

TANA ESSAY 2025

DIMINISHING DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN STATES

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Introduction

Wild jubilations in the aftermath of the recent military coups in Niger and Gabon have stunned democratic political transition enthusiasts in Africa. Quite interestingly, there is a growing consensus among scholars that the burning of the French flag and the waving of the Russian flag by jubilant Nigeriens in the streets of Niamey after the coup in Niger mirrors a surge in resentment towards France (by extension, the West) and a shift towards Russia (Al Jazeera News, 2023). The military coup of 29th August 2023 in Gabon came just a month after the military coup in Niger. Following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the move by Western countries to consolidate international support against Russia, amidst other concurrent emerging issues in the global political arena, made it pertinent to look into the dynamics and nuances of the phenomenon of military takeovers in Africa within the context of an evolving global order (Mwangi, 2021).

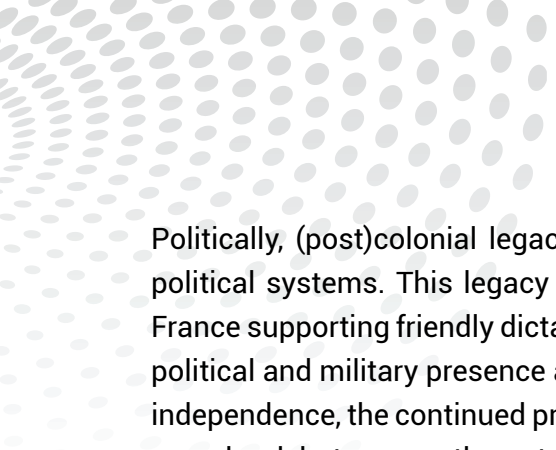
The year 2022 witnessed a turning point in international relations as the Russia-Ukraine war unfolded, fundamentally altering global dynamics. While the focus of this conflict has primarily been on Europe, its ripple effects have extended to other regions, notably Africa. Suffice it to say that, beyond Europe, Africa has emerged as one of the prime regions affected by this power struggle, particularly evident in the increasing prevalence of military coups and the diminishment of democratic political transitions (Kunda, 2020). In the last two years, five Francophone countries in Africa have witnessed a spate of military coups culminating in the truncating of democratic political transitions. Within the period mentioned above, the experiment of democratic political transition failed in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon due to successive military coups (Bakary, 2017; Diarra, 2017; Kunda, 2020).

This essay, therefore, focuses on Mali and Burkina Faso because both countries witnessed military coups that ousted pro-French leaders, and the new ruling military junta has embraced a Russia-friendly policy while openly rejecting Western presence and support (Dunlop, 2019; Babadzhanov & Hackett, 2021).

Concerning Francophone Africa

Factors such as the (post)colonial legacy, economic challenges, and regional dynamics significantly influence the region's democratic governance. The historical ties between France and its former African territories are undeniably profound, characterised by centuries of colonial domination and subsequent struggles for independence (Thomas, 2019). However, despite the formal end of colonial rule, France's influence remains palpable across various spheres, shaping the political, economic, and social landscapes of Francophone Africa, as former French colonies remained tied to France's apron strings even after independence (Mamdani, 1996; Macola, 2013).

Therefore, the context that underpins the recent spate of military coups in Francophone Africa is relevant. This includes the colonial legacy of France, seeking to illuminate the complex dynamics that continue to define the relationship between the former colonial power and its African counterparts (Mamdani, 1996; Thomas, 2009).



Politically, (post)colonial legacies in Francophone West Africa left a significant imprint on their political systems. This legacy often resulted in the establishment of authoritarian regimes, with France supporting friendly dictators (Keita, 2015). This further includes the continued, conspicuous political and military presence aimed at protecting and advancing French interests. Despite formal independence, the continued presence of French military bases and interference in domestic affairs provoke debates over the extent of autonomy and self-governance. This mode of engagement between France and its former colonies sometimes created political instability and prolonged it (Lacher, 2017). This dynamic exacerbates the complexities surrounding the (post)colonial legacy and its implications for Francophone African countries, some of which underlie the decline in the popularity of democratic political transition in the coup-affected countries (Roberts, 1963; Geschiere, 1995; Braud, 2018).

Furthermore, while an economic analysis of the (post)colonial legacy of France in many Francophone African states will easily tilt towards unearthing the exploitative nature of French colonialism, some scholars have argued that French colonialism did offer significant economic advantages to Africa. Lee and Schultz (2012) opine that French rule helped Africa by establishing infrastructure such as railways, roads, and ports, which have facilitated trade, communication, and the movement of goods and people. Similarly, proponents of French colonialism in Africa argue that it facilitated the integration of African economies through the establishment of trade networks and the production of cash crops (Lee & Schultz, 2012).

The positive economic impacts of French colonialism highlighted above are overshadowed by the adverse effects, which are still being felt decades after the end of colonial rule (Chanda, Chitondo and Mpolomoka, 2023). French colonialism institutionalised an ongoing system of economic dependencies that has hindered the autonomous development of Francophone African countries. The continuation of economic ties, particularly through the CFA Franc, French investment in key sectors, and trade agreements, has perpetuated a neocolonial framework that limits the economic agency of these nations (Forson, 2018). Also, the persistent control of key resources by France and the dominance of French companies have created imbalances and hindered genuine economic diversification (Chanda et al., 2023).

France's cultural and linguistic influence has also played a significant role in shaping the postcolonial reality for Francophone African countries. The imposition of the French language as the official language has both positive and negative consequences (Thuram, 2019). On the one hand, it has facilitated communication and opportunities for Francophone Africans in a globalised world. On the other hand, it has marginalised Indigenous languages and cultures, aiding a legacy of cultural assimilation.

Overall, the above-stated issues raise questions about the sovereignty of Francophone African states and the lingering struggles towards genuine decolonisation and development (Naughton, 2017; Thuram, 2019). The implications of these, among other things, include the decline in popularity and desirability of democratic political transitions.

The Decline of Democratic Political Transitions and Military Coups



In recent years, some Francophone African states have witnessed a significant decline in democratic political transition, as the people in these states seek an alternative to what the French-friendly context offers. The period of democratic rule, perceived as an era of democratic consolidation, is fast giving way to increasingly disrupted governance and a rise in military coups, as evident in Mali and Burkina Faso (Bakary, 2017; Diarra, 2017; Kunda, 2020). This phenomenon has given rise to what some experts refer to as a "New Coup Belt" in the region, as military coups have had debilitating effects on smooth democratic political transition (Lewis, 2021; Sani, 2022). Findings in extant literature attribute the following salient factors as being responsible for the diminishment of democratic political transition in some Francophone states of Africa:

Firstly, there is a lack of strong institutions and governance structures. Transitioning from autocratic regimes to democratic systems requires effective institutions that can ensure the rule of law, safeguard human rights, and promote accountability (Sani, 2022). In many cases, fragile institutions are easily manipulated or co-opted by those in power, undermining the democratic process. Clearly, the lack of political will by the ruling elites to institutionalise democracy, and also a pattern of perpetuating themselves and their allies in power, has resulted in a lack of interest on the part of the ruling elites to build strong state institutions (Nyarko, 2017).

Secondly, the influence of external actors. Some countries in francophone Africa have faced interference from foreign powers, which can undermine democratic processes (Ibrahim, 2019; Kane, 2020). Conflicting interests and geopolitical rivalries often push these external actors to support autocratic leaders or destabilise countries, which further hampers democratic transitions (Kendeh, 2004; Engels, 2023).

Thirdly, the socio-economic challenges and inequality: This includes high levels of poverty, limited access to education, and a lack of economic opportunities, which fuel discontent among the population (Braud, 2018). When people's basic needs are not met and inequality persists, they may be more susceptible to supporting undemocratic alternatives or individuals promising stability, even at the cost of democratic principles. For them, it is not about democracy or not; rather, it is often about providing an alternative to what works to satisfy the needs the incumbents are unable to and/or may have proven unwilling to resolve. Fourthly, Ethnic and religious divisions: In some cases, politicians exploit these divisions to gain and maintain power, leading to increased polarisation and tensions within society. This can erode trust in democratic systems and pave the way for authoritarian rule (Ibrahim, 2019).

Following the withdrawal of the French, Parens (2022) contends that Russia has strong-armed France, a key competitor, out of Mali. In the same vein, field data from a study by Issaev et al. (2022) indicate positive perceptions of Russia's presence in Mali and other neighbouring West African states (Issaev et al., 2022). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Wagner Group's engagement in Mali expanded significantly, with analysts estimating its fighter presence at 800-1000 (Neethling, 2023). The immediate foregoing, therefore, informed Neethling (2023:15)'s assertion that "Wagner's operations in Mali are indicative of Russia's geopolitical contest with the West".

Re-Direction: Russia's Adventure and the Observed Shift by



Francophone Africa

Russia's increasing interest in Francophone Africa to fill the perceived void created by France's approaches to its engagement with its former colonies and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine reshaped the outlook of global geopolitical dynamics (Dunlop, 2019; Costello, 2019; Gaddy & Simms, 2020; Ba, 2020; Babadzhanov, 2021; Babadzhanov & Hackett, 2021; and Traore, 2022). Both the adventure (of political and militarised nature) of Russia in this regard emphasises and amplifies a strained relationship between Russia and its allies on one end; Europe, the United States of America (USA) and their allies on another, and those who seemed to either be uninvolved or expressed a non-aligned principle (Fofana, 2021 and Traore, 2022). The voting trend at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) is an indicator worth considering. On this premise and given other similarities between this era and the Cold War period, it is explained why scholars like Buzan (2024) suggest that an active Second Cold War is ongoing.

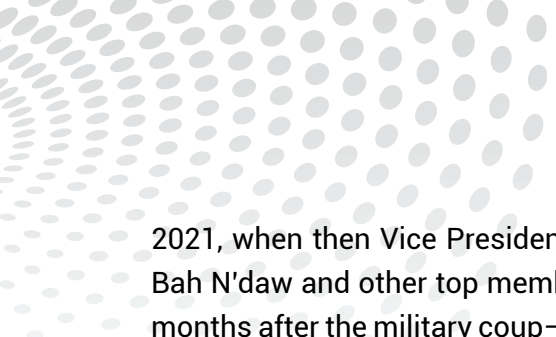
In recent years, there has indeed been a noticeable shift in the relationship between some Francophone African countries and Russia. This shift can be understood within the broader context of evolving geopolitical dynamics and African nations' pursuit of diverse partnerships (Traore, 2022). One key factor contributing to this shift is the desire of some African countries to diversify their international partnerships beyond traditional ties with former colonial powers. The desire for greater economic independence, diplomatic and political leverage, and access to alternative sources of investment and development has driven this.

Russia, with its increasing global assertiveness, has actively sought to expand its influence in Africa in recent years. It has pursued a multifaceted approach, involving diplomacy, economic cooperation, military cooperation, and cultural exchanges, to strengthen its ties with African nations. Russian officials have conducted high-level visits, held bilateral summits, and signed agreements covering defence, energy, infrastructure, and education (Fofana, 2021; Traore, 2022). For some Francophone African countries, the appeal of closer relations with Russia lies in the potential economic benefits. Russia has substantial expertise in sectors such as energy, mining, and infrastructure development, which aligns with the development priorities of many African nations.

Additionally, Russia has shown a willingness to provide loans, investments, and technical assistance, which can be attractive to countries seeking to spur economic growth and achieve sustainable development (Vincent, 2017). Furthermore, Russia offers an alternative to traditional Western partners, such as the European Union and the United States (Kane, 2018). This may be appealing to Francophone African countries that have experienced strained relations or disagreements, especially in view of the failed democracy project. In Mali and Burkina Faso, for example, we see how the issues they face and the sour relationship with France under the coup regime led them to turn to Russia, as do most other Francophone states.

Mali

Mali is a Francophone West African state that gained independence from French colonial rule in 1960 and has, for over six decades, maintained close economic, military, and political relations with France as a significant international partner. Mali experienced its latest military coup on 24 May



2021, when then Vice President Colonel Assimi Goita led the Malian Army in capturing President Bah N'daw and other top members of his government (VOA, 2021). At the end of 2021 –barely six months after the military coup– the Russian mercenary Wagner group was reported to be operating in Mali to help the Malian military in the fight against armed Islamist groups (Neethling, 2023). Following the Wagner group's engagement in Mali, France reduced its military presence there, ultimately ending its joint counterinsurgency operations with the Malian military.

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Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is also a West African Francophone state that gained independence from French colonial rule in 1960. As was the case with the Francophone African states, Burkina Faso maintained strong political, economic and military ties with France. However, while historical ties between Burkina Faso and Russia have been minimal (Winter, Warner and Cheatham, 2024), the 20 September 2022 military coup led by 34-year-old Captain Ibrahim Traore marked a pivotal shift in Burkina Faso's geopolitical and ideological interests. Significantly, Captain Ibrahim Traore's takeover of power just seven months after Russia invaded Ukraine and his reference to Russia as a "strategic ally" in May 2023 (Winter, et al, 20224) have birthed speculations amongst analysts and observers that Russia catalysed the coup that brought Captain Traore to power in 2022 (Seldin, 2022; Ndiaga, 2023).

Three-pronged events further gave the foregone speculations credence: first, the announcement by the Captain Traore-led Burkinabe government that it was expelling French diplomats from Burkina Faso (BBC News. 2024); Second, the reopening of Russian embassy in December 2023 after it was shut over 32 years ago (VOA, 2023); and Third, numerous reports –also advanced by the United States– of the presence of the Russian Wagner mercenary group helping the Burkinabe military in its fight against Islamist groups in Burkina Faso (Mensah, 2022; Al Jazeera English 2023).

Beyond Francophone West Africa's 'Coup Belt': Motivations for Military Coups in Other Regions of Africa

As many Francophone states in the West African sub-region continue to reel from the wave of military coups that have marked a diminishment of democratic transitions in recent years, it is pertinent to note that other regions of Africa have also experienced pockets of military takeover within the same period. Apparently, while the a growing body of extant literature attributes the recent military coups in many Francophone states to the global shift in superpower contestations for geopolitical spheres of influence between Russia and the West (Issaev et al., 2022; Neethling, 2023), the recent military coup in the East African state of Madagascar was somewhat influenced



by the ongoing global wave of youth (Gen Z) protests which have already triggered sweeping political change Nepal (PBS News, 2025). The wave of youth protests, which ousted the incumbent governments in Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh in 2024, continued into 2025 as youths forced similar political change in Nepal.

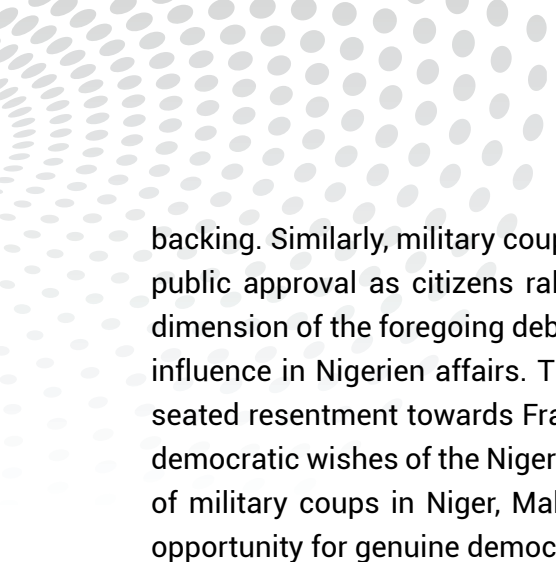
Drawing motivation and inferences from the widespread Gen Z discontent and resentment, massive youth protests in Madagascar led to a mutiny and a military takeover, with President Andry Rajoelina and coup leader Colonel Michael Randrianirina (BBC News, 2025). Importantly, the military coup in Madagascar, which is also a Francophone state, has not been linked to the dynamics of superpower geopolitics that have played out in many states after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. To this end, an evolving trend of youth protests against African, rather than Russian, influence or anti-West sentiments has birthed a military coup in Madagascar (BBC News, 2025).

Furthermore, a broad analysis of military coups in other regions of Africa over the last three to five years reveals diverse motivations that are not necessarily directly linked to the narrative that military coups in Africa are an outcome of superpower contestation between Russia and the West. A clear case in study is Sudan, which was plunged into brutal civil war after a military coup in 2021. However, in recent years, the dimension of the civil war in Sudan has revealed a ripple effect of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, Russia have switched support from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Transnational Sovereign Council (TSC) to the Rapid Response Force (RSF). This switch is driven by Moscow's quest to build a naval base in Port Sudan and to undermine Ukraine's cooperation with the SAF, especially regarding Ukraine's drone supply to the SAF. The Kremlin-backed Russian mercenary group known as Wagner also established close links with the RSF before the death of Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin (The Jamestown Foundation, 2024)

The Nuances of Military Coups in Africa: Democratic Decline or Disguised Democratic Expressions?

The widespread jubilation that has greeted recent military coups in many Francophone West African states underscores the need to assess the nuances of these coups to establish a more profound, context-specific understanding of the subject. On one hand, military coups –widely described as an aberration- are generally perceived as signalling a decline or diminishment of democracy. This is because military coups mark an abrupt truncation of the democratic processes and are marked by a zero tolerance for opposition and voices of dissent. On the other hand, military coups, ironically, may signal a break with a highhanded, sit-tight, oppressive authoritarian leader posing as the democratically elected head of a country. In the latter context, military coups are often perceived as national liberation, and celebratory protests in support of them may thus represent a form of democratic expression.

Quite interestingly, it can be argued that cheering crowds celebrated the fall of unpopular and undemocratic regimes and welcomed soldiers, as seen in Niamey (Niger) and Bamako (Mali), thereby providing some democratic expression for citizens and boosting legitimacy and public



backing. Similarly, military coups in Guinea in 2021 and Burkina Faso in 2022 received widespread public approval as citizens rallied behind the juntas that overthrew long-term leaders. Another dimension of the foregoing debate is Nigeriens' resentment, particularly towards excessive French influence in Nigerien affairs. Thus, the burning of the French flag could be an indicator of deep-seated resentment towards France for reinforcing authoritarian governments against the genuine democratic wishes of the Nigerien people. It can be said that for most people who rallied in support of military coups in Niger, Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, such celebratory rallies signal a rare opportunity for genuine democratic expression that is not anti-regime.

Another pivotal angle to the nuances of democratic coups in Africa stems from a widespread discontent with what Mbaku (2018) termed “unconstitutional coups” (Mbaku, 2018) in which supposedly democratically-elected leaders have perpetuated themselves in power through constitutional reforms to remove term limits, intimidation and suppression of opposition, and organizing elections that falls short of the minimum standards of a free and fair electoral process.

Conclusion: Looking Backwards for Lessons to go Forward

Despite the rising spate of coups in Francophone Africa, the prognosis for democratic political transition in the region is not entirely bleak. While the prevalence of coups may suggest a stagnation in democratic progress, it is essential to consider some factors that shape the transition to democracy. Firstly, it is crucial to recognise that democratisation is a complex and multifaceted process that takes time. The establishment and consolidation of democratic institutions, norms, and values require considerable effort and patience (Traore, 2020; Adamolekun, 2005). Secondly, the regional and international communities have shown a growing commitment to supporting democracy in Africa. Regional organisations such as the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have been actively involved in advocating democratic principles and enforcing mechanisms to deter coups (Toure, 2015).

Furthermore, one may consider the growth of civil society and the emergence of vibrant social movements in many African countries amid the uncertainties of democratisation. Civil society plays a crucial role in holding governments accountable and pushing for democratic reforms. Civil society organisations, media outlets, and human rights activists have been instrumental in exposing corruption, advocating for transparency, and fostering citizen participation. Their role in driving democratic change cannot be underestimated. Overall, these are issues that can be consolidated and further leveraged for democratisation in Francophone Africa.

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