

**POLITICAL INSTABILITY, DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND DEMOCRATIC
CONSOLIDATION IN WEST AFRICA**

BY

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Abstract

West Africa is constantly bedeviled by a renewed trend of political instability and democratic backsliding despite decades of post–Cold War democratization and democratic consolidation. As ECOWAS marks its golden anniversary, several member-states continue to be confronted with the spate of military coups, authoritarian resurgence, civil liberty suppression, electoral irregularities, weak institutions, and governance crises. Pertinently, military intervention is increasingly perceived in some arenas as a corrective alternative to failing democratic systems. This study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data, including scholarly literature, policy documents, and ECOWAS treaties and protocols. It is hinged on Frustration–Aggression Theory in explaining the correlation between governance failures and popular receptivity to unconstitutional change of government. This study argues that sustained democratic erosion produces public frustration, which may legitimize military intervention, equating it to a perceived solution to governance deficits. This trend risks entrenching West Africa as a focal point of coups and autocratic rule, if appropriate checks are not put in place. Findings reveal that weak institutional frameworks, non-adherence to constitutional term limits, limited accountability, and insufficient civic engagement significantly drive democratic backsliding. This study introduces a “demo-meter” as a standard of measurement for democratic ethos, values and strategies to check and maintain democratic tempo and advocates those West African states must put forward a demonstrated relative democratic resilience through institutional strengthening, adherence to term limits, and civil society engagement to check and maintain democratic tempo.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding, democratic consolidation, ECOWAS, military rule, political instability

Introduction

Most political events in contemporary Africa can be traced to their colonial heritage and experiences. For instance, at independence, most African countries operated a multi-party system; the run-up to

independence saw the emergence and operation of a wide multiplicity of political parties in the diverse African territories. The anti-colonial and pro-independence struggle were a mass movement and virtually every segment of society was involved in the struggle. In engaging in the struggle, the African masses expected tangible benefits from independence such as better life, more infrastructure, greater involvement in governance, etc. (Onah, 2010). Some of these expectations were dashed with daunting realities that stared them in the face. The prevalence of one-party rule and strongman dictatorships in Africa were prominent and ubiquitous. As a result, it was not very long before the military in the various countries of the continent, started feeling that the state was drifting, intervened in politics and took over power forcefully from the civilian leaders. Egypt was the first country in Africa to experience a coup in 1952. In 1958, there was another coup in Sudan. In 1963, a coup took place in Togo. In 1966, it was the turn of Nigeria. From then, in the late 1960s through to the 1970s, Africa became the theatre of coups. Virtually all countries in Africa have had their own share of political instability, military incursion and other forms of anti-democratic manifestations. In the last one decade, there has been a sweep of military interventions in countries in West Africa and across the Sahel, looking more like the Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) from 2010.

A comparison between the Arab Spring and the resurgence of military coups in West Africa since 2020 points to a number of divergences. First, the Arab Spring was characterized by mass uprisings against entrenched authoritarian regimes, but the coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger were military interventions within formally democratic or hybrid systems. Second, scholarly analyses revealed that the Arab Spring focused on structural socio-economic grievances, endemic corruption, and mass youth employment as the major triggers (Lynch, 2012; Bellin, 2012). This was apparent in the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia. The experiences in West Africa had their sources in governance deficits, exemplified by insecurity, electoral manipulation, corruption, and poor service delivery. Another point of divergence is in the source of political change. There was a bottom-up mobilization manifested through individual discontent, youth activism, civil society network and aggrieved labor unions in the uprising leading up to the Arab Spring (Brownlee *et al*, 2015). In contrast, the coups in West Africa were a top-down intervention perpetrated by the military class. Fourth, vulnerabilities in authoritarian regimes were exposed in the Arab Spring while the coups in West Africa reflected the weaknesses in shallow electoral democracies. Altogether, broad

insights that could be teased from the foregoing are: legitimacy is important for regime stability, military institutions are significant and, procedural democracy in the absence of institutional accountability, prevalence of the rule of law, and socio-economic balance would lead to state fragility.

Studies have shown factors that call for political instability and coups in West Africa. Wada & Garba (2025) opine that the resurgence of coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, are evidences of structural weaknesses in democratic institutions, rather than just being a proof of political aberration. The resultant instability is spurred by institutional fragility, elite exclusion, insecurity, persistent governance failures, which altogether reduces citizens' confidence in civilian rule, thereby also creating an enabling environment for praetorian intervention (Asante, 2023; Akubueze, 2024). Another factor, according to Odeh *et al.* (2025), that leads to instability is the correlation between political volatility and economic factors. Resource curse is an apparent example, in a situation where reliance on natural resource wealth exacerbates corruption and undermines democratic resilience. ECOWAS' limitation in terms of responses, sanctions and diplomatic interventions which have often not been able to live up to expectations, is a factor as well. Olubiyo & Ayodele (2024) agree with Omilusi (2024) that ECOWAS has failed in reversing unconstitutional power change or in deepening democratic norms. These all sum up a deepening crisis of governance that threatens the region's democratic gains. They also emphasize that political instability and democratic reversals in the West African region are not accidental but indicative of enduring institutional challenges.

Issues surrounding persistent political instability and democratic backsliding raise a number of pertinent questions and quiz the democratic consolidation bid being touted by some West African states and their leaders. How does political instability manifest? What are the pointers to democratic reversals in West Africa? Can the region regain its old status of full democratic standards? This work, therefore, aims at discussing the nature and causes of political instability and democratic backsliding in West Africa, drawing a linkage between the two variables, and considering the indices of democratic consolidation as a mode for mitigating political instability and the pace of democratic decline in this region. A critical examination of the ECOWAS treaties and protocols, especially those addressing military coup d'état would be done while proffering a *demo-meter* which serves as a gauge for measuring, monitoring and evaluating democratic standards among ECOWAS member-states.

Conceptual Clarification

Political Instability and Democratic Backsliding in West Africa

Throughout human history, power relations, political structures, processes and culture and indeed, social processes and norms have had to change either in response to internal dynamics or external ones, or a combination of both. In other instances, major economic changes have had far reaching political and social consequences in terms of change or the transformation of the status quo (Obi, 2015). The mode of adaptability or quest for modification is very crucial and this depends on the level of development of the states and the understanding of the citizens. However, if changes are not properly managed, they can break down into anarchy or at the least, a situation of political instability.

Efforts to avert volatile security challenges and unconstitutional change of government (UCG) in the West African region have continued to be abortive. Several deeply rooted and inter-related causative reasons have been discovered with these conflicts, including environmental disasters, illegal maritime activities, disinformation (Al Jazeera, 2023), poor governance, unorganized military rule, proliferation of small arms, mismanagement of diversity, political dysfunction, corruption (Keili 2008; Bourkhars, 2013), and lack of adequate political will on the part of governments in West Africa to enforce signed peace accords and resolutions (Ejibunu, 2007) or to manage human rights problems and create transparent and accountable governance institutions. As Ani (2021) posits, social upheavals are signs of a new tendency of democratic re-negotiation in which the masses are determined to clamp down on governance systems that do not supply democratic deliverables to them.

Political instability manifests in different shades: civil unrests, mass insurrections, insurgency and terrorism, violent extremism, ethnic clashes, communal conflicts, political assassinations, banditry, kidnapping, coup d'état, etc. The polity can also be heated due to a public outcry against nepotism, corruption, neo-patrimonialism, economic recession, inflation, hunger and unemployment. Revolution, which is usually bloody, violent and destructive, can result on the extreme side.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram insurgency and its splinter factions have caused about 45,606 deaths in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states between 2009 and 2023 (Sasu, 2024). Also, farmer-herder conflicts, especially between Muslim pastoralists and Christian farming communities, and the collapse of state authority in some places have further deepened the insecurity challenge. Burkina

Faso and Mali have witnessed increasing jihadist uprisings since 2015, with incidences of attacks, abductions, and destruction of lives and property in their rural communities. The Sahel has become a breeding ground for violent extremism, expanding into coastal West African states of Benin and Togo with violent attacks soaring by 250 per cent in two years (UNSC/15971, 2025). For instance, Togo recorded ten attacks resulting in 52 deaths in 2024 while Benin lost 28 soldiers to terrorist attacks near its border with Burkina Faso and Niger on 8 January 2025 (UNSC Report, April 2025). According to Yusuf (2025), the JNIM, Al-Qaida and Da'esh affiliates are responsible for most of the terrorist attacks in the region. The drivers of terrorism are deeply rooted in structural and systemic vulnerabilities. Some of these include weak governance, widespread corruption and poverty, military coups, ethnic and religious schism, porous borders, proliferation of small arms and light weapons, unemployment, and fragile institutions (Wapmuk, 2021).

In the last twenty years, a defining feature of international politics has been the retreat of democracy, commonly referred to as democratic backsliding in political discourses. Surprisingly, little agreement has been reached regarding the cause of the phenomenon, despite the fact that it has received a great deal of attention. The most common explanations offered by analysts—ranging from the role of Russia and China and disruptive technologies to the rise of populism, the spread of political polarization, and democracies' failure to deliver—fall short when tested across a wide range of cases (Carothers and Press, 2020). The decline of democracy across nations in multiple regions has forced an acknowledgement with the once-favored notions about democracy's inevitable spread, its intuitive appeal, and its absolute value. However, as the trend line of the global democratic recession has become uncertain, longer and starker, policymakers and political analysts have debated the ideology and decided to confront the grim, new reality of a world where each year brings less rather than more democracy globally.

Early scholarly discussions of democratic consolidation assumed that with democratic institutions firmly rooted, democracy becomes “the only game in town” (Linz & Stepan, 1996). This, however, has been challenged by contemporary scholarship who demonstrated that democracies can gradually recede without abrupt breakdowns (Cheeseman, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Asante, 2023; Olubiyo & Ayodele, 2024).

Backsliding, as the word implies, is not an instant occurrence, rather, it refers to the gradual build-up of events that lead to the downward slope of democracy. Democratic backsliding, simply put

therefore, is a process in which a country gradually moves away from democratic principles towards authoritarianism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). It exemplifies a situation where the existing democracies become less democratic and democratic political institutions are in a moribund condition due to efforts by popularly elected officials, typically the executive branch. It occurs gradually, through a series of incremental actions rather than a coup. While usually protracted, it can be swift and can be reversed, contained, or result in a transition to autocracy. Democratic backsliding is not linear, involves great uncertainty, and may be hard to identify as it unfolds (Cheeseman, 2015; Gyimah-Boadi, 2015; Wada & Garba, 2025). For Waldner and Lust (2018), democratic backsliding is the decline in the quality of democratic institutions and practices within existing democratic regimes. They emphasize that backsliding often manifests through weakened checks and balances, reduced civil liberties, and electoral manipulation. In a similar vein, Bermeo (2016) in Dash & Mohapatra (2025) captures six mechanisms of democratic backsliding viz: executive aggrandizement, strategic manipulation of elections, curtailing media freedom, restricting civil society, judicial capture and undermining checks and balances.

Democratic backsliding manifests in the following ways: stifling of civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and association, manipulation of elections in the form of voter suppression and intimidation, and the use of state resources to benefit the ruling party. Other forms are bad governance, the concentration of power in the hands of a small elite, the suppression of an independent media, one-party rule, the use of violence or intimidation to suppress civil dissent, sit-tight syndrome, economic and security problems, marginalization and repression of regime opponents and minorities, largely incremental executive aggrandizement and the absence of the rule of law, equity and justice. The foregoing is however, not exhaustive.

The peak or the eventual result of democratic backsliding is a coup d'état or a revolution and this could take place where the foregoing is evident. Where citizens' rights are restricted and good governance is waning, the citizens may just as well look forward to a military intervention. This played out in the Nigerien coup in July 2023 that ousted President Bazoum and brought the Commander of his presidential guard, General Abdourahamane Tchiani into power. As soon as the civilian government was toppled and the military junta was announced, there was an outbreak of jubilations and celebrations among the citizens; ditto for Gabon. It is therefore appalling that an incident that should lead to a civilian protest, backlash and a quest for an immediate return to a

democratic rule is being celebrated among the governed. It possibly meant that the principles, practices and dividends of democracy, which the people were supposed to be enjoying, were dwindling or no longer made available to them (Al Jazeera, 2022). More so, the military does not always just oust a sitting leader successfully; they capitalize on the political atmosphere and citizens' heated experiences and this stance could explain the outburst of jubilations that erupted in Niger and Gabon after the military junta succeeded.

Another dimension to the backsliding pattern is to consider if a state has attained a significant level of democracy and then experienced a significant erosion of democratic values, principles and institutions. However, the question of significance is relative. In states where democratic transitions have only developed superficially, such as in Ethiopia and Myanmar, it still tallies with the general perception of the international community as being a form of a global expansion of democracy.

Carothers and Press (2020) observed that global pace of democracy has increasingly deteriorated since the mid-2000s just after the colossal expansion of democracy starting in the 1980s and which improved after the end of the Cold War. The core of this global democratic slide is democratic backsliding—aspects of political change in which countries with some level of democracy become significantly less democratic. The democratic recession also involves two associated trends: first, autocratization in countries that have moved away from some form of partial or soft authoritarianism to a stricter form of authoritarianism (such as Belarus and Cambodia in recent years) and second, democratic shakes, in which an intensification of illiberal forces within a democracy raises concern about the state of the system but does not provoke the systemic readjustments necessary to actually threaten it (such as the rise of right-wing populist parties in Germany and Sweden). But it is only logical to inquire: does democracy necessarily translate to good governance and systemic growth and development, given the cases of China and Russia?

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, which measures the impact of terrorism globally, the Sahel region is the “epicenter of terrorism” worldwide. 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 while West African countries are the fifteen members of ECOWAS: Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Togo, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso

and Niger, although these last four have been suspended by the sub-regional body as a result of the military junta operating in their states.

A puzzling question however arises: Does democratic backsliding lead to military intervention or military intervention lead to democratic backsliding?

A Discourse on Democratic Consolidation

Historically, the mass agitations for political pluralism across Africa ultimately led to the democratization of the countries on the continent. The process of democratization from military and authoritarian rule in Africa comprises a number of stages. The first stage generally involves the convocation of national constitutional conferences in several countries to produce new, liberal constitutions for the countries. In many Francophone countries, these conferences were sovereign. In many other countries, the regimes only convoked constituent assemblies to fashion new constitutions for their countries (Onah, 2010). Sequel to the promulgation of the new constitution into law, the next stage was the emergence and registration/recognition of new political parties. In many African countries again, the erstwhile sole, authoritarian party was one of these new parties, either in its old name or under a new name. The next stage was generally the holding of general elections for the election of new leaders.

In many countries, the erstwhile authoritarian leaders were among the candidates in the new elections. The new civilian governments have usually pursued the consolidation of democracy immediately on the assumption of office. To be certain, democracy is a people-oriented political system, and this entails periodic mass elections, in which the wholesomeness of the electoral process is safeguarded by strict assurance. This position is based on the assumption that democracy does not just allow for the participation of the masses, by way of mobilizing the electorate for inclusion in the selection of representatives, but that democracy thrives on openness and accountability in the conduct of public affairs (Yagboyaju, 2013). Ake (1996) adds the principles of public accountability, mass participation, majority rule, and minority rights as factors that define democracy as a concept. Democratic tenets include the protection of fundamental human rights, predominance of the rule of law, and the observance of due process in governance.

Democratization process begins with democratic transition, proceeds through democratic acclimatization and ends in democratic consolidation (Ejiofor and Udeogu, 2017). For them, each

point represents a stage in the developmental trajectory of stable democracy. This means that democratic consolidation is in itself, a process that seeks to metamorphose into a stable democracy. To use Nigeria as an example; Nigeria has successfully exceeded the elementary transitory stage which is democratic transition; however, it currently dangles between democratic acclimatization and democratic consolidation. In 1999, when there was a democratic transition, certain new concepts and ideas, previously oblivious to the militarized masses were introduced. Democratic principles namely, periodic elections, tenured term of office, the rule of law, due process initiative, independence of the judiciary, equality before the law, and supremacy of the constitution, etc., are concepts and practices that should follow democratization.

A distinction has to be quickly made between democratic transition, democratic acclimatization and democratic consolidation. Democratic transition is often associated with the movement or transformation from a military or autocratic regime to a civilian administration while democratic acclimatization means getting used to the new system and practices that are associated with democratic rule. Democratic consolidation is the consistent development of the principles and dividends of democracy. Democratic consolidation is endless; nations have to keep developing and improving on their democratic status.

For Udeogu & Onwuanabile (2016), democratic consolidation refers to the continuous procedural institutionalisation and becoming accustomed to democratic values thereby amounting to the process by which a new democracy becomes mature in the sense that it will not fall back to authoritarianism without any external factor. Nevertheless, they argued that it is easier to attain democratic transition than to attain democratic consolidation, and if not the latter, then every so-called democracy is a fake, and has all of the inherent potentialities for regressing to something of a 'democratic authoritarianism'. This is with reference to relative political practicality.

In the opinion of Przeworski (1991) in Udeogu & Onwuanabile (2016), democracy is consolidated when it becomes self-enforcing. That is to say, when all concerned political elements consider it appropriate to keep cooperating and submitting their interests and values to the uncertain interplay of democratic institutions.

For Adekunle (2025), the consolidation of the democratic process, ensuring democracy is secured well into the future implies democratic stability. It is the absence of a democratic breakdown. This implies that democratic stability is the continuity of the democratic system over time, without

disruptions or interruptions. Ghana, with a history of nearly three decades of peaceful power transitions, and Senegal, have been considered as having a stable democracy, thereby regarded as bastions of democracy in West Africa (Njoki, 2025).

According to Ogundiya (2009), democratic consolidation connotes a system of regime maintenance and seeing the main political institutions as the only context for political competition and conformity to the democratic rules. Yagboyaju (2013) supports that democratic consolidation should depict consistent and sustained practice of democratic principles. Critically speaking, democratic consolidation relates to the growing of the defence mechanisms of democracy. This means that democratic consolidation is a process, not an accomplishment. It involves in part, an affirmation and strengthening of democratic institutions, such as the electoral system, revitalized or newly created parties, judicial independence and respect for human rights, which have been created or recreated during the course of the transition from military rule to a civilian administration (Okeke, 2015).

Yagboyaju (2013) further opines that democratic consolidation could be said to efficiently succeed in most mature and advanced democracies of the world, where many of the prominent democratic principles are imbibed and embedded in their political culture. He identifies another term that emanates in the discourse on democratic consolidation, and which is democratic fortification. This requires a conscious effort towards sustaining the need for building the defence mechanisms of democracy, which may be more pronounced in emerging democracies. This is also likely because democracy is often under attack and can easily regress.

Other indices of democratic consolidation are the pursuit, attainment and sustenance of good governance by democratic administrations. This includes the promotion of democratic ideals such as respect for the rule of law, popular participation, independence of the judiciary and free and fair elections. Iboi (2019) adds that good governance essentially promotes transparency, improves welfare of the people, reduces corruption to the barest minimum and supports accountability by public managers in the conduct of state affairs. Zero tolerance for human rights violation, efficiency and effective public institutions and an enabling environment where citizens are able to pursue and achieve legitimate goals without undue interference and restraints by government or harassment by law enforcement agencies, a fundamental re-ordering of the political environment in a way as to encourage inclusivity are other indicators.

It is pertinent to note here that democratic consolidation differs largely from consolidated democracy. While the former is a process, the latter presupposes an end, which most times is elusive. Even the United States of America despite their established political patterns and long years of democracy, are revealing that democracy evolves. A consolidated democratic system would mean the existence of an enhanced economic development, developed democratic culture, stable party system and a well-refined political process that ensures continuous democratic practices but states having these qualities can still regress. Ideally, democratic consolidation in African politics should include the institution of periodic free and fair elections and a smooth transition from one civilian administration to another, economic liberalisation and social reorientation to ensure that every citizen enjoys the benefit of citizenship as well as contributes his own quota to national well-being. However, these are in turn, some of the challenges of democratic consolidation.

Theoretical Framing: Frustration-Aggression Theory

This theory was propounded and popularized by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939), and has over the years been applied in several fields of study (Breuer & Elson, 2017). The theory is premised on the basic assumption that there is a nexus between frustration and aggression. It provides an important framework for understanding citizens' reactions that come with political instability. It is also premised on the assumption that frustration springing from unrealized expectations or relative deprivation can lead individuals or groups to express aggression (Dollard et al., 1939; Gurr, 1970). For instance, from the lenses of this theory, citizens' response to persistent governance failures could be that of dissuasion with democratic institutions and support for military intervention as an alternative source of order or stability. This also stems from the assumption that coups do not just take place; military formations have their reasons for perpetrating one, sometimes often fueled by popular disillusionment with democratic governance.

Empirical studies on political unrest have shown that perceived injustice and deprivation can generate collective grievances that manifest in protests, riots, or acceptance of regime change (Gurr, 1970; Davies, 1962). Ditto for issues such as corruption, insecurity, unemployment, and electoral manipulation. However, while the Frustration–Aggression Theory captures the societal dissonance, grievances and discontent that create permissive conditions for coups, it lacks an adequate

explanation for strategic military takeovers. The reason adduced could be that coups are typically elite-driven political actions shaped by institutional incentives, organizational interests, and civil–military relations rather than spontaneous reactions to public frustration. Scholars of coup politics highlight that officer calculate the risks and opportunities of intervention based on factors such as regime weakness, factionalism within the armed forces, and the expected response of domestic and international actors (Powell & Thyne, 2011; Singh, 2014). In some other cases, coups occur when military leaders perceive those civilian authorities are unable to maintain security, protect institutional privileges, or ensure the cohesion of the armed forces, and there is a display of public discontent with the incumbent administration; and this is the part that is tantamount to the West African coup experiences.

This theory is used in this study to explain the underlining factors responsible for military coups in Africa generally, and the recent coups within ECOWAS member-states. West African coups d'état may be viewed as elitist power competition, ruling oligarch conspiracy and bandwagon phenomenon that defined the politics in post-independence Africa. Frustration by citizens may be in diverse forms; socio-economic, political, cultural and leadership inadequacy that characterize almost every polity in West Africa. In short, the increasing number of people living in abject poverty, unemployment, corruption, violation of human rights, hunger, and rebel activities contributed to insecurity. There is also environmental degradation, injustice, inflation rate, infrastructure shortage, ethnic conflict, militancy, terrorism and insecurity of all kinds, which nurture hatred and sporadically produce aggression against democratic leaders who are rightly or mistakenly thought to be accountable for the wretched condition of the citizens.

Citizens have often called for military intervention and some outrightly celebrated military coups in nations like Mali, Guinea, Burkina-Faso, Chad and Sudan. In particular, in January 2022, hundreds of citizens took to the streets in Ouagadougou to celebrate the military coup that toppled the government of former President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Still in 2017, Zimbabweans took to the streets celebrating when the military coup ousted former President Robert Mugabe (Arezki 2022; Chigozie and Oyinmiebe 2022). While such celebrations may not necessarily mean the end to maladministration, it is a change that may have quenched or eased frustration at least for the time being. In totality, leadership in Africa and West Africa in particular are either deliberately or unknowingly under-developing the already underdeveloped institutions, political structures and the

people. This has resulted in a built-up aggression that seems to have pushed other people to misinterpret democracy as incapable of resolving the issues of the West African region, thus, the resolve to assault the system if not overthrow it outrightly in the quest for peace, stability, security and development.

Drawing from the institutional weakness perspective in explaining coups and democratic backsliding in West Africa, it is assumed that such occur when there exists a weak judiciary, a breakdown in civil-military relations, an incapacitated electoral institution, excess power being concentrated in one arm of government, and a poorly institutionalized political party system (Cheeseman, 2015). Given the situation, the military can override constitutional processes without strong resistance. These institutional deficiencies reduce accountability and weaken constitutional governance, thereby increasing the likelihood of democratic backsliding and military intervention. This stance has been used to contextualize recent coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Niger, where weak governance structures and declining public trust created openings for military intervention.

The limitation of the Frustration–Aggression framework is in its inability to sufficiently account for the regional clustering or diffusion of coups, a phenomenon increasingly observed in West Africa. Studies on the contagion effect of coups have suggested that coups often spread through regional demonstration effects, where successful military takeovers in one country influence and embolden military elites in neighboring states (Thyne, 2017; Weyland, 2012). Other factors that could facilitate the proliferation of coups are regional political dynamics, shared security challenges, and transnational military networks.

The Perils of Democratic Backsliding and Political Instability

Democratic backsliding and political instability present a serious threat to the whole gamut of a state's politico-economic system, internally and externally, especially in Africa. On the economic front for instance, when a system backslides into authoritarianism, it is prone to becoming more insular and less open to trade and this is likely to have implications for intra-regional trade and economic development. This is because authoritarian governments are likely to impose protectionist measures on imports thereby making it more expensive for businesses to buy goods and services from other countries in the region and compete. They also often restrict market access to foreign

businesses, making it more difficult for companies to trade across borders. This can discourage investment. This is one factor playing out in Niger especially against France.

Political instability would stifle economic growth because investors would be wary about the security of their investments and the prospects of their profits. Where an authoritarian government results, there is the likelihood of less efficiency and less transparency and where corrupt, can divert resources away from productive investment. In the same vein, sustainable growth and development may be difficult to achieve.

At the ultimate, democratic backsliding presents the likelihood of a military intervention and this is a peculiar one because it comes with citizens' acceptance and jubilation with sighs of relief. Since the end of the Arab spring, Africa has been witnessing a resurgence of military interventions into democratic governments through coups and militia rebel groups. The Niger military intervention is the seventh coup in western and central Africa since 2020, and it seems largely driven by internal factors. There have been coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Chad, the latest being in Gabon. The soldiers seized political power often following the continued deterioration of the security situation, poor economic and social governance. With a successful military takeover, democratic backsliding continues.

Factors Militating against Democratic Consolidation in West Africa

Democratic consolidation is feasible and possible but there are a number of factors and conditions that are hampering the workability. If Nigeria is taken as a case study, there are prevailing issues that are making the bid for consolidating on democracy an uphill task. The lack of accountability, lack of social infrastructure, mismanagement of public resources, poor service delivery, faulty governor-governed linkage hinders any progress that can be made. Okoye (2005) submits that there is no transparent system where the public is allowed to participate in policy formation and contribute to how the policies should be implemented. Nigeria has a large number of natural resources but lacks proper accountability measures. Partially, it could be attributed to the absence of connective infrastructure like roads, internet access and electricity which service delivery and social accountability systems depend on. He attributes this lack of infrastructure to the mismanagement of

resources by government officials, and that if these officials are made to be accountable to the citizens, there will be a good response to the delivery of services.

Another factor is inequality in resource distribution. Despite Nigeria's substantial natural resources which is capable of catering for its enlarging population, just a few people in the country have access to the revenues gotten from the resources. A substantial ratio of the citizens lives below the poverty line amidst the massive wealth in the country. As such, any political office holder sees the position as an opportunity to enrich himself while in the position.

Omotoye (2011) identifies weak institutions and law enforcement agencies as a major limitation to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It provides an avenue for public office holders to embezzle funds while not being apprehensive of being prosecuted. Unfortunately, Nigeria is relapsing into a system that lacks a particular, recognizable legal framework for law enforcement agencies or judicial system. Citizens are likely to get away with crimes such as money laundering, uncontrollable theft of government money and other official illegalities, if they have political patronage.

Corruption is a major challenge and threat to democratic consolidation and this particular malaise cuts across African countries. It has been argued that the war on graft has been difficult to win because the act is perpetrated by policy makers themselves. Oko (2008) observes that nothing enervates democracy more than corruption. It not only distorts governance but also provides perverse incentives for dysfunctional behavior as well as diminishes the quality of life of the citizens by diverting funds for social service into private pockets.

Patron-clientele relationship whose source can be traced to feudalistic societies in the 15th century in Europe has been adapted to contemporary politics to depict the relationship that exists between a political sponsor (usually known as a godfather) and another individual, usually an aspirant who gets the support of the sponsor and owes him loyalty, allegiance and is obliged to do the biddings of the godfather. Patron-clientele relationship is loosely called God-fatherism and is a major hindrance to democratic consolidation. God-fatherism has been identified as a major cause of political violence and corruption since the return of democracy in 1999. According to Ogundiya (2009), God-fatherism is both a symptom and a cause of the violence and corruption that together permeates the political process in Nigeria. Many public officials are indebted to their political godfathers because of their rise in politics and they are expected to repay the debt during their stay in office. The implication of this is exhausting the state's meagre resources, which were originally meant for the masses.

Godfatherism frustrates the democratic process since it inhibits the selection of credible leaders, thereby stalling democratic consolidation in the country. Ayoade (2006) reflects on another political snag, which is godfatherism. According to him, it is not an act of philanthropy because it is identified by undemocratic and devious acts such as bribery, corruption and violence, all summing up in the interests of the political godfather. It is a transactionary affair such that the godfather invests his resources in the godson and the godson, on assumption of office, is expected to give a return on investment either in cash or kind or in all respects, including his decision making while he remains in public office. The key goal of all godfathers is to rule by proxy or rule through protégés (Ojo and Lawal, 2013). Gabon presents an example where the seat of leadership was passed down from father to his son as if it is a monarchical system.

Everywhere in Africa, except for a very few exemplary countries, the major problem of consolidating democracy now lies with elections. The people are hardly allowed to choose their leaders in free and fair elections. Instead, these elections are massively rigged and the will of the people is regularly thwarted. This is true even for many countries that had shown an early promise but where elections are now brazenly rigged. This is unfortunately creating a new gulf between the African government and the governed, and will ultimately make it impossible for African countries to either consolidate democracy or mobilize the energies and resources necessary for development (Onah, 2010).

An Examination of ECOWAS Treaties and Protocols Addressing Military Coups and Unconstitutional Change of Government (UCG)

ECOWAS was established in 1975 for the promotion of economic integration and regional development. In its 50 years of being established, it has had to respond to emerging threats, including civil wars, UCG, and manifestations of political instability, amongst others. To be fair, it has recorded modest achievements in regional economic integration, conflict mediation, and facilitating movements of citizens, goods and services. With regards to coups and crises, it has been able to act swiftly and decisively in key instances as in the case of Guinea-Bissau in 2003 and 2012 when ECOWAS had to impose sanctions and deploy peacekeepers to restore order and mediate transitions. Another instance is Mali in 2012 when ECOWAS enforced sanctions, brokered a transitional deal, and facilitated a return to civil rule. ECOMOG successfully ousted Yahya Jammeh in the Gambia in 2017 after he refused to concede defeat in the presidential election, reinstating democratic governance.

There exists several treaties, protocols, and frameworks, against UCG in ECOWAS but the efforts have remained largely rhetorical, with minimal operational impact (Yusuf, 2025). The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) as a foundational instrument, is replete and explicit on its goals and intentions. It was intended to prevent authoritarian backsliding and unconstitutional changes (Adebajo, 2002), developed in response to widespread political instability, civil wars, and authoritarianism in the region during the 1990s, and aimed at strengthening democratic norms (Ajibewa, 2025). The key provisions in the protocol include constitutional convergence principles, free, fair, and transparent elections, separation of powers and rule of law, zero tolerance for unconstitutional change of government, rights and obligations of member- states (which include duties to uphold democratic values and cooperate with ECOWAS in election observation, mediation, and conflict resolution) (ECOWAS, 2001). Despite these provisions, ECOWAS has been encumbered with persistent challenges of rising poverty, violent conflicts, underdevelopment, arms, drugs and human trafficking, political instability, poor funding, limited enforcement capability and the most recent being the military interventions in, and exit of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

Taking the Niger coup of July 26, 2023, as a case study, a critical look reflects a justification of the coup based on deteriorating security, internal power wrangling and poor governance (IISS, 2023). The response from ECOWAS was the imposition of severe economic sanctions, travel ban on junta leaders, and demand for a return to civil rule in seven days, amongst others. Rather than yield the desired effect which was a return to democratic rule, it reinforced the military formation; Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso exited ECOWAS and formed the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) which further destabilized ECOWAS' unity and lessened the credibility of its legal framework. An impact assessment of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance points in the direction of an effective wielding of the instrument but weakness in enforcement mechanisms.

The weakness of ECOWAS in restoring civilian rule to the three states reveals a lot. It reveals that sanctions, threats, ultimatums, and suspensions will not always work. Rather, ECOWAS should look at other methods and mechanisms for restoring civilian rule. According to Hussain (2026), the regional body should consider combining reforms, with a more strategic and inclusive approach, inclusion, civic engagement, rebuilding public trust, and support for legitimate transitions. This may

stem from the assumption that the roots of political instability and citizens' discontent has been ignored.

The challenge of democratic reversals, military coups and the helplessness of ECOWAS is dire. ECOWAS protocol stating zero-tolerance for unconstitutional changes of government is very clear but this has not prevented the resurgence of military takeovers (Adekunle, 2025). As such, these are clear indications of a weakened deterrence mechanisms, crisis of legitimacy and a waning commitment to democratic norms. More so, ECOWAS has been blamed for selective enforcement and lack of political will. Its inconsistent responses to constitutional manipulation and third-termism as in the case of Côte d'Ivoire in 2020 under President Alassane Ouattara's and his third term bid which was met with muted ECOWAS response. This kind of selective enforcement undermines the legitimacy and normative consistency of ECOWAS interventions.

Other general, internal constraints confronting ECOWAS are weak institutional capacity and financial constraints. The ECOWAS Commission and supporting bodies (e.g., the Early Warning Directorate) suffer from staff shortage, paucity of technical tools, and financial resources. The unavailability of an independent enforcement body to investigate or penalize member states violating democratic principles creates a lacuna. Ogunnoiki (2020) also observed that the protocol lacks concrete, enforceable sanctions for violations beyond political condemnation and suspension (Ogunnoiki, 2020).

Fawole (2025) blames West African leaders for the gross mismanagement of intra-regional relations and the dearth of sufficient sensitivity to the peculiar nature and circumstances those states currently ruled by military leaders in West Africa- Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon- were. The heavy dose of sanctions and ultimatums imposed on Niger following the coup that toppled President Mohamed Bazoum in 2023 and similar sanctions and threats previously imposed on Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso failed to yield results.

UCG has re-emerged in the West African region, despite decades of democratic progress (Omilusi, 2024). In a sense, this spate questions the effectiveness of intervention models (including economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military threats), attempted by ECOWAS in stalling democratic regression and countering military coups. Limited success has been recorded in spite of its efforts, and strategies at stemming the tide of democratic reversals and especially the exit of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali from the body.

The disconnect between policy and implementation brings about critical questions about the institutional capacity, political will, and collective security commitments of member-states. The exit of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS and resultant creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in 2024 further complicates regional cooperation and has serious implications for the future of military juntas in the region (Kwarkye, 2024). These threats demand dynamic, context-sensitive solutions that emphasize regional collaboration, early warning systems and proactive conflict prevention, especially in fragile and violence-prone regions such as West Africa (ISS Africa, 2024)

Mitigating Political Instability and Democratic Backsliding in West Africa-Some Recommendations

Having discussed the issues around political instability and democratic backsliding, and the polemics of democratic consolidation as differing from consolidated democracy, it is apposite to consider the factors that are capable of mitigating the incidences of the twin disturbances of political instability and democratic backsliding in West Africa.

This author recommends a *demo-meter*; a democracy gauge which is specially curated as an impactful way to measure and evaluate the health, quality, depth, viability and virility of democracy among ECOWAS member-states. This tool would include a range of quantitative and qualitative indicators including political participation (frequency of elections, voter turnout in elections, and electoral competitiveness), civil liberties and legal protection for minorities and dissenting voices, rule of law, institutional effectiveness, transparency and other accountability mechanisms, public trust and engagement, checks and balances, due process, press freedom, etc. While there are other actual global indices that function like a demo-meter namely, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Freedom House's Freedom in the World Report and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem Project), this particular one would be designed to monitor each ECOWAS country with tip-offs when they begin to veer off and warning sent as required. An extensive description of the operationalization of the *demo meter* is to be covered in a future study.

Second, stiffer and tougher penalties from regional and sub-regional bodies can be enacted and implemented to caution nations that are tilting towards democratic regression. This means that a

checklist to measure the dwindling of democratic ethos and values has to be instituted, say a demometer that was prescribed earlier. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must gear up to this demand and task.

Third, there is the need for the existence and thriving of a strong and dynamic civil society whose responsibility it is to check repeated abuses of power, hold public officials accountable for their actions and inactions in the management of public resources and serve to mitigate political conflicts (Diamond, 1999). The Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) comprise different social movements such as religious groups, associations, trade unions, journalists etc. Aside from other important roles they undertake, they are capable of mobilizing opposition and lending support to a truly democratic leadership in the face of military threats.

The fourth approach to mitigating political instability and democratic backsliding is to adopt a people-centered approach in governance since democracy is popularly referred to as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. This is an extensive approach in that it places primacy on the citizens which African leaders are there to serve, having voted them in, in the first place. With this in place, a sense of responsibility and accountability are naturally ingrained in the leaders even from the point of election campaigns. African leaders must take decisive steps to address the root causes of insurgency and terrorism, bad governance, exclusion and marginalization among others. They must strive to exterminate breeding grounds and sources of violent extremist organizations (Yusuf, 2025).

West African leaders must be democratic exemplars; they must necessarily put forward a demonstrated relative democratic resilience through institutional strengthening, adherence to term limits, and civil society engagement if they are to confront any other state that may be regressing from the democratic lane. To achieve sustainable democratic consolidation, enforcement of constitutional rule, substantive governance reforms, inclusive political participation, and strengthened civil-military relations are likewise required.

Conclusion

At the risk of being pessimistic, democratic governance will remain threatened in the coming future. This standpoint is exemplified in the coup attempt on Nigeria in January 2026. This was confirmed

by the Defence Headquarter of the state (*bbc.com*). Against this backdrop, this study concludes that no state is immune from coups or unconstitutional change of government. Aside coups, the trivialization of democracy by elected civilian governments is rife and that, in a disturbing manner. Some reasons are adduced to this stance, namely, covert support and endorsements they get from interested foreign powers, which, instead of their touted affection for democracy, only use promotion of democracy as a disguise. Therefore, as democracy diminishes, it creates internal grievances and crises that force the so-called democratic regimes to turn to non-democratic methods for staying in power.

Unfortunately, predatory resource extraction oftentimes fuel local, national and regional crises and instability. As it is, military juntas are swapping foreign masters; Russia is replacing France and the US, while both are fighting back against possibility of marginalization and exclusion in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. China is emerging as a stronger force in other civilian governments, and US is struggling to consolidate her presence. The challenge of preventing the disintegration of ECOWAS and the full restoration of regional unity and stability for joint development would need tact, and acute statesmanship. The crux is whether the current crop of leaders of the region possess the required weight to attain this, simply because some of them are sit-tight authoritarian rulers. The question of whether the members of AES will return to ECOWAS is still being debated.

From the foregoing analysis, it has been established that both political instability and democratic backsliding are undesirable in any society especially with focus on countries in West Africa and the Sahel. The two variables manifest in similar ways. On the question of if military intervention leads to democratic backsliding or vice versa, it can be said that military intervention is a reflection of democratic backsliding while the former is also the ultimate result of the latter. It has been established also that public dissatisfaction and discontent have a way of fostering and legitimizing military intervention thereby deepening democratic reversal. More so, with military rule, democracy continues to decline. The ways forward, if actualized, can help nations perform better in their quest for democratic actualization and consolidation.

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