



Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Legitimacy, Coups and Political Transition In The Sahel

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BEYOND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: LEGITIMACY, COUPS, AND POLITICAL TRANSITION IN THE SAHEL¹

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ABSTRACT

The wave of military coups that swept across the Sahel was the result of the collapse of a political model whose legitimacy had run out. Moving beyond the conventional narrative of democratic backsliding, I argue that the region's regularly held elections have become mere rituals, failing to convert popular will into meaningful sovereignty. This systemic failure created a vacuum that military factions filled, often gaining significant public support, especially among the youth. I reframe this support not as an endorsement of militarism, but as a complete rejection of a captured and unresponsive political class. Based on empirical insights and proceedings from the 16th EISA Symposium, including presentations and debates, I highlight several theoretical and empirical questions that emerged. This article explains how domestic actors, local elites, political institutions, and weakened civil societies have contributed to reinforcing a failing system of governance. This article explores a central paradox: Why do 'corrective' post-coup political transitions end up perpetuating the very governance failures they vowed to rectify? It argues that a deep-seated crisis of political legitimacy, rather than mere democratic backsliding, is key to explaining both their emergence and subsequent failure. The article argues that when the ballot box is structurally unable to bring about change, it sows the seeds of its own irrelevance. Thus, the issue is not that Africans fail in elections, but rather that elections fail in Africa. This crisis presents a challenge to the pursuit of peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) across the continent.

Keywords: Electoral legitimacy; civil society; governance; institutional failure; military coups; political transitions; Sahel; SDG 16 – peace, justice, and strong institutions.

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INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN THE SAHEL

The wave of coups that swept through the Sahel in the 2020s did more than just overthrow governments; it overturned an entire paradigm. It dismantled the teleological myth of inevitable democratic progress, exposing realpolitik machinations where legitimacy is transactional, sovereignty is asserted through militarism, and the very definition of political transition is violently redefined. It was within this reconfigured regional political reality that the 16th Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) Symposium on *Navigating Political Transitions in Africa* convened. Its purpose was to analyse and clarify the complexities of the emerging and volatile regional phenomenon of coups (re)occurring in the region. Moving beyond diagnosing democratic backsliding, the symposium addressed a more urgent question: What constitutes a political transition, especially when the trajectory points *away* from democracy and *towards* authoritarian consolidation?

Engaging with the symposium's core debates, this article argues that the Sahelian coups are not simply political interruptions but represent a regressive form of political transition: a deliberate, gun-mediated renegotiation of the social contract. To understand this, we must shift our focus from institutional decay to a fundamental crisis in which the constitutional form is disconnected from the substance of governance. The central conceptual challenge of the symposium underpins this analysis: If Huntington's (1991) 'waves' explain the advance of democracy, how should we conceptualise the undertow, i.e., the deliberate regression using the very institutions meant to safeguard democracy? This compels us to redefine political transitions. A political transition is a lengthy and uncertain process of systemic regime change, ideally moving towards democracy. It is characterised by institutional fluidity and the renegotiation of the political order (Benyera, 2014, p. 336). However, the assumption that every political transition leads to a liberal democratic outcome is flawed. Many African states, especially in the post-coup Sahel, are caught in a grey zone of hybridity and cyclical instability (Benyera, 2016), revealing the concept's Western-centric teleology.

Conceptually, a coup by itself does not constitute a transition. It is better understood as an extra-constitutional seizure of power that either destroys or reveals the absence of a legitimate political framework. This seizure of power marks the beginning of an unstable interregnum, during which a meaningful transition is possible but not guaranteed. True transition can only begin if these coups lead to an inclusive reconstitution of political legitimacy that addresses the grievances that enabled them. However, historical precedent provides little cause for optimism, as most past coups in the Sahel have simply replaced one authoritarian regime with another (Fain et al., 2024). For a transition to be meaningful, the energy of popular grievances must be harnessed to build a renewed social contract (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 2013). Given how seldom this occurs, we are left to ponder whether Sahelian transitions are trapped in an endless cycle or will ever reach a definitive conclusion.

The symposium framed these coups as part of a continuum, symptomatic of the deeper failure of the post-1990 democratic project to deliver security, dignity, and development. This legitimacy deficit created a vacuum (Edet et al., 2024), worsened by a fragmenting global order, retreating multilateralism, the resurgence of nationalism, and geopolitical realignment (Keita, 2025, pp. 29–31). Within this context, the military’s Uberisation of power – a quick-fix alternative to the slow process of institution-building – gained appeal. These dynamic forces raise an important question: Can a democracy that persists in *form* but fails in *substance* ever truly be resilient? Moreover, in this new reality, what is ultimately the true purpose of an election?

The central research question addressed in the article is: Given the resurgence of military coups as the dominant mode of political transition in the Sahel during the 2020s, why do the resulting self-proclaimed corrective regimes typically fail to resolve – and often even embody – the very governance crises they claimed to address? How can a framework centred on a crisis of legitimacy explain this paradox? A qualitative case study design was employed, combining a systematic analysis of expert contributions with participant observation at the 16th EISA Symposium on *Navigating Political Transitions in Africa in the 2020s*. This is complemented by a focused review of recent scholarly and policy literature on political transitions in Africa. This approach allows for an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of how diverse actors interpret the current wave of political transitions, while situating these insights within broader empirical and theoretical debates. A key methodological limitation of this approach is that the data collected from symposium participants, although valuable for capturing expert and stakeholder perspectives, are self-reported and may be influenced by potential biases, strategic narratives, or unverified motives of the contributors, rather than representing independently verified or scientifically measured observations.

To address this question, the article employs a qualitative case study design, centred on a systematic analysis of contributions and participant observations from the 16th EISA Symposium, supplemented by a focused review of recent literature. Recognising that symposium data reflect elite discourse and may be influenced by strategic narratives and bias, this limitation is reframed as an analytical strength. Using process-tracing and discourse analysis, the contributions to the symposium are examined not as factual reports but as case studies in the justification and legitimisation of power, revealing the mechanisms behind regime change. This highlights the article’s core analytical contribution: a legitimacy-centred framework that shifts the focus from institutional decline to the dynamic crisis of political legitimacy.

The article is organised into six sections. The *first* section critiques the dominant analytical framework used by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, arguing that their misunderstanding of democratic backsliding leads to a fundamental misinterpretation of the political conditions in the Sahel. This misdiagnosis results in flawed political recommendations. In response, I propose a more nuanced, legitimacy-focused framework for analysing the subsequent political transitions.

The *second* section analyses the legitimacy crisis in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger that occurred before the coup. It details the empirical evidence of state failure and the erosion of the social contract, arguing that in Burkina Faso and Mali, existing regimes had significantly depleted their sovereign legitimacy, creating a political vacuum that the military forces subsequently filled. The case of Niger, however, presents a different dynamic: rather than a complete collapse of the social contract, the coup is viewed as the result of intra-military rivalries and institutional tensions, particularly within the presidential guard, that emerged within a contested yet still functioning political order.

The *third* section analyses the failure of electoral institutions to reflect the popular will in post-colonial societies. The argument is that the coups, while problematic, were symptoms of a misguided attempt to address the deeper maladies of stunted democratisation and incomplete decolonisation. From this perspective, the coups emerged as processes of political emancipation and realignment, with civil-military coalitions framing them as necessary revolutionary actions.

The *fourth* section examines how the media ecosystem serves as a central battleground during political transitions. It explores the struggle to create and control narratives within fragmented public spheres, where the media serves as a battleground for information warfare between the junta and various political protagonists, including opposition parties.

The *fifth* section assesses the responses of regional economic communities (RECs), arguing that their reliance on sanctions and the threat of force was a strategic miscalculation. This approach failed because it underestimated the junta's domestic support, which had effectively harnessed anti-Western and pan-African sentiments to its advantage.

The final section examines the institution of elections. It raises the question of whether simply returning to a traditional electoral model effectively resolves the foundational legitimacy deficits or merely perpetuates the cycle of instability, thereby increasing the risk of further coups. The following six explanations have been proposed as causes for the collapse of the constitutional order in the Sahel.

THE CRISIS OF THE BALLOT BOX IN THE SAHEL

The wave of coups that swept across the Sahel in the 2020s triggered a predictable scholarly focus on their causes and instigators (Atufe-Musa et al., 2025). Far less examined, however, are the political transitions initiated by the juntas themselves. These transitions are often described and justified as brief, corrective interventions aimed at restoring democracy. Elsewhere, for example, Zimbabwe's 2017 coup was framed as Operation Restore Legacy (Mudau & Mangani, 2018). In practice, these junta-led processes often become what this article terms perpetual political internships: indefinite periods of rule by decree characterised by deepening isolation, economic decline, and heightened insecurity. This pattern presents a paradox: if juntas seize power to rectify governance failures, why do they so often become the very embodiment of those failures, as argued by Dieng (2019) and Osland and Erstad (2020)? Unpacking this paradox requires looking beyond

the coup itself to analyse the political economy of junta rule, where the promised transition is strategically reconfigured and repurposed from a bridge to democracy into a mechanism for normalising indefinite military governance.

This new wave of coups in the Sahel was distinct in its reception. The coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger revealed a fundamental contradiction in democratic theory. The people, the ultimate source of political legitimacy, enthusiastically endorsed the overthrow of the very constitutional order meant to provide that legitimacy. Citizens largely accepted the admittedly slow and flawed constitutional process in exchange for the promise of revolutionary change. This contradicted the dominant analytical framework of the African Union and ECOWAS: democratic backsliding. The concept of democratic backsliding refers to the gradual, legalistic erosion of democratic norms by elected officials; however, this does not accurately describe the reality in the Sahel. Democratic backsliding is characterised by a slow, incremental decline in the quality of democracy, where formal democratic *structures*, such as elections and legislatures, may remain intact. At the same time, their *substance* and safeguards are being undermined. Democratic backsliding often occurs through procedural changes, making it difficult to identify and address in its early stages. Popular support for these coups was not a rejection of democratic ideals per se, but a rejection of a system in which democratic rituals, such as elections and constitutional processes, consistently failed to deliver security, dignity, and self-determination. This reveals a disconnect between input legitimacy (procedural democracy) and output legitimacy (effective governance), where the collapse of the latter ultimately eviscerates the former.

In an effort to understand whether the aftermath of the coups in the Sahel will result in political transitions, the 16th EISA Symposium identified the following series of interconnected failures that characterised the overthrown regimes and created a permissive environment for military coups:

- Systemic corruption and nepotism: Governments were structurally corrupt and failed to deliver basic services, especially in rural areas.
- Security problems: States presided over demoralised militaries and proved incapable of containing jihadist insurgencies, directly undermining their core function (Olaitan, 2024). The involvement of foreign forces, such as the French military and the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group, further worsened an already precarious regional security situation.
- Crisis of political legitimacy: Although the severity varied from Mali's deeply unpopular Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to Burkina Faso's more legitimate but security-challenged Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, each regime faced a disconnect between self-serving elites and an alienated populace, exacerbated by rigged elections in the Sahel (Döring, 2023).
- Chronic economic failure: An inability to address extreme poverty, youth unemployment, and stagnant growth (Cour, 2001). This was often mistakenly attributed to a Malthusian demographic problem rather than recognised as a failure of political decisions and economic growth models (Kabir et al., 2023). Framing the Sahelian coups as the result of

neo-Malthusianism risks shifting the analytical focus away from political choices, structural inequalities, and governance failures that cause mass poverty and instead promotes an implicit demographic determinism. Instead, the core issue lies in economic models and regimes that have lost their ability to deliver legitimate and inclusive development.

- Compromised sovereignty: States' perceived subservience to foreign powers, notably France, reinforced the image of regimes that had failed to fulfil the fundamental post-colonial promise of genuine self-rule.

These failures supported one of the symposium's main arguments: that the turmoil in the Sahel was not a descent into chaos, but rather the painful final stage of incomplete decolonisation (Korvensyrjä, 2025). The region suffered from choiceless democracy – a system in which electoral processes continue in *form* but lack *substance*, merely rotating elites while insulating core power structures through a phenomenon that Sanín-Restrepo (2018) termed power encryption. This results in democratic fatigue and a vacuum of legitimate authority (Benyera, 2024, p. 102).

As a result, the democratic backsliding thesis offers an insufficient and often misleading explanation for the persistent cycle of military coups in the Sahel (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Lajada et al., 2025). The governments ousted in Burkina Faso and Mali faced such severe legitimacy deficits that the social contract itself had collapsed (Downie, 2015). This legitimacy vacuum allowed the military to intervene, presenting itself not as a usurper of power but as a necessary corrective agent. By projecting an image of discipline and public service, qualities perceived as lacking in the ousted civilian regime, the military cultivated a saviour narrative that gained measurable popular support.

The article addresses the central question: Why do these self-proclaimed corrective regimes typically fail to resolve, and often come to embody, the very governance crises they pledged to address? To unpack these dynamics, I examine the roles of regional bodies, the media, and civil society. I draw on Wahi's (2023, p. 7) analysis of the constitutional challenges facing the African Union and RECs in (mis)managing unconstitutional changes of government (Allison, 2024, p. 10; Wahi, 2023), as well as Mare's (2020) work on the media's role as a contested space in shaping and challenging legitimacy during transitions. To understand why this messianic promise so often fails, we must examine the competing narratives and structural forces that influence political transitions in the 2020s.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE COUPS AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN AFRICA IN THE 2020S

To move beyond the limitations of the democratic backsliding thesis, this section analyses the contested nature of political transitions through the diverse and often conflicting perspectives of key African actors. Drawing on insights from the diverse cohort convened at the 16th EISA Symposium, which included civil society leaders, media practitioners, academics, EMBs, and

representatives from regional and electoral organisations, this analysis reveals that coups are not a singular phenomenon. Instead, they represent a complex and contested landscape shaped by competing narratives, strategic interests, geopolitics, and battles over legitimacy, all of which ultimately determine the trajectory of post-coup regimes. This section summarises the six key explanatory frameworks that emerged from the symposium.

First, the original security vacuum thesis. This perspective posits that the deterioration of regional security following the fall of the Libyan state in 2011 directly caused Libya to emerge as a centre for terrorist and insurgent activities (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, 2024). The spillover from this instability contributed to the coups in the Sahel region (Edet et al., 2024). This argument contends that the influx of experienced fighters, small arms, and light weapons crossing porous borders has created a profoundly unstable environment. This insecurity, coupled with the state's declining accountability and capacity, and its deteriorating economic prospects, was perceived as requiring military intervention to restore order.

Second, the geostrategic realignment thesis. An alternative explanation situates the coups within a broader global context, highlighting the combined effects of declining French influence and opportunistic Russian engagement, especially through the private military group known as the Wagner Group. As French attention was diverted to conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, a strategic vacuum emerged. Russia, primarily through the Wagner Group, offered alternative security guarantees that led to the overthrow of regimes perceived as clients of France. From this perspective, the coups signify a reorientation of the region's geopolitical allegiances and interests. For others, they represent the final stage of decolonisation (Fain et al., 2024; Keita, 2025; Primus, 2025), as epitomised by the expulsion of the French from these countries, their subsequent departure from ECOWAS, and the formation of a new regional economic bloc called the Alliance of Sahel States.

Third, the pre-existing governance crisis thesis. This explanation focuses on internal-state failure, in which the state was virtually absent from most of the territories it governed. It argues that the coups were the result of a long-term breakdown of the social contract. These states had lost control over their own performance sovereignty. Quantitative data from the Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance substantiate this argument. The data show a measurable decline in parameters such as participation, rights, inclusion, security, and safety in coup-affected countries prior to the coup. These coups were thus interpreted not as the cause of instability but as a symptom of a pre-existing crisis of state legitimacy, in which governments had already failed to guarantee physical security, political security, and ultimately human rights. Table 1 summarises the pre-coup scores.

Table 1: Ibrahim Index of African governance category trends (2017-2021)

Category	Burkina Faso	Guinea	Mali	Niger	Average Trend for Africa
Security and the rule of law	−9.0	−3.3	−7.3	−3.9	−0.9
Participation, rights, and inclusion	−3.2	−6.6	−3.9	−2.7	−0.7
Foundations for economic opportunity	−0.8	2.6	−0.3	0.2	1.3
Human development	2.2	1.5	1.1	−0.5	1.8

Source: Adapted from Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2023, p. 21)

Fourth, the instrumentalisation of the grievance thesis. This perspective acknowledges popular discontent but focuses on the junta's agency in harnessing it. It argues that military actors strategically presented their actions as emancipatory coups – necessary corrective measures to curb corruption, improve service delivery, and eliminate self-serving civilian regimes. These coups gained support from segments of the population, particularly the youth, by framing the military as a liberating force against exploitation by domestic elites and neocolonial French influence. This narrative effectively transformed widespread public grievance into a source of political legitimacy for the junta. This move resonated with disaffected segments of the population, particularly the youth, despite opposition from constitutional hardliners.

Fifth, the institutional security failure thesis. From a regional perspective, this thesis attributes the coups to the collapse of key security structures. The dissolution of the G5 Sahel and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, along with the expulsion of French forces from the region, created a security vacuum that national armies were ill-equipped, unprepared, and unable to fill promptly. This perspective criticises regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union for having mandates that exclude their political will and capacity to act. As a result, they were unable to heed the evident early warning signs, such as manipulated elections and constitutional amendments. These early warning signs and the finality of military coups were indeed foreseeable.

Sixth, the inadequate safeguards thesis. This explanation attributes the problem to the weaknesses of continental and international enforcement mechanisms. The African Union and RECs have a persistent and well-documented enforcement deficiency (AsuquoEdet et al., 2023). Furthermore, the African Union (2007) has a commendable normative framework, including Article 23 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance; however, its enforcement mechanisms are weak. Sanctions and suspensions are often overlooked, allowing member states to evade accountability by holding membership in multiple RECs. The typical pattern, in which coup leaders later legitimise their rule through managed elections, further undermines the credibility of RECs. International responses from the United Nations are constrained by the principle of non-interference and the conflicting interests of member states, particularly the permanent members of the Security Council, who prioritise their national and

geopolitical agendas over sustained democracy in the Sahel. This results in the United Nations taking a somewhat ad hoc, reactive, and case-by-case approach. Initiatives such as the Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions are positive steps, but they operate in a complex geopolitical environment where achieving consensus on restoring democracy is often difficult or considered a low priority by member states.

While these six theses offer distinct analytical perspectives, the symposium's position is that they are more useful when considered together. These casualties are not isolated issues but interconnected symptoms of a single, deeper crisis: coloniality. At its core, coloniality is a framework of asymmetric power relations that allows post-colonial states to have *de jure* sovereignty but not *de facto* sovereignty. The Sahel's security continues to rely on external support, its governance models are often subservient to foreign interests, and its civic space is limited by a lack of genuine self-determination. Analysing the Sahelian coups through a fragmented perspective leads to a misdiagnosis of the situation. The true problem lies in the infrastructure of colonialism – coloniality – which systematically and structurally creates the instability, illegitimacy, and insecurity that juntas claim to address through coups. As a result, political transitions in post-colonial states become ongoing attempts to achieve authentic legitimacy and sovereignty.

BEYOND THE DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Conventional analyses of political instability in the Sahel often frame recent coups through the lens of democratic backsliding, depicting a narrative of regression from an established democratic norm (Mbianda, 2024). For Bakare (2023), this framework obscures fundamental regional and country-specific dynamics. A historical perspective reveals a persistent pattern of instability: the countries currently undergoing transitions – Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Niger – experienced similar political transitions between 2008 and 2014 (Amoateng, 2022). This recurring pattern suggests that transient democratic consolidation, rather than simple backsliding, defines the region – a trend that indicates deeper systemic factors. Attributing instability to a regionally unique frustration with democracy is insufficient. Data show that the highest levels of democratic dissatisfaction in West Africa are actually found in countries without recent coups, such as Benin, Cabo Verde, Ghana, and Senegal (Afrobarometer, 2023a; Mattes, 2019). This disconnect reinforces the need to move beyond generalised frustration and closely examine the specific institutional, security, and legitimacy failures that made the Sahel vulnerable to military coups.

Democratic backsliding assumes that democracy previously existed and is now in decline. At the very least, it assumes that the few democratic successes achieved in post-colonial states are being eroded. I challenge this notion because, while standard indexes did not categorically classify the Sahelian states as democracies at the time of their 2020s coups (Afrobarometer, 2023a, 2023b; Freedom House, 2015), this static perspective overlooks the ongoing process of democratic backsliding. A longitudinal analysis reveals a negative trend: for example, Mali was rated 'free' by

Freedom House (2015) for nearly two decades (1995–2011) and enjoyed strong popular perceptions of democracy before experiencing a sharp decline after 2013. Therefore, the coup does not represent the collapse of a consolidated democracy but rather the culmination of a years-long regression from a more democratic baseline (Afrobarometer, 2023b; Freedom House, 2015). While effective in describing global trends, the concept of democratic backsliding is insufficient – and can be misleading – when analysing the recent coups in the Sahel. Its major limitation is the assumption that prior democratic consolidation has already occurred, after which it can then decline. For many citizens of the Sahel, the toppled political regimes were not simply democracies in retreat but discredited regimes that had long failed to deliver democratic dividends (Mbianda, 2024). The backsliding narrative promoted by ECOWAS and the African Union focuses on the erosion of democratic institutions, including the weakening of parliaments, suppression of the opposition, manipulation of term limits, and the prevalence of disputed electoral outcomes.

While these trends were evident in the Sahel, this framework misdiagnoses the symptoms as the cause; it overlooks the crisis of legitimacy that had already eviscerated the state's moral authority. This crisis was tripartite: (i) a failure of security legitimacy, in which states failed to protect citizens mainly from jihadist violence; (ii) a failure of socio-economic legitimacy, characterised by corruption, executive impunity, and persistent poverty that made governments appear predatory rather than representative; and (iii) a crisis of sovereign legitimacy, in which states were perceived as client states of the former colonial power, France. The democratic backsliding framework is analytically narrow as it centres mainly on the formal procedure of democracy, especially elections, while ignoring its foundational purpose, which is to create a legitimate, responsive, and capable people-centred state.

Instead of the democratic backsliding thesis, I propose a multidimensional framework for understanding democratic legitimacy. This is not a monolithic concept but a composite of four interconnected pillars: performance legitimacy, moral legitimacy, procedural legitimacy, and sovereign legitimacy. This framework offers more value than the one-dimensional procedural democracy framework, which often conceals serious failures in the other three dimensions, resulting in a power vacuum subsequently filled by the military junta.

Performance legitimacy depends on the state's ability to provide tangible goods, such as security, economic stability, and basic services (Cross & Ci, 2024). It is a cornerstone of human rights. Prior to the coup, Sahelian states had failed dismally to fulfil their performance legitimacy duties, as human rights violations were widespread – not only by jihadists but also by many other militias – leading to escalating insecurity. Combined with entrenched corruption, executive impunity, and extreme poverty, these pre-coup governments were perceived not merely as incompetent but as predatory and extractive, offering nothing in return to their citizens (Downie, 2015).

The erosion of performance legitimacy directly caused a decline in *moral legitimacy*. Moral legitimacy is the perception that a government rules justly and for the common good (Muldoon, 2008). Widespread elite and regime preservation means that the state is being turned into a vehicle

for private accumulation rather than serving the public good. This undermines its moral authority and transforms citizens' disappointment into deep-seated resentment. The social contract was indeed broken irrevocably.

Procedural legitimacy refers to the adherence to established rules, norms, and principles, particularly those governing electoral democracy (Font & Blanco, 2007). Elections in these regimes had become meaningless political rituals. They are mere rituals to anoint incumbents rather than to represent the will of the people. Devoid of both performance and a moral foundation, electoral proceduralism became a source of discontent rather than consent. The incumbent regimes in Burkina Faso and Mali have perfected a form of legalistic repression. This strategy substitutes overt violence with the calculated manipulation of the law and state institutions. By wielding electoral laws, judicial rulings, and administrative procedures to engineer political exclusion, these regimes created a façade of procedural legitimacy. This approach did not simply sideline the opposition; it also systematically suffocated genuine political pluralism under the guise of legal order and reorganisation. The result was that the very institutions designed to channel dissent ended up becoming instruments of its suppression. This was indeed a perversion of democratic norms, aligning with the symposium's examination of how dissent was neutralised not only through force but also through lawfare.

The weaponisation of state institutions was evident in all three countries. In Niger, President Mahamadou Issoufou's administration perfected its use of judicial measures to eliminate political rivals. A clear example was the disqualification of the main opposition challenger, Hama Amadou, by the Constitutional Court, which cited a conviction widely perceived as politically motivated (Aksar et al., 2023). This same legal manoeuvre was also used to threaten the chosen successor, Mohamed Bazoum. This was accompanied by frequent defamation charges against journalists and critics, deliberately used to instil fear and restrict civic space, especially during election periods. In Mali, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita exposed the judiciary's role as an instrument of political power following the deeply flawed legislative elections of 2020 (Agence France-Presse, 2020). The Constitutional Court overturned the results in more than 31 constituencies, which was unfavourable to the ruling party (Harding, 2020). The opposition condemned this as a legal coup. This judicial overreach directly sparked the mass M5-RFP (Mouvement du 5 Juin Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques) protest movement, which argued that the state had corruptly legislated a parliamentary majority it could not achieve through democratic means. In Burkina Faso, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's government employed a subtler form of legal intimidation. They used the 2019 Penal Code to criminalise the publication of information that could demoralise the military (Bocande et al., 2024). Bocande et al. (2024) reported that journalists, activists, opposition members, and other civic movements faced arrests for exposing security failures. The resulting legal environment acted as a structural barrier to accountability, pre-emptively insulating the government from electoral accountability.

From a global perspective, *sovereign legitimacy* contextualises the failures of the pre-coup regimes. Here, states were increasingly viewed as subservient to foreign powers, especially France

(Petidis, 2024). National armies, often supported by international partners, were perceived as ineffective French proxies that undermined national self-determination. This fuelled a powerful narrative that true sovereignty had been outsourced to the former colonial powers, rendering the state illegitimate and bolstering pan-African and nationalist sentiments, which were gladly accepted and weaponised by the junta to serve its own interests.

The lack of sovereign, procedural, moral, and performance legitimacy presented a propitious opportunity for the junta to curate a narrative that masqueraded as an attempt to provide security, purge corruption, and assert national sovereignty. For the sections of the citizenry that supported the coups, the junta offered a direct response and a valuable solution to these challenges. However, there is a paradox: the exact solutions promised by the junta contain elements that could lead to its downfall. While these movements may initially have moral and sovereign legitimacy due to their revolutionary, nationalistic, and decolonisation rhetoric, their long-term survival depends on rebuilding the very performance legitimacy that their predecessor regimes failed to achieve. The symposium explored the conundrum of how the junta could establish performance legitimacy while avoiding the very pitfalls that caused its predecessors to collapse. The media ecosystem was identified as a key battleground that would shape the trajectory of political transitions and influence the junta's attempts to achieve performance legitimacy.

MEDIA ECOSYSTEM AS THE BATTLEGROUND FOR NARRATIVE IN A FRAGMENTED SPACE

The symposium's discussions on the media ecosystem highlighted an important yet often overlooked dimension of political transitions and governance crises in the Sahel: the collapse of a shared media ecosystem. The region underwent a dual transformation: a systematic decline in local professional media alongside the unchecked rise of global digital platforms. This shift has created a fragmented media landscape vulnerable to disinformation, misinformation, and fake news, making it nearly impossible to establish a common factual narrative. Control of information was both a symptom of the pre-crisis period and a tool for (re)ordering after the coup. The pre-coup Sahelian regimes did not collapse solely due to their own failures and illegitimacy; they were equally dismantled and rendered vulnerable by a pincer movement of domestic neglect and foreign-orchestrated disinformation. These two factors created a void that the junta filled with a carefully crafted narrative centred on liberation, emancipation, decolonialisation, and pan-Africanism.

The decline of local media was driven by both economic and political factors. Traditional newspapers, radio stations, and local television outlets have faced financial sustainability issues and struggled to remain viable. They operated under persistent political intimidation (Bocande et al., 2024), with governments frequently using legal harassment, such as charging journalists with undermining state security or spreading false/fake news, to enforce self-censorship. The closure of various media outlets and the arrest of prominent journalists – a common occurrence in the years

leading up to the coups – created a vacuum in credible, on-the-ground reporting. Under the guise of protecting national sovereignty, the junta systematically silenced media outlets such as RFI and Jeune Afrique. This evisceration of the local fourth estate left fewer trusted institutions to verify facts, hold those in power accountable, and provide balanced narratives during times of national uncertainty.

Global digital platforms, primarily Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), and YouTube, rushed to fill this vacuum. While these platforms provide new avenues for communication, they operate according to principles that are fundamentally different from those of professional journalism. Their algorithms prioritise engagement and virality over accuracy, creating fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of misinformation, disinformation and emotionally charged rhetoric. As Mare (2025) argued, this created a “parallel information universe”, where conspiracy theories and sensationalist content gained mainstream credibility overnight. The consequences of this fragmented ecosystem are especially severe during coups or major security crises. When trusted local sources are unavailable, the public is often left to navigate a chaotic digital landscape. For example, during the coups in Bamako and Ouagadougou, conflicting reports about the president’s whereabouts, the allegiance of military units, and the number of casualties circulated simultaneously. The International Crisis Group (2021) described the situation in Mali as a coup within a coup, which further increased political uncertainty and insecurity.

Juntas and their supporters adeptly used social media to broadcast their revolutionary, decolonisation, and pan-African narratives directly, framing their actions as patriotic interventions while labelling dissenting voices as foreign agents, sellouts, and unpatriotic. This created a cruel irony: while activists used social media to bypass state censorship, the juntas, in a deft tactical reversal, co-opted these same platforms to spread their own liberation narrative directly to the people. This immediately transformed social media into a battleground where liberated information, previously under state control, was harnessed by the state itself as a powerful and unlimited channel for propaganda. The evolution of social media into a paradoxical platform has made it difficult to establish a baseline of agreed-upon facts. In the Sahel, it became difficult for citizens to ascertain whether the junta was restoring sovereignty or destroying democracy, and whether foreign ‘partners’ were providing support or perpetuating neocolonial control. The answers to these questions depend on which fragmented information stream a citizen chooses to consume. This erosion of a shared reality paralysed constructive debate, deepened social polarisation, and undermined the possibility of reaching a national consensus during a political transition. In the end, the battle for legitimacy in the Sahel is fought not only with weapons on the ground but also with narratives in a fractured digital space, where disinformation and misinformation often have a greater impact than the truth. However, this is preceded by the junta’s physical takeover of the airwaves.

SEIZING THE SOUL OF THE STATE

A recruitment pattern common to nearly every successful coup in the Sahel was the simultaneous seizure of two symbolic centres of power. The first is the State House, the physical seat of executive authority. The second is the national broadcaster and its associated key media infrastructure. This dual capture is as much symbolic as it is functional. The takeover of the State House represents the seizure of the state's political body, while the seizure of the airwaves represents the capture of its voice and soul. This demonstrates that for a junta, the battle for control is not only a military operation but also a battle for the narrative – one that commences immediately.

The way the political transition is framed is closely tied to how it is presented in takeover speeches. In Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, the coups were announced exclusively through the national state broadcasters' captured infrastructure: RTB in Burkina Faso, ORTM in Mali, and Télévision Sahel in Niger, respectively. This approach is both deliberate and symbolic, transforming these communication channels from organs of the state into the junta's mouthpiece. Seizing the airwaves serves a dual purpose: it provides a tangible demonstration of physical control over power and it acts as a performative claim to legitimacy by appropriating the state's official platforms to immediately present the coups as the new authoritative narrative.

The junta's first address to the nation is its most important political act. In this initial statement, delivered through the very media channels it has just taken over, the junta performs a delicate rhetorical balancing act. Although illegal, it frames its seizure of power as a necessary, patriotic, and legitimate intervention. The narrative is carefully constructed: the action is framed not as a coup but as a takeover, a correction, or a revolution. It cites the former government's poor security record, rampant corruption, and breakdown of the social contract as justifications. By portraying themselves as reluctant saviours who had to patriotically step in to prevent state collapse and restore the integrity of the nation, the junta seeks not only to create and control the narrative but also to pre-empt criticism, shape public perception, and establish the foundational legitimacy of their rule before any counter-narrative can emerge. This battle over the narrative is the opening salvo in the broader war over information, setting the stage for subsequent attempts to generate, own, control, manipulate, and suppress public discourse. This emphasises the central role of the media ecosystem and civil society in any political transition.

At the EISA Symposium, it was noted that during any political transition, a viable fourth estate, comprising independent media and a vibrant civil society, serves as the guardian of the public interest by mediating between the state and its citizens (Edward, 1980; Von Doepp & Young, 2013; Whitten-Woodring & James, 2012). In the Sahel, this fundamental pillar of democracy has been eroded. The junta's war on information was, in essence, a deliberate campaign to suppress the fourth estate. Through a pattern of internet shutdowns, media censorship, and attacks on journalists, the space for independent reporting was severely restricted. This manufactured information vacuum was filled with state-sponsored propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation disseminated through government communiqués and allied social media networks

to vilify opponents and frame military rule as a revolutionary and overdue necessity. This two-pronged attack aimed to transform the media from a watchdog into a lapdog, dismantling the last remaining infrastructure of public accountability.

One key outcome of the symposium was the recognition that civil society and independent media must collaborate to uphold a practice that fosters *critical hope* (Allison, 2024, p. 11). This is not simple optimism but a clear-eyed, courageous commitment to preserving the possibility of a legitimate political future. Although regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the African Union have often been sidelined and international actors have pursued inconsistent, self-serving policies, local journalists, community radio stations, pro-democracy activists, and human rights defenders have remained on the front lines. They bypassed internet blackouts, documented human rights abuses, and provided counter-narratives to state and junta propaganda.

Their role became complex: they opposed military rule on principle while simultaneously channelling the popular grievances that the ousted civilian regimes had ignored. The media's role is not only to report on the transition but also to actively reshape and contribute to its reconstitution. Access to consistently reliable information is a non-negotiable foundation for any meaningful political transition. It enables citizens to monitor power, debate the future, and hold transitional authorities accountable for their promises. Political transitions occur in the dark when the media is silenced, captured, or compromised. Here, transitions risk becoming cynical performances that legitimise authoritarianism rather than genuine steps towards sustainable democracy. The survival of the fourth estate is a prerequisite for democracy itself. Both were critics of the junta and archivists of the previous regime's failures and atrocities.

In the post-coup information vacuum, election management bodies (EMBs) play a crucial role in translating the documented archives of state failure and popular grievances into the foundation of a legitimate civilian government.

THE ROLE AND LIMITATIONS OF DOMESTIC INSTITUTIONS (ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODIES AND JUDICIARY) DURING POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

At the EISA Symposium, a central paradox was highlighted. While EMBs are fundamental to the quality of democracy, their past complicity in normalising flawed elections and contributing to voter apathy has itself fuelled a crisis of electoral legitimacy (Allison, 2024, p. 11). In the post-coup Sahel, the responsibilities of EMBs and election commissions extend beyond merely administering elections; they must also help restore trust in the very process undermined by pre-coup regimes. The dilemma is this: by conducting elections under military rule, does the EMB resolve the legitimacy deficit or does it merely recreate the conditions for it, enabling the junta to use the ballot as a tool to consolidate and normalise their power? An independent judiciary was thus proposed as a corrective mechanism (Allison, 2024, p. 11). As both an initiator and an abettor of EMB reconstitution and electoral reform, a credible and independent judiciary can break this cycle of illegitimacy and distrust. The greatest casualty of recent coups, therefore, is not only

democracy itself but also the credibility of its primary institutions. EMBs now find themselves in an impossible bind, struggling to maintain their eroded credibility while risking cohesive complicity in a managed political transition.

The pre-coup conditions are crucial for understanding the devaluation of elections in the region, which had already lost their legitimacy. They had become meaningless, ritualistic exercises in which incumbents used state machinery to guarantee predetermined outcomes. Here, the EMBs are perceived not as independent arbiters but as willing instruments of the ruling elites, responsible for administering a process that confers a veneer of legality on regimes that have long since lost public trust. The junta's primary justification for intervention is a pre-existing credibility deficit. They argue that they did not overthrow democracy itself, but rather a corrupt electoral façade controlled by the elite and foreign interests. For disillusioned citizens, the military's patriotic intervention was not an attack on legitimate democratic processes but a rejection of a fraudulent one.

The role of elections and EMBs is radically redefined in the post-coup period. Elections are held at the end of the transition period as a nation's final reward. The sequence of events is that the junta must first eliminate corruption within the state, restore security, and draft a truly sovereign constitution. Elections are then scheduled at the end of this timeline, which often spans years, effectively granting the military an extended lease on power under the guise of a transitional government. The credibility of electoral outcomes is no longer measured by the EMB's success but by its ability to produce a plausible result that eases regional sanctions and grants legitimacy to the junta. This creates a vicious cycle that further degrades the institution of elections. Each election administered under a junta's reign reinforces the public's pre-existing cynicism. RECs are thrust into this legitimacy vacuum and are responsible for assisting their member states in restoring constitutional order and electoral integrity.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES AND INCONSISTENT REGIONALISM IN THE SAHEL

One of the key players in preventing unconstitutional changes in governments is the RECs. One of the most credible ways to prevent military coups is to deploy robust air assets and maintain a ready standby force. To its credit, ECOWAS has a deployment-ready standby force established by the 1999 Protocol, which has been activated or threatened on several occasions. It was deployed in Liberia in 2003, in Mali in 2013, in the Gambia in January 2017, and in Niger in August 2023. Paradoxically, the more ECOWAS deploys or threatens to deploy its standby intervention force, the more coups seem to occur.

ECOWAS employs a multi-layered toolkit of interventions, including diplomatic isolation, travel bans, asset freezes, economic blockades, and the explicit threat of military force. This was demonstrated in Niger following the ousting of President Mohammed Bazoum. Supported by the Nigerian military, the ECOWAS Standby Force has been engaged in Liberia and Mali, establishing

its unquestionable credibility. In terms of funding, ECOWAS is the most innovative organisation in Africa, using a proven approach based on regional trade levies and the establishment of conditional transitional frameworks. This approach was demonstrated in Mali after 2021, when timelines for elections and institutional reforms were mandated.

Despite these credible mechanisms and interventions, the ultimate goal of these institutions – restoring constitutional order – has remained elusive in the Sahel. The question is: What explains the illusory nature of constitutional order following military coups in the Sahel? One credible explanation is that the juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, with Russia's assistance, consolidated their power and, under pressure from ECOWAS and the international community, collectively withdrew from the bloc to form a rival organisation, the Association of Sahel States. This marked a stark repudiation of ECOWAS's authority and highlighted the counterproductive consequences of unconstitutional changes of government. The consolidation of the three juntas and the formation of the Association of Sahel States are unprecedented in the history of RECs in Africa.

The effectiveness of RECs across Africa is challenged by institutional weaknesses. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) initially demonstrated eagerness to act by suspending Gabon following a military coup on 23 August 2023 (Niyonzima, 2023). However, the rapid lifting of sanctions based solely on transitional promises, while leaving the junta intact, exposed a serious lack of leverage, if not a lack of political will. The capitulation of ECCAS can be interpreted as a manifestation of *realpolitik*, given Gabon's status as a major financial contributor. In the Horn of Africa, where the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) prioritises peer democracy, high-level envoys have managed to achieve some stability in Somalia and South Sudan. However, they failed to mediate in Sudan (Allison, 2024, p. 9). IGAD has two major weaknesses: first, it lacks the legal mandate to sanction members for unconstitutional changes of government; and second, it relies heavily on donor funding, which limits both the scope and autonomy of its democracy-promotion agenda. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) follows a politically contingent approach (Mude, 2014). While it deployed troops to Lesotho through the SADC Preventive Mission in the Kingdom of Lesotho as a pre-emptive measure, its response to the 2017 military coup in Zimbabwe was marked by deference to national sovereignty. Here, political bonds dating back to the liberation struggle limited SADC's response to quiet diplomacy. This highlights the limitations of pan-African solidarity when confronting entrenched and powerful regimes.

The performance of ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, and ECCAS reveals the ineffectiveness of the RECs' primary cohesive instrument: sanctions. For example, ECOWAS's economic sanctions against Niger affected the civilian population more than the junta. This allowed the junta to create a humanitarian counter-narrative, which they adeptly leveraged to galvanise nationalistic sentiment, thereby rendering the sanctions counterproductive. In a paradoxical legal manoeuvre, the junta sought relief from the ECOWAS Court of Justice, only to be dismissed on the grounds that an unconstitutional authority lacks the legal standing to appeal to a regional court. The

persistence of both attempted and successful military coups in the Sahel region – especially in Burkina Faso, Mali, Gabon, and Niger – despite the full range of responses employed by RECs, presents a compelling empirical argument. The ECOWAS toolkit has largely failed to prevent or reverse coups and achieve sustained democratic restoration. Such a prolonged failure necessitates reconsideration and reconstitution of the conceptual foundations, assumptions, and logic underlying REC interventions.

The economic law of diminishing marginal returns reveals that coercive measures against juntas have a breaking point. When exceeded, these measures not only fail to restore constitutional order but can actively backfire, catalysing a counterproductive political fusion and bond of nationalist resistance between the junta and the people, united by shared external pressure.

One of the assumptions underlying REC's intervention in the event of a coup is that the coup will remove a constitutionally legitimate government. However, empirical evidence from Burkina Faso, Gabon, Niger, and Sudan reveals that the pre-coup political orders were themselves dynastic, unconstitutional, and electoral authoritarian regimes, characterised by deeply rooted corruption. Therefore, framing the interventions of RECs narrowly as efforts to restore democracy ignores political realities and risks legitimising deeply flawed regimes that would otherwise have been removed through equally illegitimate and unconstitutional means. The repeated occurrence of military coups demonstrates a pervasive failure of a specific model of electoral politics and democracy, which has been unable to deliver the democratic dividend in the post-colonial era. Given that most countries hold multiple memberships in RECs, this often undermines the reality that, structurally, a REC's effectiveness is largely determined by its most powerful member state. For example, Nigeria has hegemony in ECOWAS, while South Africa has hegemony in SADC. However, in the absence of a legal framework, as seen in the cases of ECCAS and IGAD, an enforcement gap emerges because the regional hegemon lacks the legal authority to intervene in the affairs of member states.

THE FUTURE OF SOVEREIGNTY AND LEGITIMACY IN THE SAHEL: A CONCLUSION

The cycle of coups in the Sahel was neither isolated nor episodic; it was a continuum symptomatic of a deep-seated crisis of political legitimacy. I argued that these coups, although engineered domestically, stemmed from political settlements that centralised power, co-opted institutions, and fostered a system in which a narrow elite both monopolised and, to some extent, personalised the state. The inevitable legitimacy deficit created a vacuum. Into this vacuum stepped the military, presenting themselves as saviours and leveraging narratives of finalising decolonisation, actualising national sovereignty, and realising pan-Africanism, successfully curating a capacity for power as liberty.

This paradox highlights a conundrum: when elections are perceived as mere ballot rituals, incapable of altering the distribution of power and resources, they cease to be a source of

legitimacy and instead become a factor in its demise. I emphasised that in the Sahel, the appeal of unconstitutional changes in government carries the seeds of the junta's demise, as it faces the difficult task of enacting performative legitimacy while avoiding the same issues that led to the collapse of its predecessor civilian regimes. From a legitimacy perspective, the coups in the Sahel were not the cause of the crisis but a symptom of illegitimate regimes that had irrevocably breached the social contract. For the junta, the test is whether it will fulfil its promises and transform from military rulers into architects of a new, genuinely inclusive political order. Their success, whether as military or civilian rulers, depends on their ability to address the governance and human rights failures they cited to justify their actions. If they fail to do so, they will complete the cycle and become the next iteration of a discredited *status quo*.

Regional organisations, especially the African Union and ECOWAS, must evolve and move beyond their perpetual political infancy. The imperative is to evolve not just normatively but, most importantly, in terms of action. As suggested during the EISA Symposium, a sustainable approach requires moving beyond merely punishing coups after the fact. Addressing this issue requires a proactive, nuanced strategy that tackles the underlying grievances and causes, most of which were identified by early warning signs. RECs must evolve from curative to preventive politics. Their credibility depends on their ability to serve as true guardians of substantive democratic governance, rather than merely focusing on the aesthetics of elections or acting as temporary crisis managers. For the Sahel, a legitimate future rests on a simple but radical premise: that power must be derived from public consent, not from military force. Media and civil society are the agents of this recalibration, embodying *critical hope* by challenging the narratives of those in power. Their independent existence is the foundation upon which a new, credible social contract must be built.

The political trajectory of Sahelian states remains uncertain, a situation exacerbated by the proven ineffectiveness of RECs. Established as guardians of the constitutional order, RECs have failed to provide a credible deterrent or, at the very least, a coherent voice advocating for the restoration of democracy after coups. This failure is not just operational; it is primarily political. RECs are increasingly seen as instruments of elite preservation, prioritising the stability of incumbent governments over the principles of democracy and popular sovereignty. When RECs respond to calls for sanctions that further immiserate populations or use threats perceived as neocolonial, they inadvertently validate the junta's anti-establishment rhetoric. The mechanism intended to uphold democratic norms, weakened and lacking legitimacy, ends up legitimising military interventions in the eyes of dissatisfied citizens. This creates a vicious cycle: the ineffectiveness of RECs emboldens the military and deepens public cynicism towards regional democratic initiatives. This further erodes the institutions of democracy that were created to protect it. This is where the media, civil society, and other non-state actors contribute not only to ensuring credible elections but also to improving the overall quality of democracy in Africa during political transitions. These non-state actors are effective not only in reshaping the political transition but

also in determining how to ensure constitutional order, the rule of law, and credible elections thereafter.

AI DISCLOSURE

On 11 January 2026, the author used DeepSeek 4.0 and Grammarly to edit the manuscript and improve its clarity. The author is responsible for all intellectual content, research design, and data analysis.

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