), 23 June 2023

²³ There have been coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (twice in 2022) and Guinea (2021).

²⁴ BBC News, [Country profile Niger](#), accessed 30 August 2023

inauguration of former interior minister Mohamed Bazoum to the presidency following the end of President Issoufou's term in office.²⁵

Andrew Mitchell, the Minister for International Development and Africa, described Niger as a “vital regional partner” to the UK during a three-day visit in February 2023.²⁶ A month later, Antony Blinken made the first visit by a US Secretary of State to Niamey, the capital, describing Niger as a “model of resilience, a model of democracy, a model of cooperation”.²⁷ Bazoum has also had close ties with France and the coup raises questions for both France and the US, who maintain military forces in the country. For more, see Commons Library briefing [July 2023 coup in Niger](#).

Nigeria

Bola Tinubu, of the ruling All Progressives Congress, was elected President in February 2023 and sworn in on 29 May. The two main opposition parties subsequently filed legal petitions asking the Appeals Court to invalidate the election and for a new election to be organised. In early September, the presidential election tribunal rejected challenges by opposition parties to the result.²⁸ The EU's election observation mission said Nigerian citizens demonstrated a clear commitment to the democratic process in the run up to the vote, but found the election “exposed enduring systemic weaknesses”.²⁹

Nigeria's economy and national security dominated the election campaign, with rising inflation and high rates of violent crime key issues for voters.

Further analysis of the candidates and election issues can be found in Commons Library paper [Nigeria 2023 presidential election](#).

Senegal

Senegal has been described by BBC News as one of Africa's “model democracies” for its tradition of stable government and civilian rule. Freedom House also says Senegal is “one of Africa's most stable electoral democracies”.³⁰

²⁵ [Niger's top court confirms Mohamed Bazoum's election win](#), Al Jazeera, 22 March 2021

²⁶ FCDO, [UK launches new Sahel Humanitarian Fund](#), 16 February 2023

²⁷ US State Department, [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Nigerien Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou at a Joint Press Availability](#), 16 March 2023

²⁸ Reuters, Nigerian election

²⁹ EU, [The European Union Election Observation Mission presents its final report](#), 27 June 2023

³⁰ Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023: Senegal](#), March 2023, accessed September 2023

In recent months tensions have been rising ahead of the next presidential election in February 2024. The sentencing of popular opposition leader Ousmane Sonko for “corrupting” a youth (but acquitted on charges of rape) in June 2023, sparked what Associated Press called the country’s “deadliest clashes” between police and protestors for decades.³¹ His lawyer said the “authorities want to prevent him from standing” in the election.³²

President Macky Sall allayed fears that he would extend his stay in office by announcing in July that he would not seek a third term.³³ This decision was welcomed by regional leaders.³⁴ However, Michelle Gavin, an Africa specialist at the US-based Council on Foreign Relations, says the subsequent dissolution of Sonko’s political party by the Interior Minister undermines public trust and confidence in democracy.³⁵

Sierra Leone

President Julius Bio of the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) beat Dr Samura Kamra of the All People’s Congress (APC) in elections held in June 2023. Key issues for voters were the high cost of living, high taxes on businesses, rising inflation, electricity challenges and the rising cost of fuel.

Several countries and international organisations commented on the processes and results in Sierra Leone’s presidential election. As well as making individual comments, the US, the UK, Ireland, Germany and France issued a joint statement on 28 June, expressing concern over “the lack of transparency in the tabulation process” and calling on stakeholders to engage in dialogue to resolve disputes.

The APC are contesting the results of the election and is boycotting parliament. Africa Confidential says that security worries are growing among senior officials in Freetown, partly because of the electoral results dispute, but also because of political unrest elsewhere in the region.³⁶

Further analysis of candidates and electoral issues can be found in Commons library paper [Sierra Leone: 2023 presidential election and international reaction](#).

³¹ AP News, [Protesters in Senegal accuse police of using armed civilians to quell unrest](#), 16 June 2023

³² AP News, [Senegal opposition leader Sonko convicted of corrupting youth, acquitted of rape](#), 2 June 2023

³³ Al Jazeera, [Senegal’s Macky Sall rules out third term after deadly protests](#), 4 July 2023

³⁴ Al Jazeera, [Senegal’s Macky Sall rules out third term after deadly protests](#), 4 July 2023

³⁵ Michelle Gavin, [A setback for Senegal](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 1 August 2023

³⁶ Africa Confidential, [President Bio taps Trump ally as security worries grow](#), 31 August 2023

Togo

The Eyadema family have ruled Togo since Gnassingbé Eyadema seized power in 1967. His son, Faure, succeeded him upon his death in 2005. While he has won four elections, most recently in 2020, the elections have been criticised by the opposition, who have alleged widespread fraud.³⁷

³⁷ BBC News, [Togo country profile](#), 28 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

2

Rise in the number of coups

Coups since 2020

2023 Niger

2022 Burkina Faso
(twice)

2021 Mali, Guinea

2020 Mali

In the past three years, the elected presidents of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger have been forcibly removed from office by the military. There have also been reports of attempted coups in The Gambia and Guinea Bissau.³⁸

In 2021 the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, warned about an “explosion in seizures of power by force” across the world, declaring “[military coups are back](#)” in speech to the General Assembly. Guterres ascribed a loss of faith in governments and institutions, a breakdown of values and rise in mistrust, compounded by geopolitical divisions undermining international cooperation. He warned “a sense of impunity is taking hold”.³⁹

That there have been six successful coups in the region since 2020 has prompted concern that military takeovers are on the rise, at the expense of democratic handovers of power.⁴⁰ None of the countries involved has returned to civilian rule.

In early July 2023, Nigeria’s newly elected President Bolo Tinubu used his accession to the presidency of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to warn against military takeovers, declaring “we will not accept coup after coup in West Africa again.”⁴¹ Within a few weeks, military officers overthrew the elected government in Niger.

Every coup is different and driven by each country’s own domestic circumstances. However, recent analysis suggests governance failures and ongoing insecurity are major contributing factors. The following sections explore some of these issues.

³⁸ Reuters, [Niger coup: List of recent military takeovers in West and Central Africa](#), 27 July 2023

³⁹ United Nations, [Solidarity ‘Missing in Action’, Secretary-General Tells General Assembly, Decrying ‘Malady of Mistrust’ while Stressing: ‘We Must Get Serious’](#), 21 September 2021

⁴⁰ Niger coup: [Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?](#), BBC News, 29 July 2023

⁴¹ [‘We Won’t Accept Coup d’etat In West Africa Again,’ Tinubu Declares As New ECOWAS Chairman](#), Sahara Reporters, 9 July 2023

1 Historical trends

A study by two US researchers, Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, identified over 200 attempted and successful coups in Africa since the 1950s.⁴² They averaged around four a year between 1960 and 2000, with a marked decline in military interventions since the turn of the century. The number of coups in the last few years has reversed that trend.

Their studies also found that many of the African countries with the highest number of failed and successful coups have been in West Africa, with ten apiece in Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Their analysis also shows a significant decline in coups across the continent since 2000.⁴³

⁴² Niger coup: [Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?](#), BBC News, 29 July 2023

⁴³ Niger coup: [Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?](#), BBC News, 29 July 2023

3 Strength of democracy

The number of coups and attempted coups have led some commentators to question the underlying strength of democracy in the region. Opinion polls show declining satisfaction with the way democracy is working.

3.1 Underlying strength of institutions

Some commentators have questioned the underlying strength of democracies and democratic institutions in some countries on the continent. Rabah Arezki a former chief economist and vice president at the African Development Bank, has spoken about the fragility of democratisation in countries that are at an early stage of economic development and face major security challenges:

The increasing frequency of military coups is a symptom of the shortcomings of democratisation in Africa's poorest countries, where elections have failed to produce legitimate governments capable of delivering security and development. Where institutions are weak, elections alone will not make leaders accountable.⁴⁴

Muhammad Dan Suleiman, a lecturer at Curtin University, and Hakeem Onapajo, a lecturer at Nile University of Nigeria, identified governance and democratic failures as some of the recurring themes in their studies of coups in West Africa.⁴⁵ They point to a lack of informed and active participation, respect for the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and civil liberties. Political power is inherited rather than democratically contested, they say, and point to attempts by sitting presidents to amend constitutional terms to stay longer in power. They suggest that “despite modest democratic achievements, a more accurate picture of democracy in West Africa is that it is superficial.”⁴⁶

In 2020, Freedom House, an NGO which tracks democracy worldwide, said the region with the fastest decline in political rights and civil liberties was West Africa.⁴⁷ Five of the 12 countries with the largest year-on-year score declines worldwide were in West Africa: Benin, Burkina

⁴⁴ Rabah Arezki, Africa's coup wave, RUSI Newsbrief, 18 March 2022

⁴⁵ Muhammad Dan Suleiman and Hakeem Onapajo, [Why West Africa has had so many coups and how to prevent more](#), The Conversation, 15 February 2022; Muhammad Dan Suleiman, [Towards a better understanding of the underlying conditions of coups](#), E-International Relations, 24 September 2021

⁴⁶ As above

⁴⁷ Freedom House, [West Africa's Democratic Progress is Slipping Away, Even as Region's Significance Grows](#), 19 March 2020.

Faso, Guinea, Mali and Nigeria. Three of those have since experienced coups. Freedom House categorises only two of the 15 countries in West Africa as “Free”: Ghana and Cabo Verde (see table 1).

Table 1 Freedom House status of countries in West Africa		
Not Free	Partly Free	Free
Burkina Faso	Benin	Cabo Verde
Guinea	Cote d’Ivoire	Ghana
Mali	The Gambia	
	Guinea Bissau	
	Liberia	
	Mauritania	
	Niger	
	Nigeria	
	Senegal	
	Sierra Leone	
	Togo	

Source: Freedom House, [Freedom in the World 2023](#), March 2023, accessed September 2023

Freedom House’s separates countries into Free, Partly Free, and Not Free by analysing the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, the functioning of the government, freedom of expression and of belief, associational and organizational rights, the rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights. Further information on their methodology is available online: [About the Freedom in the World report](#). Individual country profiles [provide a detailed assessment and recent developments](#).

In a study of West Africa in 2022, Saferworld, an NGO that works to prevent violent conflict, found that “years of political misgovernance and state abuses have led to an accelerated deterioration of citizen–state relations in Mali and Burkina Faso” and that the western-led focus on counter-terrorism and security has “neglected the political governance challenges that have corroded the region since independence.”⁴⁸

This governance failure “creates a vacuum in which the military presents itself to the civilian population as an alternative that will bring order and stability” according to Vincent Obisie-Orlu, a researcher at the Good Governance Africa organisation.⁴⁹ Ebenezer Obadare, an author of

⁴⁸ [How not to lose the Sahel: community perspectives on insecurity and international interventions in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso](#), Saferworld, February 2022

⁴⁹ [A snapshot of the roots of instability in West Africa](#), GGA, 13 April 2022

several books on governance in Africa, says “what seems like affection for the soldiers is in fact a desire for stability and good governance.”⁵⁰

Analysis by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, a German political foundation, suggests the number of coups reflects an expression of a severe crisis of West Africa’s political systems. Anna Wasserfall and Dr Susanne Conrad suggested Côte d’Ivoire, Togo, Benin, and Ghana are “struggling with similar structural challenges and state fragility” as those that have already experienced coups.⁵¹

2 Democratic backsliding?

US Ambassador Robert Wood has used the term “democratic backsliding” to describe recent developments in the region.⁵²

E Gyimah-Boadi, co-founder of Afrobarometer and co-founder of the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, discusses what he sees as a decline in democratic trends in recent years. He says that after years of reforms, the region had become a “trailblazer in African democratic governance” by 2010. However, in the last five years “this optimistic narrative has faltered”, not only with military coups but signs of democratic regression in some countries, typified by the stifling of opposition parties, media and civil society. He argues that while some countries have sustained and deepened their democratic traditions “too many countries have regressed down the path to autocracy.”⁵³

[Freedom House](#) maintains individual country profiles tracking political rights, participation, transparency and accountability, civil liberties, freedom of assembly, rule of law and individual rights.

⁵⁰ [Coups in Burkina Faso bodes ill for stability in West Africa](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 25 January 2022

⁵¹ [A new epicentre of terrorism?](#), Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 12 September 2022

⁵² US Mission to the UN, [Remarks at a UN Security Council briefing on West Africa and the Sahel](#), 25 July 2023

⁵³ E Gyimah-Boadi, [West Africa’s authoritarian turn](#), 11 July 2022. See also Paul Melly, [Niger coup underlines challenge to democracy across Africa](#), Chatham House, 18 August 2023; [Season of putsch: Why have coups become so popular in Africa?](#) Al Jazeera, 1 September 2023; [What’s driving Africa’s coups?](#) *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 3 September 2023

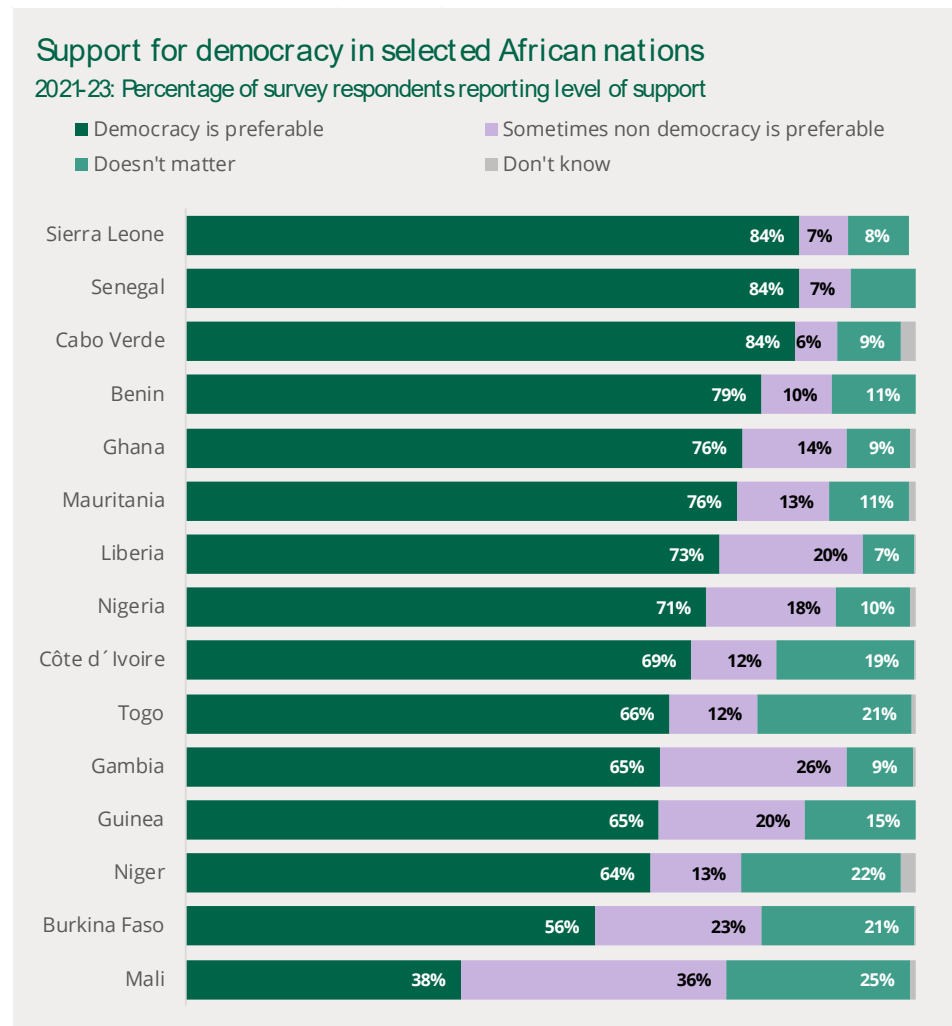
3.2

Decline in satisfaction with democracy

“Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening”.

Afrobarometer,
January 2023

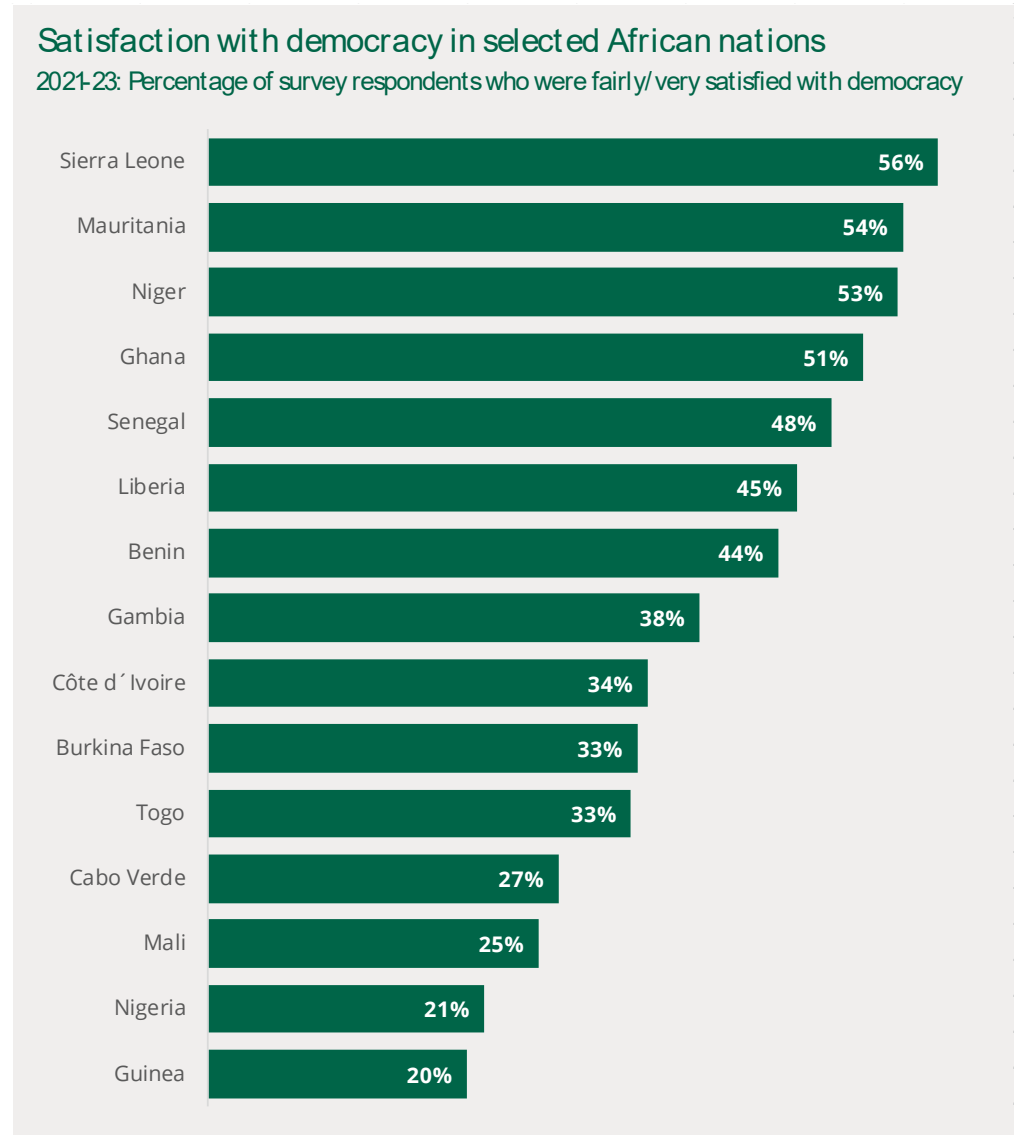
Satisfaction with the way democracy is working has declined across Africa, according to Afrobarometer, a pan-African, non-partisan research network based in Ghana. Speaking in July 2023, Afrobarometer CEO Joseph Asunka said the failures of governments and elected leaders to meet popular democratic aspirations has “led to a decline in popular confidence in democratic governance and an increasing attraction to military rule and intervention.”⁵⁴



Source: [Analyse online: Afrobarometer 2021-23 data](#), section C03, Q44. Question asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your opinion: (1) democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, (2) in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable, and (3) for someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

⁵⁴ Afrobarometer, [Declining satisfaction threatens African democracy, Afrobarometer CEO reveals](#), 18 July 2023

Afrobarometer has raised concerns before about the low levels of satisfaction with political leaders. Analysis of their polling from 2019-21 showed that while Africans remain committed to democracy, the political reality often falls short of these aspirations: “Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening.”⁵⁵



Source: [Analyse online: Afrobarometer 2021-23 data](#), section C03, Q59 question asked, “how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?”

⁵⁵ Afrobarometer, [PP85: Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren’t listening](#), 19 January 2023

3.3 Recent elections

Leonardo Santos Simaão, Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), told the Security Council that during 2023, some countries had taken steps to “further consolidate the democratic process”, with local and national elections in Benin, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.⁵⁶ Commons Library briefings are available on the elections in [Nigeria](#) (CBP 9738) and [Sierra Leone](#) (CBP 9829).

Liberia will hold presidential and legislative elections on 10 October 2023. Political parties have signed an accord to prevent violence ahead of the elections, and committing signatories to use constitutional means if they are dissatisfied with the electoral process and outcomes.⁵⁷ Senegal’s next presidential election is planned for February 2024.

3.4 Strengthening democratic institutions

Nigerian President Tinubu has called on fellow ECOWAS members to “stand firm on democracy”, which he described as the best form of government.⁵⁸ He explicitly called upon its members to “strengthen our democratic institutions and ensure the respect for human rights and the rule of law.”⁵⁹

Suliman and Onapajo suggest averting future coups requires a radical change of direction: “countries must address government deficits in the form of non-fulfilment of the entitlements of citizenship, economic frustration, and growing insecurity.” They also call on ECOWAS and the African Union to be “firm and unbiased” in their response to coups.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ UN Security Council, [Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel](#) (PDF), 30 June 2023, S/2023/490

⁵⁷ BBC News, [Liberia parties sign peace pact ahead of October polls](#), 5 April 2023 [accessed 3 August 2023]

⁵⁸ [‘We Won’t Accept Coup d’etat In West Africa Again,’ Tinubu Declares As New ECOWAS Chairman](#), Sahara Reporters, 9 July 2023

⁵⁹ [‘We Won’t Accept Coup d’etat In West Africa Again,’ Tinubu Declares As New ECOWAS Chairman](#), Sahara Reporters, 9 July 2023

⁶⁰ Muhammad Dan Suleiman and Hakeem Onapajo, [Why West Africa has had so many coups and how to prevent more](#), The Conversation, 15 February 2022;

4 Insecurity and violence

West Africa includes parts of the Sahel region, which have been fighting an Islamist insurgency for many years. The UK Government, among others, has said it is concerned insecurity could spread from the Sahel to West Africa's coastal states.

4.1 Terrorism and insecurity in the Sahel

The Sahel region is the “epicentre of terrorism” worldwide, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace, which measures the impact of terrorism globally.⁶¹ The Institute's Global Terrorism Index 2023 said 43% of deaths globally from terrorism were in the Sahel, compared to 1% in 2007.

According to the global terrorism index, 73% of terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel in 2022 were in Mali and Burkina Faso. Most terrorism-related attacks are attributed to jihadists; JNIM (Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen) and Islamic State (IS) being the two most prominent groups. International counter-terrorism operations have been focused on the tri-border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.⁶² In addition, Boko Haram has increased its presence in Niger, having been driven out of northern Nigeria.⁶³

The Institute warns violence is escalating beyond the Sahel, with Togo and Benin “recording their worst global terrorism index scores on record.”⁶⁴ The index identifies some of the reasons for the significant increase in deaths:

The underlying drivers are complex and systemic including weak governance, ethnic polarisation, ecological insecurity, abuses by state security, pastoral conflict, the growth of transnational Salafi-Islam ideology, political instability, transnational crime, food insecurity and geopolitical competition.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Institute for Economics and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the impact of terrorism](#), March 2023

⁶² As above.

⁶³ As above.

⁶⁴ Institute for Economics and Peace, [Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the impact of terrorism](#), March 2023

⁶⁵ As above.

The report also notes that governments in the state's worst affected by terrorism have experienced multiple coups and coup attempts.

But it is not just terrorist groups that create insecurity in the Sahel.

The collapse of Libya in 2011, after the UK, French and US (later NATO) led military operation, led to an influx of small arms into southern neighbours. This enabled rebel groups and bandits in Mali, Niger and elsewhere to acquire weapons and ammunition.⁶⁶

Long standing tensions between farmers and pastoralists have been exacerbated by the effects of climate change, with increased competition over resources, compounded by state failures to provide security. Professor Chafer, Professor of French and African studies at Portsmouth University, says accelerating desertification and increased economic competition meant that local people, in their competition over resources, are experiencing a "retrenchment into community-based self-defence groups" to help families protect themselves and their land.⁶⁷

Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are among the [least developed countries in the world](#). All three countries are ranked towards the bottom of the UN Development Programme's human development index in 2023.⁶⁸

The drivers of conflict in the Sahel are discussed in more detail in Commons Library briefing [UK military in the Sahel: Developments in 2022](#) (CBP 9634).

4.2

Military responses to insecurity

There have been multiple international and regional military interventions to restore security in the Sahel, with little success.

In June 2023 the United Nations Security Council agreed to end its decade-long peacekeeping mission in Mali, at the request of Mali's transitional authorities. The call to leave follows rising tensions between the authorities and the UN mission, MINUSMA, in recent years. The UK Government had already announced its intention to withdraw its 250-strong contingent earlier than planned because of tensions with the Malian government, and its association with the Russian Wagner

⁶⁶ Institute for Security Studies, [Arms trafficking from Libya to Niger is back in business](#), 28 July 2022; See also a report by the UN Office on drugs and crime, [firearms trafficking in the Sahel](#) [PDF], 2022 for further analysis of small arms trafficking and analysis of non-state armed groups. The current crisis in Mali has its roots in the events of 2012, when northern separatists and Islamist armed groups forced government forces out of northern Mali, and the military overthrew the Government.

⁶⁷ Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation](#), HL Paper 88, 10 July 2020, written evidence ZAF0039

⁶⁸ UN Development Programme, [Human Development Index](#), accessed 14 September 2023

Group.⁶⁹ Further background is available in Commons Library briefing [UN ends peacekeeping force in Mali](#)

France ended its separate decade-long counter-terrorism mission in 2022, after similar tensions with the Malian transitional authorities. The French Government cited “multiple obstructions” by the authorities as one of the reasons for ending Operation Barkhane and Task Force Takuba.⁷⁰ French policy is discussed in section 7.

In 2014, five Sahel countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger – formed the [Group of Five for the Sahel](#) (the G5) “whose main objective is coordination of development and security policies and strategies for the benefit of their populations”. A G5 Sahel Joint Force drew together military, police and border personnel to counter terrorism, organised crime and human trafficking in the tri-border area, supported by both the African Union and the UN Security Council (in [Resolutions 2359 and 2391](#) adopted in 2017).

There has been much debate over whether the international community has overly focused on the security aspect. The Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, in its 2020 report on UK policy towards Africa, emphasised the importance of addressing the underlying causes of conflict: “[it is vital that the international response to instability in the Sahel is not overly focused on conflict management, nor overly securitised.](#)”⁷¹

In a report published in 2022, Saferworld criticised the “security first” approach adopted by European countries, arguing that focusing on counter-terrorism failed to address the underlying causes of conflict and therefore failed to provide security. They argued a counter-terrorism focus “fed into escalating conflictual violence, inter-communal conflicts and structural impunity, especially regarding abuses by state security forces.”⁷²

4.3 Risk to the stability of coastal states

For several years Ministers and officials have been warning of the risk that insecurity in the Sahel could spread to West African coastal states.

In 2019 the UK Government said one of the reasons for increasing its deployment with the UN Mission in Mali was that by working to stabilise

⁶⁹ [HC Deb 14 November 2022 c401](#)

⁷⁰ [Joint declaration on the fight against the terrorist threat and the support to peace and security in the Sahel and West Africa](#), Elysee, 17 February 2022

⁷¹ Lords International Relations and Defence Committee, [The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation](#), HL Paper 88, 10 July 2020, para 522

⁷² [Insecurity in the Sahel: rethinking Europe's response](#), Saferworld, April 2022

states and tackle the root causes of conflict, it will help prevent conflict spilling over to neighbouring states.⁷³

In 2022, James Heapey, the Armed Forces Minister, talked about the risk of “contagion” of insecurity in Mali into coastal states in West Africa, including Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana.⁷⁴

In a policy paper explaining its development policy towards the Sahel published in July 2023, the Government said “social exclusion and governance challenges are at the root of the spread of conflict” from northern Mali into neighbouring countries, including Niger, Burkina Faso and coastal West Africa.⁷⁵

In May 2023 the UN Secretary General told the Security Council that violent extremism is “spreading at an alarming rate and expanding in West Africa.”⁷⁶

The head of the UN office for West Africa, Leonardo Santos Simão, told the Security Council in June 2023 that “the southward expansion of insecurity [from the Sahel] remains a potent threat”.⁷⁷ He said there had been renewed incursions in Benin and Togo, and coastal countries have responded by strengthening bilateral security engagements and internal security capabilities.⁷⁸

Following the coup in Niger, Abdel-Fatau Musah, the ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, said the bloc was concerned about “contagion” of coups to other countries in the region.⁷⁹

A candidate for the forthcoming Liberian presidential election has also cited the “troubling surge in coups” in a recent call for ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) to pro-actively support Liberia ahead of elections in October 2023. Sara Beysolow Nyanti, a former Assistant Secretary General of the UN, says many Liberians “fear chaos during the election” and wants ECOWAS and the AU to help safeguard the vote by providing

⁷³ Ministry of Defence, [UK to deploy 250 troops to Mali on peacekeeping operations](#), 22 July 2019

⁷⁴ [HC Deb 14 November 2022 c401](#)

⁷⁵ FCDO, [UK-Sahel region development partnership summary](#), 17 July 2023

⁷⁶ UN, [Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel: Report of the Secretary-General](#) (PDF), 9 May 2023, S/2023/328

⁷⁷ France 24, [More than 1,800 terror attacks recorded in West Africa thus far in 2023, ECOWAS says](#), 26 June 2023

⁷⁸ UN Security Council, [Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel](#) (PDF), 30 June 2023, S/2023/490

⁷⁹ The Africa Report, Exclusive: ECOWAS commissioner Musah speaks on Niger coup, 16 August 2023.

technical experts and expanding the existing ECOWAS advisory training team.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Vanguard Africa, [Liberia's October election: AU and ECOWAS must act outside the box](#), 5 September 2023

5 Popular protests

Cost of living pressures, worsening living standards and austerity measures are also affecting many people across West Africa. Rising energy and food prices in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine has exacerbated some of these issues.

At times, these pressures have been vocalised in protests and anti-government demonstrations.

In Sierra Leone in August 2022, large scale protests about the rising cost of living and economic hardship in Freetown were met with force by

police.⁸¹ A report from Reuters noted the unrest was “highly unusual” for the country.⁸² Some called on the government to subsidise basic commodities.⁸³

Over 1,000 protestors marched peacefully through Ghana’s capital in November 2022 calling for the resignation of the President amid an economic crisis.⁸⁴ It was one of a number of demonstrations held under the hashtag #fixthecountry.⁸⁵

3 Food insecurity in West Africa

An estimated 44 million people across 15 countries in West Africa and the Sahel are facing high levels of acute food insecurity in 2023, according to the Food Security Information Network.⁸⁶ The FSIN says Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone met the criteria to be considered major crises in 2023.

Conflict and insecurity was a main driver of acute food insecurity in Mali, Niger and Nigeria, while economic shocks tend to drive food insecurity in coastal countries. Food inflation has risen by 58% in Sierra Leone and 54% in Ghana between June 2022 and June 2023.⁸⁷ The removal of fuel subsidies in Nigeria in mid-June has also contributed to inflation rising.

⁸¹ [Sierra Leone: Civil Unrest - Operation Update Report 1, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies](#), 1 December 2022

⁸² Reuters, [Freetown in shock after dozens killed in Sierra Leone protests](#), 11 August 2022

⁸³ Al Jazeera, [What’s behind the violent protests in Sierra Leone?](#), 12 August 2022

⁸⁴ Reuters, [Ghanaian protesters demand president step down over economic crisis](#), 7 November 2022

⁸⁵ Al Jazeera, [Ghana’s #FixTheCountry protesters take to Accra’s streets](#), 4 August 2021

⁸⁶ Food Security Information Network, [Global Report on food crises 2023 mid-year update: West Africa and the Sahel](#), September 2023. These 15 countries differ to the 15 members of ECOWAS.

⁸⁷ As above, figure 2.8

6 Regional response

6.1 ECOWAS

Four of ECOWAS' fifteen members have come under military rule since 2020.

ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, has suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger after their governments were overthrown by the military. In the immediate aftermath of each coup, ECOWAS also imposed sanctions and closed borders. It has also pushed military authorities to commit to a clear timeline to transition to an elected civilian government.

ECOWAS has taken a notably stronger line in response to coups since Nigerian President Tinubu became its chairman in early July 2023. At the time, he spoke strongly in support of democracy, saying the organisation must not sit as “toothless bulldogs” when military officers “turn their guns against civil authorities”.⁸⁸

ECOWAS has since threatened the use of force against Niger. At a meeting on 10 August, ECOWAS said it remained determined to “keep all options on the table for a peaceful resolution of the crisis” and agreed to activate the ECOWAS standby force. ECOWAS ended the communique by underscoring its “continued commitment to the restoration of constitutional order through peaceful means.”⁸⁹

Abdel-Fatau Musah, the ECOWAS commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, explained why ECOWAS was adopting a firmer line with Niger:

First, we are seeing something like a contagion developing as far as coups are concerned. Already, in the last three years or so there have been seven coups in the region. This is the fourth successful coup. It is important to stop the contagion and we feel that this is the right time with Niger, after all the warnings.⁹⁰

However, any such action risks wider conflict. In a joint statement issued on 31 July Mali and Burkina Faso warned against any military intervention in Niger to restore ousted President Mohamed Bazoum.⁹¹

⁸⁸ [‘We Won’t Accept Coup d’etat In West Africa Again,’ Tinubu Declares As New ECOWAS Chairman](#), Sahara Reporters, 9 July 2023

⁸⁹ ECOWAS, Final Communique – Second Extraordinary Summit Of The Ecowas Authority Of Heads Of State And Government On The Political Situation In Niger, 10 August 2023

⁹⁰ The Africa Report, Exclusive: ECOWAS commissioner Musah speaks on Niger coup, 16 August 2023

⁹¹ BBC Monitoring, Briefing: Mali, Burkina Faso back Niger junta, warn against foreign intervention, 1 August 2023

The Malian minister for territorial administration, who read out the statement in Mali, said during his speech that “any military intervention against Niger would amount to a declaration of war against Burkina Faso and Mali”.⁹² On 16 September, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso established the Alliance of Sahel States, a security pact which explicitly says any attack on one will be “considered as an aggression against the other parties”.⁹³

The military head of Guinea, Col Aminata Diallo, has also warned against any military intervention in Niger, saying it would “lead de facto to the dislocation of ECOWAS”.⁹⁴

6.2 Accra Initiative

In 2017 five West African countries launched the Accra Initiative in response to growing insecurity in the region. The original five - Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Togo – were joined by Mali and Niger in 2019.⁹⁵

James Heapey, the Armed Forces Minister, attended a conference in Ghana in November 2022 to support the Accra initiative. He explicitly said it was intended to prevent “further contagion of the insurgency into Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Niger, and tackling the growing levels of violence in Burkina Faso as well as in Mali.”⁹⁶ He has since said it the government is supporting countries through the Accra Initiative to “develop the capacity of the Ghanaians, the Côte d’Ivoireans, the Togolese, the Beninois and the Nigerians” to address the security challenges in the region.⁹⁷

6.3 African Union

The African Union (AU) has suspended Niger, Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso. The AU’s constitution condemns and rejects unconstitutional changes of governments. Article 30 of the constitution stipulates that

⁹² BBC Monitoring, Briefing: Mali, Burkina Faso back Niger junta, warn against foreign intervention, 1 August 2023

⁹³ France 24, [Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso military leaders establish security alliance](#), 16 September 2023

⁹⁴ BBC Monitoring, Briefing: Mali, Burkina Faso back Niger junta, warn against foreign intervention, 1 August 2023

⁹⁵ Institute for Security Studies, [Can the Accra Initiative prevent terrorism in West African coastal states?](#), 29 November 2022

⁹⁶ [HC Deb 14 November 2022 c401](#)

⁹⁷ [HC Deb 14 June 2023 c371](#)

“governments which shall come to power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ African Union, [Constitutive Act of the African Union](#), accessed 11 September 2023

7

UK's response to coups and political instability

The Government has condemned the forceful removal from office of leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger. The Government has endorsed an African and regionally-led resolution to the situations in these countries, most recently articulated by the Foreign Secretary, James Cleverly, during a visit to Nigeria:

The UK's position is clear. Respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, self-determination and human rights must prevail. Alongside democracy, the rule of law, liberty and freedom.

And I know that these are your values too. Which is why we welcome the strong and principled stance that the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States have taken on the defence of democratic values and the constitutional order in Niger.⁹⁹

Following ECOWAS' decision to activate its standby force, Andrew Mitchell, the Minister for International Development and Africa, issued a statement supporting the regional bloc's approach:

The United Kingdom supports the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in calling for the restoration of constitutional order and democracy in Niger. We welcome the determination of ECOWAS to pursue all means to bring about a peaceful resolution. We stand in support of democracy in Niger.¹⁰⁰

James Heappey reinforced that message during a visit to Nigeria on 22 and 23 August, when he met Nigerian defence ministers and military chiefs.¹⁰¹ The Minister has also said defence ministers across Europe and NATO have been discussing responses to coups in Africa, saying the continent, lying to NATO's southern flank, is "of enormous importance to Europe and the security of the Euro-Atlantic."¹⁰²

⁹⁹ FCDO, [UK partnerships with Africa: Foreign Secretary's speech in Lagos](#), 1 August 2023

¹⁰⁰ FCDO, [UK launches new Sahel Humanitarian Fund](#), 16 February 2023; FCDO, [Situation in Niger: UK statement](#), 11 August 2023

¹⁰¹ The cable, [UK defence minister: We'll work with ECOWAS to restore democratic rule in Niger](#), 23 August 2023

¹⁰² [HC Deb 11 September 2023 c656](#)

8 International presence in the region

8.1 France

Francophone West Africa:

Benin

The number of coups in French speaking countries in recent years, and the anti-French sentiment expressed by coup leaders and in public demonstrations, has prompted a fresh look at the legacy of French colonial rule in West Africa.¹⁰³

Burkina Faso

Views and interpretations of the legacy of French colonial rule differ. What is broadly accepted is the degree to which France remained involved in its former territories after they gained independence in the late 1950s early 1960s.¹⁰⁴

Guinea

Ivory Coast

Mali

Ebenezer Obadare, with the US think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, says that “France continues to wield substantial political and economic influence in its former colonies”.¹⁰⁵ He suggests “many people have grown disillusioned with civilian governments they see as subservient to France and therefore welcome military rulers as a necessary corrective.”¹⁰⁶

Niger

Senegal

Togo

France’s military involvement in the Sahel has come under particular scrutiny. In February 2022 President Macron announced plans to end the nine-year long counter-terrorism operation Barkhane in Mali, after a deterioration in relations with the Malian transitional authorities and the presence of Russian Wagner network mercenaries.¹⁰⁷

France shifted its focus and President Macron declared the “heart of this military operation” will no longer be in Mali but in Niger (as operation

¹⁰³ See for example: Gregory Mann, French colonialism and the making of the modern Sahel, Oxford Handbook of the Sahel (2021); Ebenezer Obadare, The real meaning of Niger’s coup, Foreign Affairs, 1 September 2023; Nabila Ramdani, [The Niger empire show France’s quasi-empire in Africa is finally crumbling](#), the Guardian, 5 August 2023; France 24, [Macron suffers new Africa setback with Niger coup](#), 3 August 2023; BBC News, [Niger coup: Is France to blame for instability in West Africa?](#), 7 August 2023; BBC News, [Macron looks on as France’s Africa policy crumbles](#), 2 September 2023

¹⁰⁴ See examples above.

¹⁰⁵ Ebenezer Obadare, The real meaning of Niger’s coup, Foreign Affairs, 1 September 2023

¹⁰⁶ As above

¹⁰⁷ France 24, [Macron announces French troop withdrawal from Mali](#), 17 February 2022

Almahaou).¹⁰⁸ Idrissa Abdourahmane from the African Studies Centre Leiden in the Netherlands said that Niger had become a “crucial spot for a French military redeployment.”¹⁰⁹

President Macron also attempted to address what Obadare called the “toxicity” of French military bases when he unveiled a new strategy for Africa in February 2023. The strategy included plans for a “noticeable reduction” in France’s military presence across the continent.¹¹⁰

However, the new military leaders in Niger have revoked military agreements with France, a step Paris has so far refused to recognise.¹¹¹

Anti-French sentiment has been visible in demonstrations supporting the coup.¹¹² In early September, tens of thousands of protestors reportedly converged on a French military base in Niger demanding their exit.¹¹³

However some, such as Abdel-Fatau Musah, ECOWAS’ commissioner for political affairs, peace and security, suggest the coup leaders are using anti-French sentiment for their own means, describing the soldiers who took power in Niger as “people who were being paid to protect the president took him hostage, hijacked power and then started looking for justification and mobilising people against the French.”¹¹⁴

Stephen Smith, the former Africa editor of Le Monde, analysing President Macron’s approach to the Sahel, argues France drastically misread the terrorist threat in Africa and failed to understand local politics. This misreading meant the French mission “was never able to shore up the political foundations necessary to withstand the forces of insurgency and autocratic or populist rule.” He adds that, with its colonial and post-colonial legacy, France became the “convenient target for all of the region’s problems” and was easily displaced by Russian mercenaries (the Wagner group).¹¹⁵

President Macron remains close to ousted-President Bazoum. In early September he said he had spoken to Bazoum every day since the coup.¹¹⁶ The Nigerien military authorities have suggested France is preparing a

¹⁰⁸ France 24, [Niger becomes France’s partner of last resort after Mali withdrawal](#), 18 February 2022; France 24, [Niger-France military cooperation: an inside look at operation Almahaou](#), 12 April 2023

¹⁰⁹ [Niger becomes France’s partner of last resort after Mali withdrawal](#), France 24, 18 February 2022

¹¹⁰ France 24, [France must demonstrate 'profound humility' towards Africa. Macron says ahead of four-nation trip](#), 27 February 2023

¹¹¹ Politico, [Niger junta revokes military pact with France](#), 4 August 2023

¹¹² BBC News, [Niger coup: Thousands march to support junta](#), 3 August 2023

¹¹³ Al Jazeera, [Photos: huge protests in Niger demand French forces to leave](#), 3 September 2023

¹¹⁴ Africa Report, ECOWAS Commissioner Musah dissects Niger coup – part 2, 17 August 2023

¹¹⁵ Stephen Smith, [Macron’s mess in the Sahel](#), Foreign Affairs, 10 March 2022

¹¹⁶ France 24, [Niger becomes France’s partner of last resort after Mali withdrawal](#), 18 February 2022; Africa Confidential, [Bazoum prepares to fight on two fronts](#), 2 March 2022; Reuters, [French President Macron: I talk 'every day' to Niger's ousted president Bazoum](#), 1 September 2023

military assault on the country in conjunction with Benin, Senegal and the Ivory Coast.¹¹⁷ France continues to have soldiers based in the Ivory Coast and Senegal, as well as Gabon in Central Africa (on 31 August 2023 the Gabonese military deposed President Ali Bongo Ondimba. France initially suspended military cooperation but has reportedly resumed activities¹¹⁸).

8.2 Russia and the Wagner Group

The military leaders of Mali, Burkina Faso attended the Russia Africa summit in St Petersburg in July 2023. President Putin spoke of strengthening ties with African countries, including military and security cooperation. He blamed instability in Africa on “the heavy legacy of the colonial era” and what he described as the Western approach of “divide and rule”.¹¹⁹ The summit declaration included a reaffirmation of “the need to jointly oppose neo-colonialism” and a pledge to “work together to counter manifestations of neo-colonial policies”.¹²⁰

At the conference, Burkina’s current military leader, Captain Traore, spoke against colonialism and imperialism, describing Burkina Faso as having spent the last eight years “fighting the most barbaric and cruel form of colonialism and imperialism” and called upon African leaders to “stop acting as puppets ready to act whenever the imperialists pull the strings.”¹²¹ Mali’s interim leader, Assimi Goïta, thanked Russia for its support and “military partnership”, and said the goal is to “consolidate the strategic partnership between Mali and the Russian Federation”.¹²²

At the summit President Putin also promised free grain to Mali and Burkina Faso, as well as several other African countries. Potential trade and energy agreements between Burkina Faso and Russia were also discussed, along with the re-opening of the Russian embassy in Burkina that was closed in 1992.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Levenement Niger, [Preparations for armed aggression against Niger: the CNSP denounces France in complicity with West African countries](#), 10 September 2023; France 24, [Niger military accuses France of deploying forces with view to 'intervention'](#), 10 September 2023

¹¹⁸ RFI, [Gabon unveils transitional government, French military cooperation resumes](#), 13 September 2023, [France suspends military cooperation with new regime in Gabon](#), 2 September 2023

¹¹⁹ President of Russia, [Russia-Africa summit](#), 28 July 2023

¹²⁰ President of Russia, [Declaration of the Second Russia-Africa Summit](#), 28 July 2023

¹²¹ President of Russia, [Russia-Africa summit](#), 28 July 2023

¹²² President of Russia, [Russia-Africa summit](#), 28 July 2023

¹²³ President of Russia, [Meeting with Interim President of Burkina Faso Ibrahim Traore](#), 29 July 2023

The Wagner group

The ongoing presence of the Russian mercenary Wagner Group in West Africa is unclear after the death of the organisation's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in July 2023.

Wagner's presence in Mali and, later, Burkina Faso, had prompted some discussion within Europe about the activities of the Wagner group and Russia's intentions in West Africa.¹²⁴ Writing in 2022, Theodore Murphy, Africa Programme Director at the European Council on Foreign Relations, suggested Russia was exploiting weaknesses in Europe's relationships with states across Africa, including Mali.¹²⁵ Christopher Vandome, Africa specialist with Chatham House, told the Foreign Affairs Committee that Wagner Group's presence in Africa more broadly has been "one of collaborating with elites in countries where there has been a democratic backsliding."¹²⁶

The UK and France blamed the close relationship between Mali's military leaders and Wagner as one of the reasons behind their military withdrawals in 2022.¹²⁷ Burkina Faso's current military leader, Captain Traoré, has said "we have new partners who support us in terms of equipment and other things", without naming them.¹²⁸

8.3

US response

The US is "gravely concerned by democratic backsliding" across West Africa, Ambassador Robert Wood told the UN Security Council in July 2023.¹²⁹ He expressed support for ECOWAS' leadership:

We support the UN and ECOWAS' leadership in holding transition governments accountable to their stated timelines to return to constitutional order, and for promoting stability in the region.¹³⁰

Antony Blinken paid the first visit to Niger by a US Secretary of State in March 2023. At the time, he described Niger as a "young democracy in a challenging part of the world" but one that shares America's democratic values and has been "been quick to defend democratic values under

¹²⁴ [Russia's long shadow in the Sahel](#), ECFR, 13 June 2022

¹²⁵ Theodore Murphy, [Lone changer: Germany, Mali and Russian influence in Africa's arc of instability](#), ECFR, 31 August 2022

¹²⁶ Foreign Affairs Committee, [Oral evidence: Critical minerals](#) [PDF], HC 1095 2022-23, 21 March 2023, q32.

¹²⁷ Commons Library paper, [UN ends peacekeeping force in Mali](#), 3 July 2023

¹²⁸ Africa news, [Burkina: "we are not enemies" of the "French people"](#), says Captain Traoré, 7 September 2023

¹²⁹ US Mission to the UN, [Remarks at a UN Security Council briefing on West Africa and the Sahel](#), 25 July 2023

¹³⁰ As above

threat in neighbouring countries.”¹³¹ Blinken has since endorsed ECOWAS’ approach to Niger.¹³²

Some analysts suggest the coup in Niger could prompt the US to rethink its “security-focused engagement with Africa and military involvement in the Sahel region”..¹³³ In August 2022 the Biden administration released a new strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa which included a pledge to “seek to stem the recent tide of authoritarianism and military takeovers by working with allies and partners in the region to respond to democratic backsliding...” and support African democracies by backing civil society.¹³⁴

¹³¹ US State Department, [Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Nigerien Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou at a Joint Press Availability](#), 16 March 2023

¹³² US State Department, [ECOWAS Call for Restoration of Constitutional Order in the Republic of Niger](#), 10 August 2023

¹³³ Foreign Report, [Is Niger’s coup the Sahel’s last straw](#), 28 August 2023

¹³⁴ White House, [US Strategy towards Sub-Sharan Africa \[PDF\]](#), August 2022

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