

Shifting Dynamics Related to Civic Space in the Context of Military-Led Transitions: Trajectories and Scenarios for the Sahel

Six successful military coups since 2020, in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, have significantly changed the political landscape in the Sahel.¹ These events mark the most concentrated wave of unconstitutional changes of government in Africa since the decades immediately following decolonisation. These coups are idiosyncratically rooted in each nation's political history, but share a common backdrop of chronic insecurity, underdevelopment, deep public disillusionment with civilian elites, and intensifying competition among external powers for influence in the region. While the military leaders who seized power initially pledged to restore constitutional order and organise national elections in the near future, those promises have repeatedly been deferred. In Mali, the transitional period has been extended by three to five years; in Burkina Faso and Niger, by up to five years, while in Chad, transitional government leader Mahamat Déby claimed an election victory in 2024, which political opposition leaders dismissed as rigged.

Economically, the coups have deepened hardship in already poor societies. Sanctions and aid suspensions have disrupted trade flows, fuel supplies, and fiscal revenues. The closure of borders and the freezing of development assistance have constrained access to food and essential goods. In Niger, ECOWAS sanctions in 2023 contributed to rising inflation and shortages of electricity imported from Nigeria. In Burkina Faso, the military's prioritisation of security spending has diverted resources from education and health. Meanwhile, chronic displacement and food insecurity have left millions dependent on humanitarian aid.

The coups have also strained regional and international relations. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sanctions and suspension measures against Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been met with defiance. In January 2024, the three juntas announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS and subsequently formed the Alliance of Sahel States (*Alliance des États du Sahel*, AES), a new bloc framed around mutual defence and sovereignty. This move not only fractures regional integration efforts but also signals a shift away from Western influence. France, whose counterterrorism operations once dominated the Sahelian security architecture, has been forced to withdraw from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger amid surging anti-French sentiment. The vacuum has been partially filled by Russia, Turkey, and Gulf actors.

¹ The UN applies a flexible definition of the broader Sahelo-Saharan region, encompassing West, Central and North African countries, while placing a particular emphasis on five core Sahel countries – the Group of Five for the Sahel: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. This paper focuses on the four of these five countries that have recently experienced military coups: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger.

Civic Space in the Context of Military-Led Transitions

The coups have had different impacts on civil society and opposition political parties. The suspension of electoral democracy has been disastrous for political parties, which have been forced underground or left in an uneasy stasis pending the restoration of democracy. Three of the four Sahelian juntas (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) have formally suspended or banned political parties, while Chad has relied on selective repression and manipulation rather than legal prohibition. Nor have the coups triggered a defiant popular support for opposition political parties: declared party affiliation has actually decreased across the Sahel.²

Each of the coup governments to some degree has attempted to evoke the distinction between the divisive, self-serving political expression represented by political parties, and the true democratic spirit of the nation. They have managed this by invoking a strident national populism, harnessing justified resentment of neo-colonial dependency relationships, civilian elites, and the complicity between these two. While the effort to position military regimes as capable of directly intuiting and representing the national will outside of democratic institutions has had some success, all four military regimes have also created ad hoc consultative and representative institutions outside of the deposed parliaments. These institutions, which can be broadly categorised as “national dialogues”, have generally excluded political parties, substituting civil society as brokers for public opinion vis a vis the state. The starkest example of this is the 2025 Nigérien National Dialogue, the *Assises Nationales*, which included around 716 representatives from civil society, religious groups, ethnic groups, regional zones, and the security sector, but excluded political parties.

Without drawing false equivalence, this mode of politics is not totally unlike the “post-political” trajectory of consolidated democracies since the 1990s: broadly, the replacement of mass political parties by professional parties has led to an increasing reliance on civil society organisations as brokers of a polity made up of interest groups and sources of expertise, rather than engaged party members or voters. This phenomenon is widely observed in political science, where it is variously termed “post-party democracy”, “network governance”, “stakeholder democracy”, etc.³ This suggests, first, that the development of a stakeholder model of representation in the Sahel is not driven solely by the agendas of military governments, and second, that a stable political configuration may evolve around this model in the medium term. This will be relevant in relation to the scenarios outlined below.

² Afrobarometer, African Insights 2025: Citizen Engagement, Citizen Power: Africans Claim the Promise of Democracy (n.d.), 9, accessed 12 November 2025, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/african-insights-2025-citizen-engagement-citizen-power-africans-claim-the-promise-of-democracy/>.

³ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso Books, 2013).

Junta engagement places civil society in an uncomfortable position. The relationship between civil society and political parties prior to the coups in each country was an ambivalent one, owing to the pervasive corruption of these civilian regimes. In Mali, the 2020 coup took place amid mass protests against corruption and the legitimacy of legislative elections held in April. These protests were led by the Movement of June 5 - Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RPF), a nationalist populist civil society movement uniting a host of sovereigntist, pan-Africanist and anti-globalisation movements that developed in Mali after 2012 around the common view that the military is a progressive force in Malian politics.⁴

Another notable feature of the political landscape in the Sahel is the revival of nationalist civil society, more characteristic of 20th century political movements. In Burkina Faso, Ibrahim Traoré's government has fostered a parallel infrastructure of civilian auxiliary forces in the form of the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP).⁵ The VDP is an auxiliary militia that operates alongside the armed forces against insurgents in the country's periphery, but also maintains a presence in cities. Similarly, the Nigerien junta formed Volunteers for the Defense of Niger (VDN) in 2023. These initiatives seem to be succeeding: both Niger and Burkina Faso have seen major pro-junta protest movements and more muted popular opposition than in Mali or Chad.

In Mali, the mobilisation of patriotic civil society presents slightly differently. In 2012, the apparent collapse of the Malian state in the face of the Tuareg insurgency in the north provoked popular frustration and disillusionment with civilian political elites as well as among the junior ranks of the Malian Armed Forces, who staged a coup in March. During the coup regime, and after democracy was restored in 2013, a loose confederation of civilian political movements united by their deep scepticism of France-aligned Malian elites and their willingness to conditionally support the Malian Armed Forces as a political agent. The Malian junta has embraced this form of popular democracy, appointing Choguel Maïga, the former spokesperson of the M5-RFP, as Goïta's Prime Minister.⁶

⁴ 'Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali', OECD, 11 July 2022, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/populist-civil-society-the-wagner-group-and-post-coup-politics-in-mali_b6249de6-en.html.

⁵ James Courtright, 'Repression, War Undermining Burkina Faso Government - ICWA', Institute of Current World Affairs, 22 December 2023, <https://www.icwa.org/repression-war-burkina-faso/>.

⁶ OECD, 'Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali'.

Civic Space in the Post-Coup Sahel	
Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In April 2024, the transitional authorities suspended all political party and association activities by decree. Meetings, demonstrations, and media appearances by party representatives were prohibited.⁷ • The suspension came after opposition leaders criticised delays in elections and questioned the legitimacy of the transitional timetable. • As of late 2025, this suspension remains in place. The junta has announced no firm electoral calendar, and many party leaders have faced intimidation or judicial harassment.⁸ • Prominent opposition figures, such as those affiliated with the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD), have been silenced or co-opted into advisory roles under the transitional council.⁹
Chad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the first phase of transition, opposition parties and civil society groups were allowed to operate, but under close surveillance. The CMT promised an 18-month roadmap to elections and established a “national dialogue” in 2022 to chart a path forward.¹⁰ • When protesters demanded a return to civilian rule in October 2022, security forces violently repressed demonstrations, killing dozens, possibly hundreds of demonstrators.¹¹ • In 2023, the CMT was dissolved, and Déby was sworn in as transitional president under a new charter extending military rule for two more years.¹² By 2024, limited political activity resumed, and some exiled leaders, including Masra, returned following negotiations.

⁷ Mali: Junta Suspends Political Parties, Associations | Human Rights Watch, 12 April 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/12/mali-junta-suspends-political-parties-associations>.

⁸ ‘Mali’s Military Government Outlaws Political Parties and Suppresses Public Demonstrations’, Civicus Monitor, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/malis-military-government-outlaws-political-parties-and-suppresses-public-demonstrations>.

⁹ Francisco ASSIS VIEIRA Laura BALLARÍN CEREA, Yannis MANIATIS, Catarina, ‘MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on Dissolution of Political Parties and the Crackdown on the Opposition in Mali | B10-0294/2025 | European Parliament’, accessed 6 November 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2025-0294_EN.html.

¹⁰ ‘Chad Starts “National Dialogue” to Pave Way for Elections | News | Al Jazeera’, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/20/chad-national-dialogue-said-to-pave-way-for-elections>.

¹¹ ‘Country Policy and Information Note: Opposition to the State, Chad, March 2024 (Accessible)’, GOV.UK, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/chad-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-opposition-to-the-state-chad-march-2024-accessible>; After Mahamat Idriss Déby’s Disputed Victory in Chad, N’Djamena Is under Heavy Surveillance, 11 May 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/05/11/after-mahamat-idriss-deby-s-disputed-victory-in-chad-n-djamena-under-heavy-surveillance_6671096_124.html.

Table 1. Civic Space in the Post-Coup Sahel	
Niger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Niger’s July 2023 coup marked a dramatic break from its status as one of West Africa’s more durable democracies. • Within weeks, the junta suspended the constitution, suspended political parties, and effectively banned demonstrations and public assemblies, citing the need to maintain public order.¹³ • Opposition figures were detained or placed under house arrest.¹⁴ • By mid-2025, the CNSP had not restored political freedoms or announced an electoral timetable. The ban on political parties remains in effect, and the transitional authorities continue to govern by decree. Several leading politicians have fled abroad, joining diaspora networks that campaign for a return to constitutional order.¹⁵
Burkina Faso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following Damiba’s coup, the transitional legislature apportioned representation to political parties. When Traoré took power later that year, he adopted a more radical stance. By early 2023, the regime had suspended the activities of political parties and civil society organisations deemed disruptive to national unity. • Most parties, including the former ruling People’s Movement for Progress (MPP) and the opposition Union for Progress and Change (UPC), have become dormant. • As of 2025, no formal lifting of the ban has occurred.

¹² ‘Chad’s National Dialogue Concludes Amid Uncertainties for the Transition’, United States Institute of Peace, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/10/chads-national-dialogue-concludes-amid-uncertainties-transition>.

¹³ ‘Niger: “Threatened and Brought to Heel”’, Amnesty International, 17 March 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2025/03/niger-threatened-and-brought-to-heel/>.

¹⁴ ‘Niger: Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report’, Freedom House, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/niger/freedom-world/2024>.

¹⁵ ‘Niger: Freedom in the World 2025 Country Report’, Freedom House, accessed 6 November 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/niger/freedom-world/2025>.

Options for Civil Society Engagement

This section suggests entry points towards an inclusive, bottom-up approach to peacemaking and political transition that tackles the underlying causes of armed conflict and instability in the Sahel. An inclusive, bottom-up approach to peacemaking and political transition could be effective in creating civic space and promoting peace and stability across the region. Several entry points exist in this regard.

Options for Civil Society Engagement	
Advocating for Re-Opening Civic Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-establishing civil liberties requires marginalised groups to identify urgent issues and develop shared advocacy agendas. • Discussion spaces can enable women and civil society organisations (CSOs) to coordinate advocacy strategies, plan their engagement with transitional authorities, and define their roles in the post-coup transition processes. • CSOs can draw on existing networks and platforms to support these efforts. The Talking Tree initiative in Mali, implemented across Gao, Timbuktu, Mopti, Ségou, and Bamako, illustrates how women-only dialogue spaces can foster collective strategising and strengthen women’s participation in political decision-making. • Civil society could collect and disseminate stories about citizens’ daily challenges, amplifying grassroots perspectives across the region. • Emphasising civil society as a constructive partner rather than an adversary may reduce elite resistance to civic participation and help institutionalise permanent inclusive consultations, including those linked to recent national dialogue outcomes.
Following up on National Dialogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recent national dialogue conferences in Burkina Faso (2024), Mali (2024), and Niger (2025) offer concrete entry points for sustained civil society engagement. • These forums, whatever their deficits, generated recommendations that non-state actors can actively build upon. • CSOs can use these processes to discuss how they wish to accompany transitional authorities in implementing dialogue recommendations.

Options for Civil Society Engagement	
Following up on National Dialogues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Mali, the 2024 dialogue emphasised engaging armed groups and recommended consolidating democratic gains. These outcomes provide a mandate for civil society to promote dialogue at the community level and continue to advocate a transition back to civilian rule. • Burkina Faso’s updated Transitional Roadmap (2022) prioritised rebuilding the state and improving governance. Although progress has been slow, legislation targeting clientelism demonstrates potential openings for civil society to complement governance reforms through monitoring, consultation, and joint strategising.
Working with Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive post-coup transitional processes would benefit from the involvement of actors who could advocate for change but also mediate between various domestic stakeholders. Several actors could play such an enabling role: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Youth movements (e.g. Ras-Bath, Le Balai Citoyen, neo-pan-Africanists in Niger): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have strong mobilisation and agenda-setting power. • May lack institutional experience. • Could be engaged in exchanges with CSOs for joint advocacy. Traditional chiefs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoy strong legitimacy and political leverage, especially in rural areas. • Can mediate with armed groups and support local non-violence norms. • In Mali, have backed women-only dialogue spaces in multiple regions. Religious actors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess mediation and mobilisation capacities and have already mediated (e.g. Niger after the 2023 coup). • Influential figures like Imam Dicko can increase pressure for inclusive transitions and civic space.

Options for Civil Society Engagement	
Working with Enablers	<p>Women’s religious and civic leaders:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Islamic women’s associations and tech-savvy leaders have driven literacy and education (e.g. Oumoul Kahiry Niasse, Malama Zaharaou). • Can create safe spaces, mediate, and build cross-border support networks. <p>Labour and educational organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers’, students’, and workers’ associations remain influential. • Can advocate for and support inclusive post-coup transition processes.
Revive Local and National Peace Processes With Jihadists and Other Non-State Armed Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity continues to be a key driver of support for military rule. • The cases of Afghanistan, Algeria, Nigeria, and Somalia indicate that local-level negotiations have been effective in reducing religious extremist violence in the past. • Domestic and external financial and technical accompaniment could also enable CSOs to facilitate and moderate these dialogue spaces. Skilful external facilitation support and collaboration with traditional and religious leaders could also be conducive in this regard. • While Western actors and most of the Sahel’s previous democratically elected governments have rejected this option, past (secret) diplomatic overtures towards jihadists in Mali under Boubacar Keita, in Burkina Faso under Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, and in Niger under Mohamed Bazoum could be revived to this end. • The 2024 Inter-Malian Dialogue for Peace and National Reconciliation recommendation to engage in direct dialogue with jihadist groups offers a strong foundation in this regard.

Post-Coup Trajectories

The current situation in the Sahel creates a number of uncertainties, particularly around the durability of the transitional military governments and their intentions to end the transitional period as scheduled. The companion briefing note, Trajectories following military coups d'état, outlined three general categories of scenario and outcome:

1. Persistence of Praetorian Rule

In this scenario, the military remains in power as an institution represented by a junta (a collective leadership council of serving military officers) or represented by a serving general and commander in chief. This is, as of late 2025, the status of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. Junta arrangements are common immediately after a military coup but generally short-lived. More coherent militaries tend to recognise the dangers posed by extended occupation of the state to their own cohesiveness and combat readiness, and typically engineer quick transfers of power to a civilian or semi-civilian leadership. Coups organised by less coherent militaries (e.g. junior officers' coups) tend to become dominated by the most aggressive and dynamic member of the junta, who seizes power in a palace coup or otherwise arranges to personally acquire executive power. This trajectory is often characterised by repeated "palace coups" or "coups within coups", as seen in the September 2022 coup led by Traoré against the junta government of Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, which had overthrown elected President Kaboré earlier in the year.

Evidence for Scenario 1

The Alliance of Sahel States mutual defence agreement concluded by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger under the September 2023 Liptako-Goruma Charter, and its mooted evolution into a broader monetary and political union¹⁶, provides an example of how mutual solidarity and new international partnerships could allow Sahelian militaries to remain in power into the medium and long term. The regimes are clearly borrowing working models from one another, as with Niger's translation of the Burkinabe VDF model into the VDN.

Survey data gathered since the coups seems to indicate that military governments remain popular throughout the Sahel, even where they are several years into incumbency. Afrobarometer survey data collected in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali suggests that support for a direct military role in politics remains high throughout the region (although this must be considered in light of other survey data presented below under scenario 3 that suggests people are communicating an endorsement of the military's role in deposing corrupt civilian governments, rather than an uncritical support for indefinite military rule).

¹⁶ Reuters, "Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso Sign Sahel Security Pact," 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/mali-niger-burkina-faso-sign-sahel-security-pact-2023-09-16/> [last accessed: 7 May 2025].

Proxy indicators for support for landmark policies of military governments also indicate continued popularity. Survey data gathered by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in 2024 shows overwhelming support among surveyed populations in Mali and Niger for the decision to leave ECOWAS.¹⁷

Transition timelines have repeatedly been extended in all Sahel countries. Elections in Mali were initially promised for February 2022, postponed until 2024, and finally until 2030. Traore initially pledged a swift return to civilian rule in Burkina Faso, promising to hold elections within two years, but the national talks in 2024 produced a resolution extending the military’s stay in power for another 5 years. Similarly, in Niger, the 2025 Assises Nationales recommended Abdourahamane Tchiani remain in power for a 5-year transition period.

2. Hybrid Military-Backed Regime Emerges

In this scenario, the military transfers power to a civilian representative, while retaining substantial political role and influence. Sometimes, a military leader formally resigns and adopts a civilian identity as a precursor to running for office, often in carefully constrained elections. At the most democratic end of this category are regimes where elected governments understand that they can govern only with the confidence of the military. At the least democratic, regimes are headed by a “civilianised” former military leader or a military-aligned political party.

The variant options within this category include:			
	Subtype	Description	Examples
2.1	“Civilianisation” of former military autocrat	A military figure, usually a coup leader, adopts a civilian role and governs as an autocrat.	President Maaouya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya (Mauritania), Omar al-Bashir (Sudan), Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (Egypt)
2.2	Formation of a military proxy party	A military-aligned party bolstered by state assets or mandatory membership, competes in elections that are not free and fair.	National Democratic Party (Egypt), Union Solidarity and Development Party (Myanmar)

¹⁷ Virginie Baudais, Military Entrenchment in Mali and Niger: Praetorianism in Retrospect (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024), <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2024/policy-reports/military-entrenchment-mali-and-niger-praetorianism-retrospect>.

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2.2	Formation of a military proxy party	A military-aligned party bolstered by state assets or mandatory membership, competes in elections that are not free and fair.	National Democratic Party (Egypt), Union Solidarity and Development Party (Myanmar)
2.3	Managed transfer to ideologically compatible political party	This works best in systems with ideologically coherent parties, and has been a common feature of Latin American coup transitions.	Thailand (1992, 2019), Chile (1989), Brazil (1985).

Evidence for Scenario 2

While military governments in the Sahel have been postponing transition timelines, it is important to note that it is exceedingly rare for military juntas or serving officers to remain in power indefinitely. In a survey of thirty successful coups between 1989 and 2018, half resulted in a transition to a hybrid military-backed regime, with the remaining half resulting in a genuine transition to civilian rule (although not always to free and fair democracy). In none of these coups did the military continue to occupy the executive.¹⁸

Chad is already in this category: while President Mahamat Déby Itno remains a military officer, he competed in managed elections in 2024. Interestingly, Itno seems to have been ambivalent about the role of the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS), a regime political party formed by his father in 1990 out of the insurgent movement that had swept him to power. The MPS elevated Déby Itno to its leadership in 2024, having been somewhat sidelined during the period after the coup, but Déby Itno did not attend this conference and campaigned as an independent in 2024. In 2025, however, he convened an extraordinary conference of the MPS where he accepted the party leadership.

¹⁸ Sebastian Elischer and Justin Hoyle, 'Electoral Contests in the Aftermath of Military Coups: How Domestic Constraints Motivate Praetorian Conduct', *Contemporary Politics* 30, no. 1 (2024): 44–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2023.2230718>.

Evidence for Scenario 2

The pro-government or patriotic civil society movements formed by the juntas in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali (see above) may eventually become the nucleus of a hybrid, semi-civilian political structure centred on the military. The transition plan issued by Niger's 2025 National Conference included new rules that authorize no more than five parties and a provision for junta leader Tchiani to be allowed to stand as a candidate in proposed elections after the transition, suggesting a medium-term plan to civilianise military rule there.

3. Restoration of Civilian Government

In this scenario, the military transfers power to civilian leaders through a competitive election process (in which the military does not directly compete or register its preference for any one outcome). Military coups have an ambivalent and polarised relationship to democracy: they often spell the end of periods of democratic government, but are themselves heralds of the type of regime weakness that create opportunities for reform and democratisation. Coups against autocratic governments may even be the most common path to democracy.¹⁹

Transitions after coups are more likely to take a democratic turn when civil society mobilises large masses of citizens to demand democracy and rule of law. Chenoweth and Stephan famously identify a threshold of 3.5% of the national population actively participating in a nonviolent campaign.²⁰ In a recent study, Dahl and Gleditsch find that democratisation is more likely when coups occur in the presence of significant popular mobilisation (although they note that mobilisation itself may be driven by the same forces that provoked the coup: regime weakness and elite division).²¹

¹⁹ Michael K. Miller, *Shock to the System: Coups, Elections, and War on the Road to Democratization* (Princeton University Press, 2021), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691217000/shock-to-the-system>; Michael K. Miller, 'Reanalysis: Are Coups Good for Democracy?', *Research & Politics* 3, no. 4 (2016): 2053168016681908, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168016681908>.

²⁰ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 30–44.

²¹ Marianne Dahl and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 'Clouds with Silver Linings: How Mobilization Shapes the Impact of Coups on Democratization', *European Journal of International Relations* 29, no. 4 (2023): 1017–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221143213>.

Evidence for Scenario 3

Prospects of a return to civilian government may seem remote, but the Sahel's own recent political history furnishes repeated examples of military coups giving way to imperfect democracies: in Mali (1991, 2012), Niger (1996, 1999, 2010), and Burkina Faso (1987). This suggests that promised transition timetables should not be treated as completely insincere by civil society and political parties.

Signs of resistance to military government by civil society and citizens throughout the Sahel are nascent but encouraging. While military rulers remain popular in Mali, there are signs that support is gradually decreasing as the junta fails to deliver on security and prosperity.²² The decree dissolving political parties and extending Goïta's rule to 2030 provoked mass anti-junta protests in Bamako.²³ In Chad, the extension of the initially proposed 18-month transition provoked substantial demonstrations, which were met with lethal force killing at least 50 and probably more than 100 protestors and leading to a broader crackdown on opposition throughout the country.²⁴

Conclusion

Prolonged military rule in Africa has almost always given way to some form of civilian or "civilianised" governance. Even military regimes that appeared deeply entrenched have ultimately confronted the limits of their rule: economic stagnation, a frustrated middle-class, pressure from liberal international actors, and the creation of a new civilian elite as senior generals accumulate personal wealth and attempt to pass it to their children. Experience suggests that once the promise of stability curdles into stalemate, the incentive for "civilianisation", whether through managed elections, the creation of new political parties, or negotiated exit pacts, reasserts itself. This said, there are reasons to consider the possibility that recent events have brought the Sahel into a new environment where these assumptions no longer hold.

The formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has inaugurated a regional compact of mutually supporting juntas, underpinned by shared security threats and ideological convergence. Moreover, the external environment that

²² Baudais, Military Entrenchment in Mali and Niger.

²³ 'Mali's Military Government Outlaws Political Parties and Suppresses Public Demonstrations', Civicus Monitor, accessed 12 November 2025, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/malis-military-government-outlaws-political-parties-and-suppresses-public-demonstrations>.

once shepherded transitions toward liberal democracy has itself fragmented. The rise of Russia, the assertiveness of China, and the decline of Western leverage have created a pluralised international order in which autocrats can access alternative sources of legitimacy, financing, and security partnerships.

These developments place the region and the world in uncharted waters. The historic “inevitability” of return to civilian rule presupposed a global consensus around democratic norms and an absence of durable authoritarian alliances. That consensus no longer holds. If the AES deepens into a self-reinforcing bloc insulated from external pressure and able to draw upon new patrons, the cost-benefit calculus of relinquishing power may shift. Nevertheless, the internal contradictions of militarised governance remain potent forces of erosion, as evidenced by the declining security situation throughout most of the Sahel, and the increasing popular resistance to military rule. Whether the Sahel’s regimes adapt by reinventing civilian rule on their own terms, or collapse under the strain of their contradictions, will determine whether this cycle marks a historical deviation or merely a delayed reprise.