

Research Article

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Declining democracy, institutional weaknesses and resurgence of praetorian rule in West Africa

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Abstract: The decline of democracy in Africa has become a source of concern as an increasing percentage of the population experiences either fully or partially authoritarian or praetorian governance. In the last three years, West Africa has witnessed an unprecedented surge with five successful coups, including the one in Niger, surpassing any comparable period in the region over the past three decades. Additionally, an alleged coup plot in the Gambia underscores the pervasive institutional weaknesses and fragility among states in the West African sub-region. This paper examines the phenomenon of democratic decline, institutional weaknesses, and the resurgence of praetorian rule in West Africa. The theory of institutional weakness was used as guiding framework. The paper utilizes qualitative analysis primarily by adopting the narrative literature review as a research methodology. The narrative literature review is a form of research method that employs a qualitative approach to synthesize existing research on a specific topic drawing data from official documents, books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and other related sources. Through a thorough review of relevant literature have pointed to weak institutional framework of the states to account for the the resurgence of praetorian rule in West Africa. The study proposes a set of recommendations to uphold democratic governance, reverse democratic decline, reinforce the institutional fabric of West African states, and curb unconstitutional changes in government through military coups. The research emphasizes the imperative of establishing robust and essential institutional structures and prerequisites to enhance effective governance, fostering stronger links between citizens and governing civil authorities. Emphasis is placed on preserving presidential term and age limits and instituting constitutional safeguards against opportunistic actions to prevent incumbents from exploiting systems for prolonged tenure.

Keywords – Democratic decline, Institutional weakness, Military regime, Praetorianism, West Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

The democratic decline in Africa has been a concern for many years with more Africans living under fully or partially authoritarian or praetorian rule today than at most points in the last two decades. The manipulation of social divisions, the erosion of term limits, institutional weaknesses, autocratic tendencies, and political instability all contribute to the weakening of democratic governance and forceful seizure of power such as coups d'état in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and recently Niger. According to the Centre for Systemic Peace, a reputable research institution, the occurrence of five successful coups in addition to the coup in Niger in the past three years within

West Africa exceeds any comparable period in the region over the last three decades along with an alleged coup plot in the Gambia highlight the extent of institutional weaknesses and fragility among states in the west Africa sub-region (Siaplay & Werker, 2023). The growing prevalence of praetorians in West African nations raises concerns about the advancement of democratic principles and institutional frameworks within society. While military coups have long been a recurring theme in Africa, the emerging trend of manipulating constitutional amendments to prolong political tenures has taken on a worrisome significance, posing a substantial threat to political stability.

In the West African sub-region, there is a growing trend of citizens showing acceptance towards military coups, as evident from the enthusiastic reception given to the leader of the recent junta in Niger (Kumah-Abiwu & Tsafack 2023). This trend seems to stem from a deep-seated desire for progress and enhancement in human development capabilities independent of the nature of government. This aspiration conforms to the prevailing situation in many African nations, where human development indicators rank low. Despite witnessing economic growth and available natural resources across Africa, the advancement has not been accompanied by a commensurate decrease in unemployment rates (Akinyele et al., 2020). According to the World Bank, (2023), the economic and human development outlook of the sub-region is worsening because in 2022, economic expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) decelerated to 3.6%, a decrease from the 4.1% recorded in 2021. Projections indicate a continued deceleration of economic momentum in the region, with an anticipated growth rate of 3.1% for 2023. This deceleration is attributed to the persistent sluggishness or contraction of the economy, elevated inflation rates, and the complex interplay of unfavorable global and domestic financial circumstances exacerbated by the presence of substantial debt levels. The prevailing worsening economy, poor leadership, personal rulership and weakening institutional design in the sub-region have contributed to weakening the democratic ethos and foundations in the region.

Certainly, institutional weakness extends beyond mere governance challenges. Although it does indeed diminish the efficiency of governance, its broader repercussion lies in the erosion of democratic legitimacy (Mbaku, 2020; Lancaster, 1991/1992). As Levitsky, (2018:104) emphasizes "As time passes, inadequate governmental outcomes erode the confidence the public has in politicians, political parties, and ultimately, the very democratic structures." This issue transcends governance matters, evolving into a critical threat to the democratic fabric. Consequently, institutional weakness inherently transforms into a manifestation of democratic failure and public acceptance of military coups like recently in the Niger Republic. The paper builds on existing literature on declining democracy, institutional weakness and praetorian or military coups in West Africa. It focuses on how the weakness of the institutional design of the state to improve the human development of the state fuels civilian accumulated anger against legitimate authority and support for praetorian rule or military coups as an alternative. The paper will specifically conceptualise and theorise institutional weakness, causes of the resurgence of military coups or praetorian rule in West Africa in the context of this paper, evidence of military coup or praetorian rule and complex internal contradiction in West Africa that makes some segment of the citizens to see the military coup as an alternative and the concluding thought.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

In recent years, a troubling pattern of diminishing democracy and the reemergence of military rule has surfaced in West Africa. Several countries in the region have witnessed coups or coup attempts, with leaders at times exceeding constitutional term limits. These developments have raised or generated attention about the erosion of democratic norms and institutions in the region (Akinola & Makombe, 2024). The emergence of military rule is not limited to West Africa but a reoccurring phenomenon in the whole of Africa. According to Falola (2022) cited in Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022), the pervasive occurrence of coups in Africa is deemed a concerning trajectory for the political advancement of countries on the continent. Africa has witnessed a higher frequency of coups or military interventions in political affairs than any other continent, spanning both the 20th and 21st centuries. The literature review will be done with the following thematic headings below;

Declining democracy: The condition of global democracy including West Africa is currently overshadowed by pessimism due to recurrent setbacks. Various terms, including democratic backsliding, democratic rollback, democratic reversal, democratic erosion, democratic recession, democratic decay, and democratic decline, are employed to elucidate this phenomenon (Akinyetun, 2022). Democratic decline refers to the erosion of democratic institutions, including the peaceful transfer of power, the conduct of free and fair elections, and the protection of individual rights that form the foundation of democracy, particularly the freedom of expression. It also encompasses the ability of individuals to access socioeconomic opportunities and other benefits within a nation (Slater, 2023). The indicators of democratic decline encompass electoral violence, third-termism, constitutional coups, military coups, and digital authoritarianism. These markers especially the resurgence of praetorian rule require close scrutiny due to their frequent occurrence on the continent, particularly in the past decade (Akinyetun, 2022).

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2022), there is a discernible decline in democratic governance worldwide, affecting approximately half of the democratic governments across the world. This decline is marked by a range of issues, from curbs on freedom of expression to doubts surrounding the integrity of elections. The deterioration of democracy encompasses various aspects, such as the undermining of the legitimacy of election outcomes, constraints on digital liberties and human rights online, disillusionment among younger generations with established political parties, as well as leadership that appears disconnected from the concerns of the populace (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021).

Praetorianism: Praetorianism denotes the undue or overbearing political sway exerted by a nation's Armed Forces. This concept draws its origins from the Roman Praetorian Guard, whose ascendancy in selecting Roman emperors grew pronounced. Expanding beyond its historical context, praetorianism characterizes a form of militarism centred on the internal political framework, where the military wields authority over choices that may impact its interests and the nation. The term that aptly characterizes the governance in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger in West Africa is a "praetorian republic." In such a praetorian republic, the government can resemble a disorderly and anarchic instrument wielded by a less-than-professional military, led by audacious commanders, as observed in past instances within Latin America. A striking historical parallel to these types of praetorian states is found in the final phase of the Roman Empire which was established for safeguarding high-ranking military officials and consuls, the praetorian guards during the era of Augustus were granted the authority to intrude into the sanctified domains of Roman governance while bearing arms. This transformation elevated them to the status of imperial guards, and over time, they accrued significant power and influence. Their role extended to the selection of consuls and emperors, and their sway extended to shaping the decisions of the senate. Gradually, their allegiances aligned with the political currents that served their interests most favourably. Moreover, they skilfully translated their interests into the broader interests of the state (Birikim, 2007; Singh, 2010; Perlmutter, 1969).

Institutional weaknesses: Institutional weakness pertains to the disparity between the envisioned and actual impacts of an institution. The degree of weakness or resilience is contingent upon the extent to which an institution tangibly influences social, economic, or political outcomes. Theoretically, central to the assumption of an institutional weakness are its three distinct manifestations or typologies according to Brinks, et al. (2019) they are insignificance, non-compliance, and instability. Insignificance characterizes regulations that are adhered to, yet have minimal bearing on the behaviour of actors. Non-compliance arises when governing elites either opt not to enforce regulations or struggle to garner societal adherence to them. Instability denotes rules subjected to unusually frequent alterations. The sources of institutional weakness include a lack of resources, a lack of political will, and a lack of legitimacy. Institutional weakness can be a threat to democracy, as it makes political reform irrelevant because the intended effects fall short of their goals (Fao, 2021). Certainly, institutional weakness extends beyond mere governance issues. While it does indeed diminish the efficacy of governance, its broader impact lies in eroding democratic legitimacy. Indeed, the three typologies manifest in the governance of most Africa States including West African Countries in particular. As posited by Salih (2021), Governmental institutions, reflecting

state apparatus, have descended into dysfunctionality, characterized by cronyism and corrupt politicians backed by an equally corrupt political elite. The entrenchment of this dysfunctionality in state institutions is further bolstered by unresponsive elected representatives who frequently align with those who have usurped the state rather than prioritizing the interests of the electorate who placed them in office. In essence, the erosion of democracy can be viewed as a manifestation of the crisis in state legitimacy. Most formal institutions are wilfully disabled by the political elites to be dispensed as prebends to serve the personal interests, preferences, and sentiments of a few in most West African states (Osumah, 2013). The practice is parallel to robust democratic growth, and consolidation and ultimately weakens the institutional design of statecraft.

Causes of the Re-emergence of praetorian rule in West Africa

Military coups and interventions have been a recurring feature in the region. The re-emergence of praetorian rule in West Africa can be attributed to the following below;

The erosion of constitutional term limits: There is the dynamics surrounding the manipulation of presidential term limits in various African countries. Some leaders have employed tactics to extend their time in power beyond the constitutionally mandated term limits. This manipulation of term limits often involves changes to the constitution that weaken democratic norms and institutions, hindering a competitive political landscape. In some cases, presidents have leveraged their influence over subservient legislatures to push through constitutional amendments that allow them to remain in power for extended periods, potentially leading to situations of indefinite rule. This practice not only undermines the principles of democratic governance but also hampers the fairness and competitiveness of elections, making it difficult for opposition parties to participate on an equal footing.

The term "constitutional coup" aptly captures the essence of this phenomenon, as leaders use the façade of legality to legitimize their efforts to prolong their rule. It's important to recognize that this practice often takes place in contexts where democratic institutions are weak, and there may be an absence of a strong democratic culture that values the peaceful transfer of power. Presidents that have changed their countries' constitutions to eliminate the two-term limit include Presidents Gnassingbé (Togo), Museveni (Uganda), Déby (Chad), Biya (Cameroon), Kagame (Rwanda), the late Nkurunziza (Burundi), and el-Sisi (Egypt), just to name a few (Mbaku, 2020).

Mistrust of Civil Society Organisation: Civil society plays a crucial role in reversing the democratic slide in every society. There is a growing recognition that relying exclusively on the state as the primary agent of entrenching democracy is suicidal. Consequently, there is a rising interest in the role of civil society in citizen mobilization for good governance. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are seen as crucial partners in addressing various social, economic, and political challenges. This shift in focus reflects a broader understanding that advancing democracy requires collective action involving diverse stakeholders beyond government institutions (Mavee, 2022). However, the presence of multiple civil society groups with competing interests in addition with reports of mismanagement and corruption within their ranks have undermine public trust and resulted in weakened collective action towards strengthening democratic institutions in West Africa (Abuzeid, 2009).

Institutional weaknesses: Institutional weakness seeks to explain why institutions may fail to effectively address societal challenges. The concept of institutional weakness posits that the degree to which an institution genuinely influences social, economic, or political outcomes determines its level of fragility or resilience. In recent years, the field of political science has increasingly recognized the significance of state capacity in shaping stable governments. Regrettably, the same level of emphasis has not been placed on the robustness of institutions. While it might be assumed that enhancements in state capacity automatically bolster political institutions as cited in Brinks et al. (2019: 42) "Frail institutions stem not only from insufficient state capacity or poorly crafted regulations but also from reluctance exhibited by both state and societal actors to conform to these institutions." The presence of institutional weakness renders political reform ineffective, as the desired outcomes fail to materialize as intended. In such cases, the goals set for these institutions remain unattained. According to Brinks et al. (2019), institutional weakness refers to the disparity between an institution's desired and actual impacts. Virtually every

institution is likely to fall somewhat short of achieving its intended results, yet robust institutions manage to approach these goals closely. In contrast, institutions characterized by fragility do yield certain positive outcomes, but the disparity between intended and actual effects is considerably larger. Inherent institutional weakness typically originates from inadequate institutional structure. A constitution that is inadequately formulated will compel political leaders to disregard its legal provisions. Regrettably, this situation establishes precedents that undermine the authority of legal frameworks and foster a climate conducive to more risky actions beyond constitutional boundaries. The conduct of political elites plays a crucial role in fortifying institutional design. Equally essential is the willingness of the elites to adhere to the established formal regulations within the institutional framework for their effective functioning. In most African countries particularly the West African nation, personal rule tends to shape the governance landscape, often creating a fertile environment for military coups and political instability.

Poor Human Development Index and Unemployment: The low human development index (HDI) in West Africa has significant social, economic, and political implications for the region. According to the Human Development Reports, the human development index (HDI) is considerably lower in West Africa compared to other African regions. The Human Development Index is determined by factors such as a high standard of living, favourable health indicators, low mortality rates, and access to quality education (United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2018) cited in (Siaplay & Werker, 2023)). Although certain West African nations are experiencing economic expansion, the unequal allocation of income and the resulting disparities in health and education outcomes prevent them from capitalizing on the benefits of economic growth. As a consequence, their positioning on the human development index remains low. Unemployment is a complex phenomenon in the history of development, especially among developing regions like Africa, owing to the structure and institutional framework of the region's economy (Azuh et al., 2020). The Brookings Institution reports that West Africa's youthful population of 429 million, growing at 2.5 percent per year, risks getting stuck in a rut of insecurity and stalled human development (Siaplay & Werker, 2023). According to the World Bank, economic growth in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) slowed to 3.6% in 2022, from 4.1% in 2021, and economic activity in the region is projected to further slow down to 3.1% in 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OR METHODS

The paper employed the narrative literature review as a research methodology. The narrative literature review (NLR) according to Chukwuere (2023) is a form of research method that employs a qualitative approach to synthesize existing research on a specific topic, presenting it as a comprehensive narrative. NLRs depend on the author's assessment and analysis to integrate relevant studies. The narrative literature review is recognized for its flexibility and capacity to convey a deep understanding of a subject. NLR helps researchers to construct a comprehensive narrative that explains and discusses the key findings, themes, and trends in a subject of enquiry (Green et al., 2006; Baumeister & Leary, 1997). The narrative literature review has helped in mapping the themes appropriate in discussing the phenomenon of declining democracy, institutional weaknesses and resurgence of praetorian rule in West Africa.

4. FINDINGS

The findings drawn in this paper after review of relevant literature indicate that the re-emergence of praetorian governance in West Africa can be attributed to a decline in democracy, the weakening of institutional frameworks, and the prevalence of human misery in the region. According to the World Bank's report in 2023 indicates a deteriorating economic and human development outlook for the sub-region. This decline is attributed to the deceleration of economic expansion in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in 2022, dropping to 3.6% from the 4.1% recorded in 2021 (World Bank Report, 2023). The deteriorating economy, inadequate leadership, personal rulership, and declining institutional integrity in the sub-region according to the research findings have collectively undermined

the democratic values and foundations in West Africa. To counteract the diminishing democratic trajectory, it is imperative to enhance the institutional architecture of West African states and curb unconstitutional changes of government through military coups. It is crucial to enforce and uphold term and age limits for presidents, along with other constitutional safeguards against opportunistic actions, to prevent incumbents from manipulating the system to prolong their tenure in power.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Military coups are a familiar occurrence in the West African region. In less than twelve months, Mali experienced two military coups, one in August 2020 and another in May 2021. Likewise, Chad transitioned to a military dictatorship in May 2021. Since gaining independence in 1974, Guinea Bissau has also witnessed a series of repeated military coups (Harshe, 2021). The persistent pattern of corrupt and authoritarian leadership in West Africa has hindered the development of democratic institutions, economic investments, and the provision of essential human requirements. These governance shortcomings have given rise to instances of violent extremism, communal disputes, and occasional military takeovers or coup attempts. Instances of military coups have taken place in situations where armed forces exploit public discontent to wrest power from the civilian government, as exemplified by the case of Sudan in 2019. Similarly, when leaders attempt to prolong their tenure by bypassing electoral procedures and making changes to constitutional term limits, it has led to a surge in public support for military intervention, as witnessed in Guinea in 2021. Intriguingly, the apparent endorsement of the military junta by some segment of the population over the ousted civilian authorities in some West African countries particularly in Niger stems from an increasing belief that these leaders align more with foreign interests than prioritizing their citizenry's socioeconomic well-being where all known indicators for measuring human development placed them at the worse end. For instance, Niger has the poor and worst human development rating in the world (Kumah-Abiwu & Tsafack, 2023). The presence of human misery exists side by side with abundant natural resources which depict the complex internal contradictions in West Africa. Below are examples of countries in West Africa under military coup or praetorian rule.

Guinea: Guinea is a West African nation renowned for its abundant reservoirs of iron ore, gold, bauxite, and other valuable minerals, paradoxically remains among the world's most impoverished countries with unemployment, poverty, hunger, corruption, and insecurity. Surprisingly, Guinea boasts the highest per capita income across the African continent. However, this prosperity contrasts starkly with the harsh reality that more than half of its populace lives below the poverty line, while approximately 20 percent grapple with the dire conditions of extreme poverty (World Bank Report, 2023). The poverty landscape within Guinea is both striking and disheartening, particularly within its rural regions. An astounding 55 percent of the population languishes below the poverty threshold, compounded by soaring unemployment rates. Economic upheavals in Guinea, such as the escalation of prices within local markets, cast a wide-reaching impact on numerous households that rely on purchases to secure food access. The compounding repercussions of these shocks have gradually eroded the well-being of households, leading to a pronounced decline in their economic stability. In addition to these trials, coupled with a mounting inflation rate currently standing at 12.6 percent, inflation has marked a noteworthy surge from the 10.6 percent observed in 2020.

Also, the spectre of hunger looms large, affecting 17.5 percent of the people, while 230,000 children endure the burden of moderate acute malnutrition. Tragically, chronic malnutrition afflicts 25.9 percent of the population, further underscoring the formidable challenges the nation faces (World Bank Report, 2023). The prevalence of rampant corruption among government officials in Guinea serves as a key factor elucidating the paradox of abundant wealth coexisting with elevated poverty rates within the country. Notably, senior government figures have amassed substantial personal fortunes stemming from the surge in oil resources. A probe into money laundering brought to light an entrenched culture of corruption within the government's fabric. This systemic corruption manifests prominently in the government's disproportionate emphasis on dubious infrastructure

ventures that yield inflated costs and negligible societal benefits. Regrettably, these pursuits come at the expense of the citizens' welfare. A stark illustration of this skewed allocation is that the government of Guinea directs a considerable \$80 from each \$100 in its budget towards construction endeavours, while a mere \$2-3 is allocated for crucial sectors like health and education. Consequently, the populace remains ensnared in cycles of illiteracy and deteriorating health, with limited avenues for breaking free from the clutches of poverty.

The country is susceptible to recurring natural calamities like floods and wildfires, impacting a substantial portion of those facing food insecurity. In addition to the complexities of poverty in Guinea is the substantial influx of refugees from Liberia and Sierra Leone, driven by political turbulence within their borders. This surge of displaced individuals places added pressure on an already beleaguered economy. The failure or weakness of democratic institutions without doubt to improve the human capacity aspiration of the citizens accounts largely for political instability and coup d'état in West African states (McBride, 2017). The democratic institutions in Guinea were weak because of the corrupt manipulation by the civilian government under President Alpha Conde Guinea who ruled from 2010 until he was deposed in a military coup in September 2021. Conde's leadership was marked by an authoritarian style of governance, characterized by harsh treatment of opposition leaders. His regime centralized power curtailed political freedoms, and echoed a pattern of his predecessors, displaying a reluctance to yield power. Criticism arose as he sought a third term, amending the Constitution to extend his tenure, a move widely perceived as a departure from democratic norms and the established two-term limit. Many Guineans perceived his rule as marred by poor governance, with allegations that his inner circle amassed wealth while the population grappled with the stifling burden of a high cost of living (Harshe, 2021). Also, Guineans vehemently opposed Conde's move to amend the constitution for a third term, resulting in a growing erosion of trust in the institutions responsible for upholding democracy and stability. These institutions encompass the Commission électorale nationale indépendante (CENI), the judiciary, the Parliament, and the President himself. According to Afrobarometer cited in Boucher, (2019), confidence in the CENI diminished from 48 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2018. Similarly, trust in the President dwindled from 59 percent in 2015 to 46 percent in 2018, while confidence in Parliament declined from 53 percent to 38 percent, and trust in the judicial system receded from 43 percent to 34 percent. The declining trust in Guinea's institutions significantly contributed to the prevailing political instability and military coup in the country.

Burkina Faso: Burkina Faso ranks prominently among the world's most impoverished nations based on various global metrics. A poverty assessment conducted in 1994 underscored that a significant 44.5 percent of Burkinabe citizens subsist below the critical level of absolute poverty. Concurrently, additional evaluations affirm a considerable segment of the population's limited access to adequate income, essential social amenities, and educational opportunities. In addition to the stark disheartening realities above, Burkina Faso's placement on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) stands at a challenging 172nd out of 174 countries, underscoring the formidable developmental obstacles the nation grapples with (Hagberg, 2001). Also, in 2012, Burkina Faso was positioned at the 183rd spot out of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index ranking.

Burkina Faso stands among the globe's poorest nations marked by pervasive poverty and constrained avenues for economic advancement. Roughly 51.1% of the rural populace grapples with poverty, in stark contrast to the 20% within urban settings. Unemployment looms prominently as a pressing challenge, impacting a substantial proportion of the population aged 15 and above, with an estimated 57% facing joblessness.

In recent times, Burkina Faso has confronted a pressing security crisis, characterized by the activities of armed factions and terrorist entities launching attacks. This deteriorating security landscape has engendered displacement on an alarming scale, with over 2 million individuals forced to flee their homes. Tragically, this escalation in insecurity has further compounded the plight of poverty-stricken rural communities and the nation's economic outlook. Burkina Faso's actual growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) experienced a decline, decreasing to 3.2% in the year 2022 from the previous rate of 6.9% recorded in 2021. This reduction was primarily attributed to a significant drop of 13.6% in extractive industry activities during 2022, which contrasts with the noteworthy growth

of 7.3% witnessed in 2021. The downturn in extractive activities was attributed to the closure of several mines due to instability and the failure of the government of Roch Kabore to stem the tide of insecurity in the country. The President of Burkina Faso from 2015 until he was deposed in a military coup in January 2022 faced growing public criticism over his government's inability to stem militant attacks that have destabilized Burkina Faso, displaced 1.4 million people, and caused 2,000 deaths in 2021 alone. The ousting of Mr Kabore stemmed from mounting discontent within the security forces that criticized his alleged inadequate support for a war against insurgencies affiliated with both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group. The president's handling of the security crisis suffered a notable loss of public trust following a June 2021 assault in the northern village of Solhan, resulting in over 100 casualties attributed to militants infiltrating Mali. This tragic incident incited opposition-led demonstrations in the capital, compelling Mr Kaboré to restructure his government and take on the role of defence minister. A subsequent attack on the Inata military base in November 2021 further fueled resentment toward the government (Ochieng, 2022).

Mali: Mali is a landlocked nation, it harbours a population widely scattered across its expanse, with almost half enduring the harsh conditions of extreme poverty. Rural habitation characterizes around 60 per cent of the populace, with the majority engaged in agricultural pursuits. Mali stands among the globe's most impoverished nations, grappling with an elevated poverty rate and constrained economic prospects. Around 60% of its populace resides in rural areas, while nearly half endure the harsh conditions of extreme poverty. The prevalence of high illiteracy rates and unemployment, especially among the youth, compounds the myriad challenges facing the nation.

Furthermore, Mali is currently entangled in a pressing security crisis, predominantly affecting areas adjoining Burkina Faso and Niger. Within these zones, armed factions and terrorist entities perpetrate attacks, culminating in a state of instability and mass displacement. This deteriorating security landscape has magnified the pre-existing crises associated with poverty and unemployment, intensifying the plight faced by the country. The apparent failure of the democratic institutions to stabilise the state with growing discontent over the manipulation of elections by Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta who was the President of Mali from 2013 to 2020 who pledged to restore Mali's honour as a model for democracy in West Africa as he campaigned as a unifying figure in his fractured country, pledging "zero tolerance" for corruption became tainted by allegations of corruption and nepotism, and the months leading to his overthrow were marked by burgeoning protests over a parliamentary election he was accused of rigging. In summary, languid political reforms, a sluggish economy, dilapidated public services and schools, and a pervasive perception of government corruption all contributed to the growing anti-Keita sentiment, spurring tens of thousands of demonstrators to take to the streets which made the praetorian elements to intervene militarily by staging a coup d'état.

Niger: Niger holds a place among the globe's most poverty nations, characterized by limited government services and inadequate financial resources to cultivate its reservoir of assets. It occupies the lowest rank on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, underscoring the depth of its developmental challenges World Fact Book, (2023). Niger stands among the world's most impoverished nations, grappling with an extensive poverty epidemic. A staggering proportion, exceeding 10 million individuals or approximately 41.8% of the population, found them mired in extreme destitution as of 2021. The nation's economic landscape remains woefully undiversified, with agriculture constituting a significant 40% of its GDP. Unemployment looms large as a critical concern, exacerbating the cycle of poverty by limited employment opportunities (World Fact Book, 2023).

Insecurity serves as a pressing predicament in Niger, particularly within regions adjoining Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Armed factions perpetrate recurrent assaults against both security personnel and civilians, prompting the declaration of states of emergency in specific areas. The escalating deterioration of the security environment is widely recognized as a pivotal driver of poverty within Niger. In 2021, Niger witnessed political instability with the emergence of praetorian rule with the removal of President Mohamed Bazoum who assumed

office through democratic transition since gaining independence from France. Nevertheless, his presidency came to an abrupt end in July 2023 when mutinous soldiers apprehended him, subsequently declaring a coup.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following is hereby espoused below as the recommendations to maintain democratic governance, reverse the democratic decline, strengthen the institutional design of the states in West Africa and put a stop to unconstitutional change of government via military coups. There is a need for ensuring that term and age limits for presidents, as well as other constitutional protections against opportunism, are maintained to prevent incumbents from manipulating the system to extend their stay in power. This will guard against the erosion of democratic principles and institutional weakness in West Africa. One of the tools for fostering democracy all over the world is election which remains a crucial element that allows citizens to engage in the political process and hold leaders accountable. Striving for credible elections that are not only observed by external parties but are also deemed legitimate by the citizens themselves is crucial. This involves fostering an environment of trust and ensuring that electoral processes are transparent, fair, and genuinely representative of the people's will. Also, Efforts should be made to address economic problems, promote inclusive growth, and combat corruption and economic mismanagement. This can be achieved through targeted investments, job creation initiatives, and anti-corruption measures across Africa and in West Africa in particular to improve the human development aspirations of the citizenry. Civil society organizations, particularly in West Africa, must prioritize efforts to earn the trust of the populace. This trust is essential to galvanize collective action aimed at strengthening democratic institutions in the region. Building credibility and fostering meaningful engagement with communities, civil society can effectively mobilize citizens towards democratic reform.

7. CONCLUSION

Democratic decline and weaknesses in institutional frameworks of the states remain worrisome because they serve as a harbinger for military coups which undermine the democratic advancements of a nation, pushing it into a state of democratic decline rather than advancement. Deterring coups in Africa hinges on the level of confidence between the government and its commitment to the well-being of its populace. A pivotal measure involves the establishment of essential institutional frameworks and prerequisites to enhance good governance, thereby fostering more robust relationships between citizens and the governing civil authorities.

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