



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FRAGILE STATES, MILITARY RULE, AND THE EVOLUTION OF HYBRID INSURGENCY IN THE SAHEL: REASSESSING THE CRISIS IN MALI AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined Fragile States, Military rule, and the evolution of hybrid Insurgency in the Sahel: reassessing the crisis in Mali and regional security implications. The unstable situation in Mali portrays a multiple interactive between state fragility, militarized governance, and the transformation of insurgent violence. This study looks existing scholarship by bringing state fragility theory, frameworks to explain the continuous worsen situation notwithstanding repeated military interventions. The paper used qualitative analysis of secondary data, including ACLED datasets, UN reports, and policy briefs. The paper shows that the 2020 and 2021 coups did not settle crises rather aggravated institutional erosion and legitimized coercive state practices. The paper argues further that rebellious actors in Mali have developed into hybrid networks that blend ideological extremism with local grievances and criminal economies. The paper discusses the implications for the Economic Community of West African States, laying emphasis on the risks of regional contagion, democratic backsliding, and transnational insecurity. The paper recommends strengthening democratic institutions, implementing comprehensive security sectors reforms, promoting inclusive political dialogue and amongst others. Conclusively the study believes that sustainable peace in the Sahel region demands a shift from militarized response to governance-centered and human security approaches.

Keywords: State fragility, military rule, hybrid insurgences, political dialogue, Economic Community of West African States.

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The unstable situation in Mali portrays one of the most significant security and governance challenges confronting the Sahel region and by extension West Africa as a whole. From the last decade, Mali has developed from a relatively stable democratic state into a fragmented political environment characterized by insurgency, military intervention, institutional collapse, and humanitarian insecurity. The crisis mirrors the crossroads of weak governance structures, unresolved ethnic grievances, external geopolitical pressures, and the proliferation of violent extremist groups toward the Sahel.

The beginning of Mali's conflict can be tracked to longstanding of governance failures that backdate the recent military interventions. For many years especially since 2000, Mali has been the site of violent activity originating from "North" Mali that is destabilizing for both the country and its regional neighbours. Since independence in 1960, the Malian state has struggled to establish effective political authority across its vast territory, particularly in the northern regions populated largely by Tuareg communities. These regions have historically experienced political marginalization, underdevelopment, and limited state presence (Lecocq, 2010). Recurrent resistance in northern Mali showed the lack of ability of successive governments to effectively tackle ethnic diversity and regional inequalities.

The unstable situation intensified dramatically following the breakdown of the Libyan Civil War in 2011, which resulted in the return of heavily armed Tuareg fighters to Mali. This development contributed to the outbreak of the 2012 rebellion led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The marks of the atrocities carried out by MNLA against Malian soldiers in the Northern city of Aguel Hoc resembled known AQIM technic such as tying the hands behind the back and then slaughtering the victims. The MNLA is a Tuareg political and military organization, based in North Mali, demanding the independent of the Azawad, which refers to the desert northern administrative regions of Timbuktu, Kidal, Gao, and also some parts of Niger, Mauritania and south of Algeria.

The highlighted movement comprised of armed Tuareg tribesmen who previously served in Gaddafi's military and returned home after the 2011 Libyan civil war. The killing of Elmeimoun Ould Meinnouh (alias Khaled Ac-Chinguitti), Mauritania citizen a known AQIM leader, during the same attack, proved the connection between AQIM and the Tuareg insurgency (Jean- Jores 2012). The rebellion escalated due to the involvement of jihadist organizations linked to Al-Qaeda and other extremist networks operating across the Sahel (Thurston, 2020). The inability of the Malian government to contain the insurgency culminated in the collapse of state authority in northern Mali and the overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2012.

The crisis drew international attention hence, scholars and the international community established that the crisis constituted a threat international peace and security (United Nations Security Council [UnSc] res 2085, 2012). Consequently, international responses followed as United Nations passed resolution 2085 of December 20, 2012, authorizing international action. African Union and ECOWAS got involved, through international military interventions, France intervened with Operation Serval and later Operation Barkhane, temporarily disrupted insurgent advances, they failed to address the



structural causes of instability. Consequently, insurgent groups adapted strategically, expanding their operations into central Mali and neighboring states such as Burkina Faso and Niger. The conflict therefore transformed from a localized separatist rebellion into a broader regional security crisis.

The military interventions of August 2020 and May 2021 marked another critical moment in Mali's political trajectory. The coups were justified by military leaders on the grounds of combating corruption, restoring national security, and addressing collapse of governance. However, scholarly evidence suggests that military interventions in politics often eroded democratic institutions, undermine constitutional order, and exacerbate instability and insecurity rather than resolve it (Finer, 1988; Powell & Thyne, 2011). In Mali, the military juntas have strife to deliver good governance while at the same time facing growing insurgent violence and international separation. The continue instability despite militarized governance raises some fundamental questions. Why has military rule failed to stabilize Mali? How has state fragility contributed to the evolution of hybrid insurgencies? What are the implications of Mali's instability for regional organizations such as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)?

This study argues that Mali's crisis is fundamentally rooted in structural state fragility and governance failure. The paper further contends that militarized governance has deepened institutional weakness while facilitating the emergence of hybrid insurgent networks that combine separatist, extremist, and criminal elements. Using state fragility theory, human security perspectives, and hybrid conflict frameworks, the study demonstrates that sustainable peace in Mali cannot be achieved solely through military solutions. The spread of insurgency, arms trafficking, transnational organized crime, and unconstitutional changes of government poses enormous threats to regional integration and democratic governance. The implications for ECOWAS and Nigeria are particularly critical given Nigeria's strategic position as the region's largest economy and security actor.

2.0. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Clarifications

State Fragility

State fragility describes a condition where a government lacks the capacity or political will to maintain basic security, provide essential public services, and enforce the rule of law. This institutional weakness makes the country highly vulnerable to armed conflict, economic collapse, and humanitarian crises. The concept of state fragility occupies a central position in contemporary political and security studies. Fragile states are generally characterized by weak institutions, poor governance capacity, declining legitimacy, inability to provide public goods, and limited monopoly over the legitimate use of force (Rotberg, 2004).

Fragility emerges when the state fails to effectively perform its fundamental responsibilities, including security provision, justice administration, economic management, and political inclusion. Rotberg (2004) argues that state failure occurs when governments lose effective territorial control and are unable to maintain political legitimacy among citizens. Similarly, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) emphasize that extractive political institutions often generate instability because they exclude large segments of society from meaningful political participation and economic opportunities.



In the context of Mali, state fragility manifests through weak governance institutions, corruption, uneven development, and poor state penetration into peripheral regions. The northern regions of Mali have historically experienced limited state presence, creating governance vacuums that insurgent groups exploit. This aligns with Herbst's (2000) argument that African states frequently struggle to project authority across geographically expansive territories. Furthermore, fragile states often experience legitimacy crises that reduce citizens' trust in government institutions. According to Fukuyama (2014), legitimacy is essential for state effectiveness because citizens are more likely to cooperate with institutions they perceive as credible and inclusive. Mali's repeated political crises indicate persistent legitimacy deficits that have weakened national cohesion.

Military Intervention and Civil-Military Relations

The relationship between military intervention and political stability has generated extensive scholarly debate. Classical civil-military theorists such as Huntington (1957) argue that professional militaries should remain subordinate to civilian authority in democratic systems. However, in many developing states, the military frequently intervenes in politics under the justification of correcting governance failures. But these justifications of intervention are never achieved rather worsen the situation, exactly the situation in Mali. Decalo (1990) observes that military coups in Africa are often driven by institutional weaknesses, corruption, and elite competition. Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that military regimes rarely achieve long-term stability. Powell and Thyne (2011) demonstrate that coups tend to weaken democratic institutions and create cycles of political instability.

In Mali, the 2020 and 2021 coups were justified as necessary responses to insecurity and corruption. However, the military juntas have faced similar governance challenges as previous civilian administrations. The persistence of insurgent violence despite military rule supports the argument that coercive governance alone cannot resolve structurally rooted conflicts. Scholars also emphasize that militarized governance often undermines institutional accountability and political structures. Finer (1988) argues that military rulers prioritize regime survival and coercion over democratic institution-building. This dynamic is evident in Mali, where political repression and delayed democratic transitions have strained relations with ECOWAS and international partners. This have affected commercial activities and further weaken the Malian economy.

Human Security and Conflict Dynamics

Traditional security approaches prioritize territorial defense and state sovereignty. However, the human security paradigm shifts attention toward the protection of individuals from violence, poverty, disease, and political oppression (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 1994). Human insecurity is particularly relevant in fragile states where citizens experience both physical violence and socio-economic deprivation. In Mali, insecurity extends beyond armed conflict to include displacement, food insecurity, unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare.

According to Kaldor (2012), contemporary conflicts increasingly target civilian populations rather than conventional military objectives. This pattern is evident in Mali, where insurgent groups frequently attack villages, schools, and humanitarian operations. Such violence deepens social fragmentation and weakens public confidence in the state. This has further eroded the legitimacy of the government thereby increased armed conflicts in the state. Moreover, human insecurity often



creates conditions conducive to radicalization. Youth unemployment, political exclusion, and lack of economic opportunities make vulnerable populations more susceptible to recruitment by extremist organizations (Thurston, 2020). This suggests that counterinsurgency strategies focused exclusively on military operations are unlikely to succeed without addressing socio-economic grievances.

Hybrid Insurgency and New Wars

The concept of hybrid insurgency refers to conflicts involving multiple interconnected actors, including insurgents, terrorist groups, militias, criminal networks, and separatist movements. Unlike traditional civil wars, hybrid conflicts are characterized by fluid alliances and overlapping motivations (Kaldor, 2012). Also, a hybrid insurgency is an involving, multifaceted conflict where armed groups simultaneously use conventional military tactics, guerrilla warfare, and non-state criminality (such as illicit resources extraction, kidnapping, terrorists and so on). Rather than attempting to overthrow a government in a traditional sense, these groups typically seek to establish coercive local control in peripheral or ungoverned regions

Kalyvas (2006) argues that violence in civil wars is often shaped by local dynamics rather than purely ideological commitments. In Mali, jihadist groups have strategically embedded themselves within local communities by exploiting grievances related to governance failures and ethnic tensions. The convergence between separatist actors and extremist groups in Mali illustrates the adaptive nature of hybrid insurgencies. While Tuareg separatists pursue political autonomy, jihadist groups seek ideological and territorial influence. Tactical cooperation between these groups has enhanced insurgent resilience and complicated counterterrorism efforts.

Additionally, organized criminal networks involved in smuggling arms, drugs, and migrants contribute to the persistence of conflict across the Sahel. The intersection between insurgency and transnational crime reflects broader trends in modern conflict environments. A critical dimension of Mali's conflict is its political economy. Insurgent groups finance their operations through (i) Illicit trafficking (arms, drugs, and migrants), (ii) Local taxation and extortion, and (iii) Alliances with criminal networks

These economic activities reinforce insurgent resilience and complicate state responses (Small Arms Survey, 2022). Moreover, the convergence between jihadist and separatist groups reflects pragmatic cooperation rather than ideological alignment. This supports Kalyvas's (2006) argument that civil war alliances are often driven by strategic considerations.

Regional Security and Conflict Diffusion

Regional security theory suggests that conflicts rarely remain confined within national borders. Lake and Rothchild (1998) argue that instability in one state often generates spillover effects through refugee flows, arms trafficking, and militant mobility. The Sahel region exemplifies this phenomenon. Instability in Mali has contributed to the spread of extremist violence into Burkina Faso, Niger, and coastal West African states. The porous borders of the region facilitate transnational insurgent operations and weaken state control. For ECOWAS, Mali's crisis portrays both a security and institutional challenge. The organization has struggled to balance democratic enforcement with regional stability concerns.



Hartmann (2017) notes that ECOWAS interventions often face restrictions due to political division among member States, and inadequate enforcement mechanisms. The implications for Nigeria are particularly significant because Nigeria already confronts multiple security threats, including insurgency, banditry, and separatist tensions. The diffusion of instability from the Sahel could intensify these challenges and place additional pressure on Nigeria's security institutions. Most of the terrorists/criminals are traced to the Sahel regions.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The paper adopted state fragility theory. State Fragility Theory explains the inability of a state to effectively provide security, governance, and basic social services to citizens. State fragility also posits that a nation is vulnerable to violent conflict, economic collapse, and social ruin when its government loses the capacity or willingness to protect citizens, maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, and deliver basic social services. According to Robert Rotberg (2003), fragile states are marked by weak institutions, internal conflicts, and declining legitimacy. Similarly, Francis Fukuyama (2004) argues that weak state capacity contributes significantly to political instability and insecurity.

Zartman (1995) further explains that state collapse occurs when governmental structures, authority, law, and political order disintegrate to the extent that the state can no longer perform its fundamental responsibilities. For Zartman, the collapse of state institutions often creates political vacuums that are exploited by armed groups, rebels, and criminal organizations. In the African context, Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg (1982) maintain that many African states remain weak internally despite enjoying international recognition and sovereignty. Jack They argue that weak African states persist largely because of external support from the international system rather than strong domestic institutions.

Application to the Mali Crisis

The crisis in Mali shows the practical relevance of State Fragility Theory. The inability of the Malian government to maintain effective control over northern Mali contributed to insecurity, rebellion, and terrorism. Zartman (1995) explains that when state authority collapses, non-state actors often emerge to fill the power vacuum. This situation became evident in Mali when extremist and separatist groups took control of large parts of northern Mali following the 2012 rebellion. Jackson and Rosberg (1982) also help explain Mali's condition by arguing that many African states possess juridical sovereignty but lack effective domestic authority. Although Mali remained internationally recognized as a sovereign state, its internal institutions were too weak to maintain political order and territorial control.

The repeated military coups in Mali further reflect Huntington's (1968) argument that political instability emerges when institutions fail to adapt to societal pressures. Likewise, Herbst (2000), notes that weak territorial governance in Africa contributes to persistent insecurity and rebellion, a situation clearly visible in Mali's northern region.



3.0. METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design based on secondary method of data collection which include the following: Armed Conflict Location and Event project (ACLED) datasets, report from the United Nations and International Crisis Group, Peer reviewed academic literature were consulted. A thematic analysis is applied to identify patterns in governance, insurgency, and regional dynamics. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of complex political processes (Creswell, 2014).

4.0. DISCOURSES

Discussion on the Implications for West Africa

The crisis in Mali extends beyond national boundaries and represents a major challenge to the political, economic, and security architecture of West Africa. The instability has implications for democratic governance, regional security cooperation, economic integration, humanitarian conditions, and state legitimacy across the sub region.

Democratic Backsliding and the Normalization of Coups: Mali's ongoing instability- driven by consecutive military coups, democratic, backsliding, and fractured authority-has profound security, economic, and geopolitical consequences. The implications of the Malian crisis is the resurgence of military intervention in politics across West Africa. Mali's coups in 2020 and 2021 contributed to a wider pattern of unconstitutional changes of government in the Sahel, including in Burkina Faso and Niger. This trend threatens democratic consolidation in the region.

The successful seizure of power by military juntas may create a "demonstration effect," encouraging military actors in other fragile states to perceive coups as legitimate alternatives to democratic governance (Powell & Thyne, 2011). Such developments undermine decades of democratic progress achieved since the 1990s. For Economic Community of West African States, this creates an institutional dilemma. Although ECOWAS has traditionally promoted constitutional rule, its inability to effectively reverse military takeovers has weakened its credibility and deterrent capacity (Hartmann, 2017). Repeated sanctions without sustainable outcomes may further reduce public confidence in regional governance mechanisms.

Expansion of Violent Extremism Across Borders: The persistence of insecurity in Mali has enabled jihadist organizations to expand across the Sahel into coastal West African states. Groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State increasingly exploit weak border controls, ungoverned territories, and local grievances to establish operational networks. The state capacity has enabled a coalition of Tuareg separatists and AI-Qaeda-link groups to seize towns and threaten the capital, Bamako.

Countries such as Benin, Togo, and Ghana have experienced growing security threats linked to Sahelian insurgencies. Violent extremist attacks in northern border regions indicate a southward diffusion of insecurity from the Sahel toward the Gulf of Guinea (International Crisis Group, 2023). This development poses serious risks for regional stability because many coastal states lack sufficient military preparedness and institutional resilience to confront prolonged insurgencies. If unaddressed, the Sahelian conflict may gradually transform into a wider West African security crisis.



Humanitarian and Refugee Pressures: The Malian conflict has also generated significant humanitarian consequences for neighboring states. The inability to contain regional instability has forced thousands of refugees to flee into neighbouring countries like Niger, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso.

Large-scale displacement places pressure on already fragile social services and economic systems in host communities. Competition over land, water, and employment opportunities can intensify communal tensions and contribute to further instability (UNHCR, 2024). Moreover, humanitarian crises create environments in which extremist groups can recruit marginalized populations by exploiting poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion.

Economic Consequences and Regional Integration: Instability in Mali also undermines regional economic integration efforts. Persistent insecurity disrupts trade corridors, weakens investor confidence, and increases transportation and security costs across West Africa. As a landlocked country, Mali depends heavily on regional trade routes through neighboring states. Armed conflict and political instability therefore affect cross-border commerce involving Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea.

Furthermore, ECOWAS sanctions imposed after the coups disrupted financial transactions and regional mobility. Although intended to pressure the junta toward democratic transition, these measures also produced unintended economic hardships for ordinary citizens and neighboring economies. Protracted political instability and disrupted international relations have led to severe economic contraction, hyperinflation, and increased poverty levels everyday Malian. The broader implication is that prolonged instability in one state can weaken the collective economic aspirations of the entire sub region, including the objectives of regional integration and free movement protocols.

Weakening of International and Regional Security Partnerships: Another problem was that anti-West sentiment and friction with military authorities prompted France and other European partners to withdraw their counterterrorism and peacekeeping forces in the region. This vacuum has encouraged alternative security partnerships, including increased Russian involvement through private military actors. Such shifts reflect changing geopolitical dynamics in West Africa and may intensify competition among external powers for influence in the region. For West African states, dependence on external military actors raises concerns regarding sovereignty, accountability, and long-term security sustainability.

Crisis of State Legitimacy in West Africa: The Malian crisis highlights a broader legitimacy crisis affecting many West African states. Public frustration with corruption, unemployment, weak institutions, and insecurity has reduced trust in civilian governments. In several countries, segments of the population increasingly perceive military governments as more decisive than elected leaders. This perception reflects deep dissatisfaction with democratic governance rather than genuine support for authoritarianism. The implication is that unless governments address socio-economic inequalities and governance deficits, democratic institutions across West Africa may remain vulnerable to political instability and populist military intervention.



Implications for Regional Security Architecture: The crisis in Mali has fractured the West African security architecture, most visibly through the dissolution of counter-terrorism coordination under ECOWAS and creation of the alternative Alliance of Sahel states (AES). The crisis demonstrates the limitations of existing regional security mechanisms. Despite initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force and ECOWAS security frameworks, coordination challenges, funding constraints, and political divisions have limited effectiveness. West Africa may therefore require: Stronger intelligence-sharing mechanisms, joint border security operations, expanded counterterrorism cooperation, greater investment in conflict prevention and peace building in institutional reforms within ECOWAS. Without comprehensive regional strategies, isolated national responses are unlikely to effectively address transnational security threats.

Strategic Lessons for West Africa: The Malian crisis is a cautionary tale for West Africa. The fallout reveals that military interventions cannot replace sustainable political reforms. It highlights how unaddressed governance failures, unrestricted weapons flow, and neglected cross-border insurgencies can allow transnational militant groups to bypass borders and threaten regional stability. Key lessons for West African states include: (i) Military intervention cannot substitute for effective governance, (ii) Fragile institutions create opportunities for insurgency and extremism, (iii) Socio-economic exclusion fuels conflict and political instability, (iv) Regional security requires collective rather than unilateral responses and, (v) Democratic legitimacy depends on accountability and service delivery.

Ultimately, the crisis in Mali represents not only a national tragedy but also a warning sign for the future of West Africa. Sustainable peace in the region depends on addressing structural governance failures alongside military and security challenges.

Rethinking Security in the Sahel

The findings presented in this study challenge the assumption that military interventions are sufficient to address insurgency. Instead, it highlights the importance of institutional legitimacy, inclusive governance, and economic development. The persistence of conflict in Mali underscores the limitations of state-centric security approaches and the need for a broader human security framework (UNDP, 1994).

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Conclusion

The crisis in Mali demonstrates that militarized governance is insufficient for resolving complex conflicts in fragile states. Instead, it often exacerbates institutional weaknesses and enables the evolution of hybrid insurgencies. The solution to the situation is to address holistically the issues of corruption, unemployment, insecurity, mismanagement of resources and embrace dialogue from bottom-up approach.

For Economic Community of West African States and Nigeria, the implications are profound. Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward governance-centered approaches that prioritize legitimacy, inclusion, and regional cooperation.



5.2. Recommendations

Resolving the crisis in Mali requires multifaceted approaches, prioritizing inclusive democratic governance, national dialogue, comprehensive security reform, addressing socio-Economic drivers of conflicts, regional cooperation, reformation of ECOWAS conflict management mechanisms, countering violent extremist and strengthening international cooperation. The following recommendations are hereunder explained:

Strengthening Democratic Governance: The Malian government should prioritize democratic transition and institutional reform. Sustainable peace requires accountable governance structures that enjoy public legitimacy. Constitutional order must be restored through credible elections and inclusive political participation. Rebuilding domestic legitimacy requires the transitional government to establish inclusive dialogue, combat hate speech, and outline clear roadmaps for democratic elections.

Inclusive National Dialogue: An inclusive national dialogue involving ethnic groups, civil society organizations, religious leaders, women, and youth groups should be institutionalized. Addressing historical grievances, particularly in northern Mali, is essential for national reconciliation.

Security Sector Reform: Comprehensive security sector reform is necessary to improve professionalism, accountability, and operational effectiveness within the military and security agencies. Human rights compliance should form a core component of counterinsurgency operations

Addressing Socio-Economic Drivers of Conflict: The government and international partners should invest in education, employment generation, infrastructure, and social services in marginalized regions. Reducing poverty and unemployment would reduce vulnerability to recruitment by extremist groups.

Enhancing Regional Cooperation: ECOWAS member states should strengthen intelligence sharing, border security cooperation, and joint counterterrorism initiatives. Regional security frameworks must be improved to address transnational insurgent networks effectively.

Reforming ECOWAS Conflict Management Mechanisms: Economic Community of West African States should develop stronger preventive diplomacy mechanisms capable of responding rapidly to unconstitutional changes of government and emerging security threats.

Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Governments and civil society organizations should implement community-based deradicalization and counter-extremism programs. Religious and traditional leaders can play important roles in promoting social cohesion and preventing radicalization.

Strengthening International Partnerships: International actors supporting Mali should adopt long-term development-oriented approaches rather than relying predominantly on military assistance. Peacebuilding efforts should integrate governance reform, economic development, and humanitarian support



Conflict of Interest

The author declares that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript/

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