

THE PECULIARITY OF THE NIGÉRIEN COUP AMONG THE MILITARY JUNTAS IN THE SAHEL (2020-2023): A WEB OF VESTED INTERESTS

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Abstract

This study focuses on the peculiarity of the latest Niger military coup following the already established military governments, first in Mali, then in Guinea and Burkina Faso within the West African region. All these states are Francophone amid their Anglophone counterparts. Before 26 July, 2023 Nigerien coup, the experiences of other states put together had not degenerated into a political threat in the eyes of the ECOWAS, the regional bloc, and/or Nigeria which is the biggest democracy in the sub-Saharan. What had heated the polity across the globe immediately after the military took over in Niger, forms the basis of this study. The secondary method of data collection is optimally explored for this paper. This researcher adopts the Interventionist Theory by S.E. Finer to explain the developments that have led to the military takeovers in the affected states. While using qualitative analysis to critically examine both internal and external factors outside ECOWAS which have made the Nigerien situation more strategic compared to its other sister states. The recommendation is that all the democracy sympathizers should be proactive and less selective in addressing the institutional coups; the failure causes a military junta.

Keywords: Peculiarity, Military coup, Francophone states, National interest, Sovereignty

Introduction

Since gaining independence in the 1960s, a significant number of African countries have seen democratically elected governments overthrown by military officials. In many instances, these coups have led to further internal conflicts within the military itself, such as in Nigeria, Ghana, and Burkina Faso. Various other nations, including Gabon, Angola, and Kenya, have also faced violent coup attempts. This pattern highlights the root cause of instability in numerous African states, regardless of their colonial past or political system. Over the past few years, West and Central Africa have witnessed a notable increase in military coups, with seven coups occurring in these regions alone. Among the affected countries, four are part of ECOWAS, a regional organization aimed at fostering stability and collaboration. Recent coup events in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger underscore the ongoing socio-political challenges faced by many West African nations since gaining independence. In response to these issues, ECOWAS was founded in 1975 to promote future political stability, cooperation and security within the region.

Moreover, the originators of the Economic Community of West African States aimed to establish an extensive trading alliance that would promote self-reliance and collaboration among its member nations in various sectors such as industry, transportation, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, natural resources, commerce, monetary, and social and cultural affairs. Before the current troubling trend of instability, significant conflicts had decreased and coups had become less frequent over the 48 years of the organization's existence. Realizing a correlation between the economic futures of individual nations and the

political stability and security in the area, ECOWAS created a peacekeeping coalition, the Economic Community of West Africa States Monitoring Group, in 1990. This monitoring group developed a set of measures for handling "extra-constitutional changes" in member countries. These measures consist of sanctions, suspension of membership, and the deployment of peacekeeping troops.

However, many attribute ECOWAS to improving economic development and collaboration in numerous instances of insecurity and instability in the region. Notably, it has only dispatched a peacekeeping force on seven occasions since its inception. Despite the recent surge in coups, the most recent instance of ECOWAS deploying a security/peacekeeping force was in Gambia in 2017, a mission that concluded without violence. However, the organization has struggled to address issues related to democracy and governance. Economic sanctions, particularly when imposed by nations facing their own economic difficulties and requirements, lack the necessary influence to persuade a leader seeking power for non-economic motives. A recent example was the economic sanctions and diplomatic conflict imposed on the leader of the Nigerien military coup, General Tchiani, which had minimal to no effect in compelling compliance. Effectively, deterrence can only be effective when tools are consistently and predictably applied. Like many multinational entities, ECOWAS functions predominantly through consensus, a challenging feat to achieve especially concerning sanctions and military interventions across national borders.

Theoretical Framework

The abundant interpretations of the military regime concept in various analyses has the potential to cause confusion, with differing theoretical expectations based on the researcher's viewpoint. This portion aims to clarify the concept by outlining the commonly accepted definitions. Firstly, a military regime denotes a dictatorship led by a military figure, regardless of the context and the influence of other governing bodies. The second definition, proposed by O'Donnell (1973) and Remmer (1989), describes military rule as dictatorships led by collective bodies serving the interests of the officer corps, where decision-making involves multiple officers. The third interpretation, sometimes known as military strongman administration, pertains to dictatorships where power is centralized in a single military leader. While the autocratic governance is not exclusive to military regimes, it is a defining trait of such systems. Examples of autocratic military-led governments include Idi Amin's oppressive rule in Uganda, the Egyptian anti-democratic and dictatorial regime initiated by the Free Officers in 1952, which came to an end with the removal of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, and Sani Abacha's isolated regime in Nigeria, which ceased upon his death in 1998. Having analyzed the above authors' works, although, Erude and Agiri (2023) in their "Military Junta in Francophone West-Africa" failed to look at the interests of various actors (within and outside West African region) that had led the regional polity to heat up following the Nigerien coup among other military juntas between 2020 and 2023. It is on this premise that this paper ventures to fill the gap.

Military Coups in West Africa Since 2020

Nigér

On Wednesday July 26, 2023, Niger's government was overthrown, and President Mohamed Bazoum was taken hostage. By Sunday, the 30th, The Premium Times reported that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) issued a one-week ultimatum to

the coup leaders, threatening military intervention if deposed Bazoum was not returned to power. Accléd (2023) observed the following: Niger has been bedevilled with a perpetual increase in jihadist activities since 2018, having a record year for violence in 2021 evaluated by fatalities. With the steady rise in political violence incidents from 2022, the lethality of it has followed a steady curve downward, with an attendant decrease in overall fatalities of the same year. Between January and June 2023, political violence dropped by 39% (estimated) in comparison to the last six months, backwards. Attacks on civilians dropped by 49%, and attendant fatalities dropped, still by 16% Nigerien security forces operations increased by 32%, although, as part of a continuous effort to counter insecurity Incidences of stealing, looting and vandalization of properties were recurring decimal during this period, indicating that terrorist groups viz IS Sahel and JNIM more recently see Niger as instrumental for resource extradition (Erude and Agiri, 2023).

ECOWAS member states suspended relations with Niger and closed their land and air borders with the country. The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, both led by military coup leaders, issued a joint statement warning that an ECOWAS intervention in Niger could lead to a military response from their states. Niger's presidential guards were holding President Mohamed Bazoum inside his palace in the capital Niamey on Wednesday, in what the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union are calling an attempted coup. It marks the ninth coup or attempted power grab in just over three years in West and Central Africa, a region that over the last decade had made strides to shed its reputation as a "coup belt", only for persistent insecurity and corruption to open the door to military leaders.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's army ousted President Roch Kabore in January 2022, blaming him for failing to contain violence by Islamist militants. However, coup leader Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba pledged to restore security, but attacks worsened, eroding morale in the armed forces leading to a second coup eight months later when current junta leader Captain Ibrahim Traore, seized power in September following a mutiny. Traore with his plotters faulted Damiba's administration for failing to checkmate terrorists and contain violence by Islamist militants despite is assurance address the security sector, but the reverse was the case, as attacks were increasing, by and by, wiping values and ethics in the army, which has resulted in a counter coup eight months after, immediately after the present junta leader Captain Ibrahim Traore took control of power through coercion in September following a mutiny (Felix, 2023).

Guinea

In Guinea, the Special Forces commander, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya ousted President Alpha Conde in September 2021. A year earlier, Condé's decision to amend the constitution to run for a third term and recent missteps on the economy had led sparkling widespread protests and rioting which had set the stage for the military putsch. In the aftermath of Doumbouya becoming the interim president, he had promised a transition to democratic elections within three years (Felix, 2023). However, the opposition parties alleged that he little or no progress cum efforts to put in place institutions and a blueprint to transit to democratic government. Meanwhile, the umbrella organization covering West Africa, ECOWAS, had rejected the timeline and imposed sanctions on junta members and their relatives, including freezing their bank accounts. Critically, Doumbouya has assumed that the region and international community, which had weakly protested Condé's third term, would do little substantively to oppose the coup, judging from their ham-fisted responses to recent

unconstitutional moves in Mali and Chad. The African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), France, and the United States have been hesitant to exact significant penalties in recent years, a contrast to past decades of principled responses to unconstitutional takeovers.

Mali

A group of Malian colonels led by Assimi Goita ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020. The coup followed anti-government protests over deteriorating security, contested legislative elections and allegations of corruption. Under pressure from Mali's ECOWAS member-neighbours, the junta agreed to cede power to a civilian-led interim government tasked with overseeing an 18-month transition to democratic elections in February 2022. Nonetheless, the French military intervention launched in Mali from January 2013 to July 2014 was named Operation Serval. The primary objective was to prevent Islamist extremists in the North from taking control of the country's strategically important military airport. Operation Barkhane, which succeeded Operation Serval, is currently in place. As reported by Al Jazeera (2021), the 2021 coup d'état in Mali began on the night of May 24, 2021, when Vice President Assimi Goita orchestrated the capture and detainment of President Bah N'daw, Prime Minister Moctar Ouane, and Defense Minister Souleymane Doucoure. Goita, who led the junta responsible for the 2020 coup d'état in Mali, announced in a national address that N'daw and Ouane had been removed from their positions and that a new election would be held in 2022.

Furthermore, the 2021 Malian coup d'état marked the third such incident in the country within a decade, following the military seizures in 2012 and 2020, the latter of which was short-lived - lasting just nine months. Tensions were notably high between the civilian interim government and the military, starting from the transfer of political power in September 2020, leading to the forced arrest of Keita and Cisse by rebel forces. The M5 movement, a group opposed to Keita and instrumental in the 2020 Malian protests, advocated for a more legitimate government than the interim one. On May 14, the government unveiled plans for a new, comprehensive cabinet. By May 24, tensions had eased following a cabinet reshuffle. The military retained control over strategic ministries despite the rearrangement, with two key figures from the coup, Sadio Camara and Modibo Kone, replaced by N'daw's administration. Subsequent reports highlighted increased military activities, including observations from the US Embassy in Bamako, although the city appeared relatively calm. To end the junta's grip on power and restore democratic governance, ECOWAS established a committee led by former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan. The military junta agreed to hold elections and transfer power to an elected president. Following months of delay in returning to civilian rule, an agreement was reached during an ECOWAS summit in Accra on July 3, 2022, to suspend Mali from the organization. The coup was strongly denounced by various entities such as the UN and AU.

Military Coups in West Africa between 2020 and 2023.

No	State	Rationale	Date
1	Mali	Deteriorating security and corruption	2020 and 2021
2	Guinea	Economic mismanagement and corruption	2021
3	Burkina Faso	Failure to contain Islamist militants' violence.	2021
4	Niger	Insecurity and corruption	2023

The Peculiarity of the Nigerien Coup lies in Vested Interests

The peculiarity of the Niger Coup can be said to be a rare focus given to the state based on the vested interests in the developments that followed the recent military takeover. These vested interests, therefore, are broadly classified into internal factor(s) within the West African region, and external, outside the region. However, the 27th July, 2023 military coup in Niger Republic has heated the West African polity with concomitant interests it has generated from the West and Russia. Before the coup in Niger, the region had experienced the same in other states discussed above, without conundrums. But when President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted by his leading presidential guard, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, an action that has stirred the hornet's nest for various political interests, the West African political walls have been earthshaken with bewilderment. Given the rationale behind the aforementioned peculiarity, Green (2023) posited that the Niger coup has created the world's largest region of military rule, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. And while Niger is considered one of the six poorest states in Africa—which affected the political and economic stability of the entire West African region—it is suspected that the nearby and successful coups were the tipping point that led to the government's overthrow.

There is another reason that the recent coups are getting more attention than they did in the past. Economic progress in some countries in the region means that those influential countries have much more at stake than ever before. Nigeria and other larger economic ECOWAS countries like Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, and Senegal, recognize that instability in the neighborhood can be a contagion that threatens to disrupt their efforts to increase economic investment, trade, and opportunity. Also, Niger is one of the poorest countries on earth, with 40 % of its budget dependent on foreign aid, though endowed with 5% of world uranium deposits, has garnered sympathy and economic interests from world political players since the recent political saga started (Reuters, 2023). This paper, therefore, examines the conflicting various interests as they play out.

Nigeria's Tinubu's Interest

In the face of the recent military takeover in Niger, some political commentators have canvassed for Nigeria as the regional leader (based on national interest) to intervene in Niger's political affair to restore constitutional government to sustain democracy under the guise of ECOWAS who has already activated a "standby force" following a 7-day ultimatum issued to General Tchiani four days after the coup (Oyewo, 2023). This researcher, on the contrary, believes that it was the Nigerian president, Bola Tinubu's interest to eagerly invade Niger to exercise his first foreign policy thrust as the newly installed president, just two months after, at the height of the July 27, 2023 coup. Tinubu, who the February 25, 2023 Presidential Election that brought him to power was being highly contested at the Tribunal on an account of massive electoral frauds, was looking for legitimacy from the Western governments, who had been coercing the former to restore democracy in Niger, while they had done little or none to initiate democracies in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso that have been in the control of the militaries before the Niger's. The sudden action to apply the use of force on Niger alone dampened the benefit of doubt. The begging question is, therefore, why had the West not initiated expedient military actions in other juntas before Niger? Further arguments are that Nigerians at home were discounted with the sole intention or personal interest of Tinubu to invade Niger. On one hand, some have come to criticize that Tinubu had no moral business in Niger to restore a constitutional government, while he had an existing domestic institutional coup being accused of with the electoral umpire (quipped as INEC) at the ongoing electoral court, to extricate from. On the other hand, the northern Nigerians (in Kastina and Sokoto states) who have come to share a very close affinity with the Nigeriens, had condemned the impending plans of Tinubu who is from the south, to attack their kith-

and-kin in Niger. This was consummated by the Nigerian Senate's rejection for an option of military operations in the Nigeria's neighbouring Niger Republic. This has thwarted the Tinubu's plan. Meanwhile, the coup juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have formed an Alliance of Sahelian States (AES), a counter union, if by at the end of the day to withstand military threat from the regional bloc, ECOWAS. A signal that has made the ECOWAS to soften its pedal to recently retract its sanctions against Niger.

French Interest

French interest in the recent coup is part of the interests coming outside the ECOWAS. Since the coup, France has taken a firm stance against the putschists. While French is not intervening directly, it supports a possible armed intervention by ECOWAS, the West African regional bloc, against the coup leaders, who take an anti-French position. General Tchiani had accused France for his country's socio-economic woes since Independence. On August 25, the military rulers gave the French ambassador Sylvain Itté 48 hours to leave the country. Paris rejected the ultimatum, saying that it didn't recognize the junta's authority. A deviant position that challenges Nigerien sovereignty. French's perennial interest in Francophone Africa is solidly founded in Niger's territory. This could be understood in its initial deviancy. Again, why is France acting in this way, when other countries, such as the United States, have adopted a more flexible line? More often than not, the country's more recent activities in Francophone Africa, have occurred to a large extent, without being reported. France is the foreign country with the largest number of soldiers (around 1,500) in Niger, some of whom have left Mali and Burkina Faso in recent years. The country also has certain economic interests in Niger, including uranium mining. Although, According to Durosomo (2017), French President, Mr Emmanuel Macron, visited Mali for a tour round the French military base stationed there as part of France's Operation Barkhane (to cover up France's dominance and presence in Francophone Africa), that was currently involving 3,500 troops spread around Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. The operation commenced its work in 2014 as an attempt to combat extremist uprising cum insurgency in the Sahel region of Africa. The planning and expediency of Macron's tour -it's a major action he took whilst elected as president and its a clear proof of France's dominance and presence in Francophone Africa. The presence of France in the Sahel region of Africa is not strange for sure, as all the countries involved in Operation Barkhane is an erstwhile colonies of France. Prior to now, France has intervened in Africa 19 times from 1962 to 1995, resulting in a controversial humanitarian intervention during the Rwanda genocidal period.

US Interest

American interest in the Niger's political affairs especially in the aftermath events of the coup is that of the one coming outside the ECOWAS. Importantly, the U.S. presence in Niger dates back to 2002, when the George W. Bush administration was winding up its so-called "Global War on Terror." According to Stephanie Savell at Quincy Institute panel, the co-director of the Costs of War project at Brown University, the idea was that the U.S. was going to wage pre-emptive war to root out the source of potential terrorist attacks in the troubled Nigerien region. By so doing, the U.S. military base has been situated near the northern city of Agadez to serve as a primary launching point for nearly all of Washington's intelligence and surveillance operations in West Africa. For the Nigerien junta, not considering the strategic implication of \$500 million of security aid into the country since 2012, has grounded America's drone fleet for the region that had been operating from the base worth \$110 million following the decision to shut down the airspace. Up till August 17 2023, there are roughly 1,100 American soldiers permanently stationed in the state (Echols, 2023). All this

points to the fact that American foreign policy interest is at stake in whatever that is important to the future of the coup.

Russian Interest

In the hey days of ECOWAS sanction against military juntas, the Ministers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali have adopted a treaty to create a union of states aimed at fostering economic and political integration in the Sahel region of West Africa over lack of support from ECOWAS against militants. Though the Sahel previously have a long-standing credible relationship with the French (France), precisely as their colonial Master and as a result of issues of securitization, in the instance of political challenges facing the military sheriffs, the Wagner group (Russian base military) now paved its way into the region to intervene and offers security support to them especially the Malians, Burkina Faso and Niger (Mehta 2023). Similarly, Niger has also reportedly turned towards Russia and Iran which appears insulting to Americans who have been watching closely every Russia's strategic move. It appears that the recent U.S. delegation's visit to Niamey in March 2024, led by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee and AFRICOM Commander, General Michael Langley, was proof to match with Russian interest (Responsible Statecraft, 2024).

Chinese Interest

Nonetheless, China's interest is as much important as others coming outside the ECOWAS region. Alas, China is concerned about Niger's stability. It has, *ab initio*, been providing military supports to the past and current military governments. Like French, it has important economic interests in Niger's oil and uranium resources. The China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is notably involved in the construction of an oil pipeline from Niger to the port of Sèmè-Podji in Benin, which before the coup was expected to deliver up to 110 000 barrels a day from January 2024. Although, as a result of the enormous economic interest that was at stake, some have argued that greed over the proceeds might be what triggered the coup. In this case, China has called for a 'political resolution of the coup' and proposed to mediate talks: a Chinese representative visited General Tchiani in September, 2023 (Bilquin, et al, 2023)

At this juncture, this researcher asserts that none of the aforementioned interests has expressed concern over addressing the humanitarian, economic, and security implications peradventure the current situation results to a full-blown war. What matters to the covert and overt political gladiators is their respective "national interest" at the expense of the poorest Nigeriens who are to be the grasses on the battle field.

Recommendations/Conclusion

This study has examined the peculiarity of the Niger Coup among others in the Francophone West African region. At the independence of most African countries in the sixties, Francophone Africa operated a more stable political system, despite their economic fates being tied to the umbilical cord of that of France known as the CFA franc, which metaphorically means French monetary imperialism in Africa, whereby almost 100 per cent of Francophone Africans including Nigeriens' foreign exchange reserves in a special French Treasury 'operating account' (LSE, 2024). But since 2020, the Francophone West African states have experienced four different military coups. And the recent Niger coup was the 5th in its tumultuous history. This latest coup has garnered sympathy and a web of interests from the world powers due to the fact of abundant natural mineral deposits in Niger –which have heated the polity the more. Hence, the way forward to solving this political impasse that

brought about serial military coups in Africa as a whole, is tackling the critical issues that led to the coups, and not the symptoms. Fairly enough, Western powers should be more concerned with tackling extremism and institutional coups like election rigging, corruption and sit-tight governance that some African leaders are culpable of, rather than playing the ostrich whenever there is a coup. In the guise of national (or personal) interest, nation-states especially the big powers induce, support these “African problems,” or still turn the other way when the corrupt African leaders are meeting their bids at the peril of their fellow African citizens. France, in particular, which has been indirectly controlling, *ab initio*, 75% of Niger’s nuclear energy for its electricity, should in a matter of fairness, respect the Right of Sovereignty of Niger by granting the latter economic independence like other Anglophone states. Similarly, the so-called world democracies should maintain and uphold same democratic principles they try to use military power to install whenever there is a coup; according full sovereignty to Niger Republic as an independent state regardless of its weak stature, to run its affairs as it caters for its citizens according to the stipulated rules of the United Nations. Failure of this will not end a military junta in the future.

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