

# INROADS TO AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE SAHEL

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the multifaceted dimensions of authoritarianism's resurgence in African countries, with a specific focus on the Sahel region. The examination encompasses various critical aspects, including economic factors, security concerns, governance challenges, external influences, media control and case study from Mali, comparative analysis, international responses, and future prospects. By delving into historical contexts, recent political developments, and global dynamics, the paper provides a nuanced understanding of the complex factors contributing to the rise of authoritarianism in the Sahel. Through the case study, the unique manifestations of authoritarianism are illuminated, offering context-specific insights. The comparative analysis enables the identification of commonalities and distinctions, enriching our comprehension of the diverse dynamics at play within the region. Additionally, the paper scrutinizes the international community's response to the authoritarian challenges in the Sahel, assessing diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and peacekeeping missions. A forward-looking perspective is presented in exploring potential future developments and strategies for countering the rise of authoritarianism. This study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on political developments in Africa, shedding light on the intricate interplay of factors shaping the sociopolitical landscape in the Sahel.

**Keywords:** African Politics, Authoritarianism, Coup d'état, Political Instability, Sahel Region

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the African continent has grappled with the complex interplay of political dynamics, witnessing shifts that have brought the rise of authoritarianism to the forefront. Particularly intriguing is the emergence of a distinct geopolitical phenomenon known as the "coup belt" in the Sahel, a region straddling the African continent south of the Sahara Desert. This belt has become synonymous with a surge in political instability and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. In delving into the intricacies of this trend, it is essential to explore the multifaceted factors that have paved the way for authoritarianism's ascendancy. This introductory section provides a brief overview of the general trajectory of authoritarianism in African countries, introduces the unique context of the "coup belt" in the Sahel, and culminates in a thesis statement that outlines the primary ways in which authoritarianism has made significant inroads since the year 2020.

To understand the contemporary rise of authoritarianism in the Sahel, a brief historical overview is essential. Africa's political landscape, shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence struggles, provides the backdrop for the prevailing governance challenges. Works such as Brian Davidson's *A History of West Africa* offer insights into the historical roots of authoritarian tendencies (Davidson, 2015).

## BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

To comprehend the recent surge in authoritarianism, it is essential to acknowledge the historical backdrop of political developments across the African continent. A multitude of scholarly works provides insight into the ebbs and flows of democratic governance in Africa. Notable among these is the comprehensive analysis offered by Bratton and van de Walle in

*Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Their work navigates the intricate journey of African nations in experimenting with democratic systems, offering a foundation for understanding the historical context that has set the stage for recent political shifts (Bratton M. & Van de Walle N, 1997).

The concept of the “coup belt” encapsulates a shared history of political turbulence, military interventions, and governmental upheavals. Geographically spanning Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania, the Sahel “coup belt” has witnessed recent political developments marked by coups and insurgency, exemplifying the region’s vulnerability to instability (Bøås & Strazzari, 2020).

### THE SAHEL’S “COUP BELT”: DECIPHERING THE LANDSCAPE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

The term “Coup Belt” in the Sahel encapsulates a troubling narrative of political instability and recurrent military interventions across the countries situated in this expansive region of Africa. The Sahel, characterized by its semi-arid climate and stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, has experienced a disproportionate frequency of coups, earning it this distinctive label.

Historical antecedents provide context to the emergence of the “coup belt” phenomenon. The Sahel has long grappled with challenges such as economic fragility, resource scarcity, and ethno-cultural complexities, all of which have contributed to a volatile political landscape. The legacies of colonialism, arbitrary borders, and a history of weak governance have left the Sahel susceptible to political unrest.

Notable references shed light on the intricacies of this phenomenon. The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) analysis of the 2012 coup in Mali emphasizes the predictive factors that underscored this political upheaval ranging from growing regional instability to months of nonviolent protests to too much focus on security by regional and international actors neglecting decades of failed governance (USIP, 2020).

The “coup belt” in the Sahel, therefore, emerges as a nuanced concept reflecting a convergence of historical, socio-economic, and political factors. It highlights the region’s vulnerability to governance challenges and the imperative of comprehensive analyses that consider both local dynamics and broader geopolitical trends. Understanding and addressing the root causes

of this phenomenon is essential for devising effective strategies to promote political stability and sustainable development in the Sahel.

### OUTLINING PRIMARY WAYS AUTHORITARIANISM HAS MADE INROADS SINCE 2020:

Against this backdrop, the surge in authoritarianism within the “coup belt” since 2020 demands thorough investigation. Recent geopolitical events within the Sahel necessitate an examination of economic challenges, security concerns, governance issues, external influences, media control, constitutional manipulation, repression, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper explores the deep-rooted factors that have collectively paved the way for the notable rise of authoritarianism in these African nations with requisite reputable sources. It delves into each of these dimensions, drawing on a wealth of academic resources, reports, and analyses to dissect the primary ways in which authoritarianism has asserted itself within the Sahel “coup belt” since the pivotal year of 2020. Through this comprehensive inquiry, we aim to provide a holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding the recent political shifts in this region.

The global landscape has witnessed a concerning resurgence of authoritarianism since 2020, marked by multifaceted strategies employed by governments to consolidate power; Levitsky and Ziblatt in their work provide insights into the historical trajectories contributing to this contemporary authoritarian wave and the primary conclusion is that the erosion of democratic norms is the primary avenue through which authoritarianism has made inroads into these nations (Levitsky S & Ziblatt D, 2018).

Simultaneously, the manipulation of information and media has emerged as a potent tool for authoritarian control. Zeynep Tufekci’s “Twitter and Tear Gas” highlights the deliberate shaping of narratives and the suppression of dissenting voices, perpetuating a controlled information ecosystem (Tufekci Z, 2018).

Authoritarian regimes have adeptly exploited crises, such as the global pandemic, to consolidate power. Fareed Zakaria’s *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* emphasizes how these crises serve as catalysts for power grabs and the justification of extraordinary measures (Zakaria, 2021).

Regional dynamics and alliances among authoritarian regimes further contribute to the global authoritarian landscape (Krickovic A, 2015).

The year 2020 marked a notable surge in authoritarianism across African nations particularly in the Sahel, revealing a complex interplay of historical, economic, security, and governance factors. Authoritarianism's resurgence in Africa has roots in historical legacies, echoing the ghosts of colonialism and post-independence struggles. Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* provides a critical lens through which to understand the lingering impact of colonial rule on contemporary governance structures; the manipulation of democratic institutions for personal gain, a recurring theme, traces its roots to historical power imbalances (Mamdani M, 1997).

Another factor for coup rises hinges on economic challenges that have plagued the continent for decades; these economic woes play a pivotal role in fostering authoritarianism in the Sahel. Alesina and Perotti in their works provide insights into how economic challenges contribute to political instability (Alesina A & Perotti R, 1996); additionally, Oxfam in a report titled *Sahel: fighting inequality to respond to development and security challenges* offers a nuanced understanding of economic factors contributing to authoritarian tendencies (Oxfam, 2019).

Security concerns, including terrorism and armed conflicts, constitute critical factors shaping the rise of authoritarianism in the Sahel. The International review of the Red Cross report titled *The Sahel: Challenges and opportunities* provides crucial insights into the complex interplay between security issues and governance (ICRC, 2022). The rise of extremist groups like Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) further amplify the security narrative; these challenges have been used by authoritarian regimes to drive home the need to be high-handed and forceful with their style of government.

One can argue that the most important factor for the increase in coup-d'état is weak governance structures which significantly contribute to the erosion of democracy in Sahel. Investigating governance challenges within the region, as discussed in Bratton and Van de Walle's *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, sheds light on how institutional weaknesses fuel authoritarian tendencies. Issues related to corruption, lack of accountability, and weak institutions exacerbate democratic erosion (Bratton M. & Van de Walle N, 1997).

Exploring external factors contributing to authoritarianism in the Sahel reveals the role of foreign powers and regional dynamics.

The Institute for Security Studies' report on *External Influence on Political Transitions in the Sahel* provides insights into the complexities of authoritarianism in the region.

Investigating the role of media and information control in sustaining authoritarian regimes unveils mechanisms like censorship, propaganda, and restrictions on free speech. Understanding how these tools are employed is crucial in comprehending the resilience of authoritarian rule in the Sahel.

Examining specific case studies within the Sahel "coup belt" offers a deeper illustration of key points. Analyzing recent political developments in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania provides context-specific insights into the manifestation of authoritarianism.

Comparing trends and factors across different countries in the Sahel facilitates the identification of commonalities and differences in the manifestation of authoritarianism. This comparative approach enriches our understanding of the diverse dynamics at play within the region.

The international community's response to authoritarianism in the Sahel is a critical aspect to consider. Evaluating sanctions, diplomatic efforts, and the effectiveness of international interventions sheds light on the global efforts to counter the rise of authoritarianism in the region.

## CASE STUDY MALI – UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF AUTHORITARIAN RESURGENCE

Mali's political history is marked by a complex interplay of factors, including the legacy of French colonial rule and subsequent post-independence challenges. A pivotal period was the Tuareg rebellion in the early 1990s, followed by the democratic transition. The 2020 coup in Mali marked a pivotal moment in the political landscape of the Sahel region, shedding light on the complex factors contributing to the resurgence of authoritarianism.

In 2020, Mali experienced a significant political upheaval with the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. This coup marked a critical event within the Sahel "coup belt" and had profound implications for the country's political landscape.

Mali has faced longstanding challenges, including political instability, corruption, and an ongoing insurgency led by jihadist groups. The culmination of these issues fueled widespread



public dissatisfaction, leading to protests demanding political reforms and the resignation of President Keïta.

The catalyst for the coup was the contested legislative election results in March 2020, which further intensified public discontent. Protests, organized by the M5-RFP coalition, a diverse opposition group, gained momentum, calling for President Keïta's resignation.

On August 18, 2020, mutinying soldiers arrested President Keïta and other government officials, subsequently forcing his resignation. The coup leaders, identifying themselves as the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), assumed control.

Several factors contributed to the coup, reflecting deep-seated issues within Mali. These included allegations of electoral fraud, perceived government corruption, economic challenges, and the government's inability to address the escalating security situation with jihadist groups in the northern and central regions.

The international community, including the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), swiftly condemned the coup, calling for the restoration of constitutional order. Sanctions were imposed, including the suspension of Mali from ECOWAS and the closure of borders.

Following the coup, a transitional government was established, led by Bah N'Daw as president and Colonel Assimi Goïta as vice president. The transitional period aimed to address political reforms, organize elections, and stabilize the security situation.

Comparing Mali's case with other countries in the Sahel region, such as Burkina Faso and Niger, reveals commonalities and differences in the manifestation of authoritarianism.

The international community's response to Mali's authoritarian challenges involves diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and peacekeeping missions. Reports from organizations like the United Nations Security Council provide a comprehensive overview of international interventions (UN Security Council, 2021).

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the multifaceted resurgence of authoritarianism in African countries since 2020 reflects a complex interplay of historical, economic, security, governance, and external factors. The case study of Mali, situated within the Sahel "coup

belt," illustrates the intricate dynamics shaping the trajectory of authoritarianism in the region.

Historically, the legacies of colonial rule, coupled with post-independence challenges, set the stage for political complexities. Economic factors, including high poverty rates and economic disparities, have fueled discontent among populations. Security concerns, such as jihadist threats and regional conflicts, have further exacerbated the vulnerability of these nations to authoritarian tendencies.

Governance issues, characterized by weak institutions, corruption, and a lack of accountability, contribute significantly to the erosion of democratic principles. The control of media and information serves as a tool for sustaining authoritarian rule, with restrictions on free speech and censorship shaping public narratives.

The case study of Mali, highlights the manifestation of authoritarianism within the Sahel region. Comparative analyses provide valuable insights into the diverse dynamics at play and emphasize the need for nuanced, context-specific approaches.

International responses, encompassing diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and peacekeeping missions, underscore the global concern and commitment to countering the rise of authoritarianism in Africa. However, the effectiveness of these interventions remains contingent on a comprehensive understanding of the root causes and the evolving nature of authoritarian challenges.

Looking forward, predicting the future prospects of these nations necessitates a careful examination of ongoing trends. Insights from think tanks, such as the International Crisis Group and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, offer strategic perspectives and policy recommendations for addressing the underlying issues and fostering democratic stability.

In essence, the primary ways in which authoritarianism has made inroads in African countries since 2020 demand a holistic and context-specific approach. Addressing historical legacies, economic challenges, security concerns, governance issues, and external influences is essential for promoting democratic governance and ensuring the stability of the region. The complex nature of these challenges requires sustained efforts from both domestic and international stakeholders to forge a path towards inclusive and resilient democratic societies in Africa.

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