

# CHAPTER 12

## The Changing Dynamics of United States Development Assistance and its Implications for Security and Democratic Governance in West Africa

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### Introduction

The aftermath of the Cold War saw a wave of political reforms and democratisation across many African countries. This period marked intense domestic efforts led by pro-democracy forces, including civil society organisations, academics, student bodies, the media and religious groups, to pressure authoritarian leaders to embrace democratic governance (Aidoo, 2006; Makinda, 1996). These groups aimed to participate in the civic space and contribute to discussions and policies that drive socio-political and economic development, protect civil liberties and promote human rights. Internationally, the US emerged as a key supporter of these democratic movements. Although some scholars have described America's role in Africa's democratic transitions as minimal, Washington contributed to the political discourse and initial processes that laid the foundation for democracy in the region (Ngwafu, 2016; Owusu-Mensah, 2015). In response to the ongoing governance and security challenges on the continent, Washington has continued to implement initiatives that promote stability and democratic consolidation. For instance, in 2022, the US allocated US\$717 million for peace and security assistance (US\$446.5 million) and governance programmes (US\$270.5 million) (Arieff, Ploch Blanchard and Cook, 2023).

These efforts have received mixed results. Whilst some countries have made great strides in building democratic governance systems,

others have backslid, manifesting in the unconstitutional overthrow of governments by the military, manipulation of election results to favour the incumbent and constitutional review by incumbent governments to prolong their stay in power (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Currently, West Africa epitomises this regression. Since 2020, the region has experienced six coup d'états in four countries which include Burkina Faso (two coups in January and September 2022), Guinea (2021), Mali (2020, 2021) and Niger (2023) (Hudson and Towriss, 2023). These takeovers reflect a legitimacy crisis as the failure by elected governments to improve security and reduce corruption fuelled public disillusionment towards the civilian leadership which led to the coups. Meanwhile, a 2024 Afrobarometer report indicates that more than half of Africans (53 per cent across 39 countries) are willing to accept a military takeover if elected leaders abuse power for their benefit (Afrobarometer, 2024).

274 All these developments are happening amidst dwindling Washington engagement in Africa as the issues in the Middle East, Ukraine and China have emerged as the main priorities of the US (Thurston, 2024). The dismantling and cancellation of several programmes under the US Agency for International Development, including those that promote the rule of law, democracy and human rights in Africa, demonstrate the decrease US presence in the region under Trump's administration (Lyngaa, 2025). The Kremlin, on the other hand, is increasing its political and military engagements and embarking on disinformation campaigns implemented through a coordinated network of local influencers, Wagner, and Russian state media (Clifford and Gruzd, 2022; Hiebert, 2025). This is believed to be part of a broader strategy by Moscow to undermine democracy and promote authoritarian narratives in Africa. However, some scholars and policymakers have downplayed the extent of Russian disinformation, arguing that Western powers are using this narrative to divert attention from their shortcomings in the region (Warner and Duerksen, 2025).

Nevertheless, Moscow's growing influence has become a significant issue in discussions about democratic governance in West Africa. This should, however, not be analysed in isolation, as various complex internal and external factors shape governance outcomes in the region. Successive elected governments in West Africa have struggled to achieve

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socioeconomic objectives that address the people's needs due to several factors, including weak governance structures, corruption and nepotism. This situation has made democracy less attractive, as the anticipated benefits remain unrealised (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Geopolitically, the US and Russia have economic, military and diplomatic interests in the region. While the US emphasises democracy and the rule of law in its engagements, Russia has supported military governments, and its partnerships remain silent on democratic principles, raising concerns about the implications of declining US support and the increased presence of the Kremlin for the future of democratic governance in the region.

The central problem the paper addresses is the apparent democratic backsliding in West Africa despite the US and other Western assistance which aims to promote democracy and security, particularly in the Sahel region. While the US and other Western partners have invested in governance reforms and institution-building, democratic institutions remain fragile, public trust in elected governments is diminishing and insecurity continues to escalate. Simultaneously, new geopolitical actors like Russia have expanded their influence by offering unconditional support to authoritarian and transitional regimes, appealing to governments and populations disillusioned with democracy. The complex interplay between internal governance failures, the shifting landscape of US development assistance, and the increasing influence of Russia on democratic consolidation in West Africa has received little attention. This chapter explores how these shifting dynamics, marked by both internal governance failures and external normative competition are reshaping the political landscape in the Sahel.

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### **Theoretical framework: Explaining the democratic setbacks in the Sahel**

To analyse the current governance crisis and the evolving geopolitical landscape in West Africa, this study adopts a multi-theoretical framework that combines legitimacy crisis theory and norm diffusion theory. Legitimacy crisis theory emphasises that states derive their legitimacy from citizens' trust in the moral and functional credibility of the governance system to address their needs (Beetham, 1991; Lipset, 1959).

Rotberg (2004) further emphasises that legitimacy is rooted in a state's efforts to promote good governance and its ability to provide essential political goods such as security, freedom of speech, justice and quality public services. Among these, Rotberg (2004) considers security to be the most critical; a state unable to protect its citizens, secure its borders or maintain public order is deemed either failing or failed. Rotberg (2004) also notes that corruption is often both symptom and driver of state failure, eroding public trust and weakening institutional performance.

In the Sahel region, chronic insecurity and state incapacity have led to legitimacy crises as the military leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger accused the government of not providing enough resources for the armed forces to combat the spread of terrorism and violent extremism. These insecurities have killed many citizens, left millions displaced and forced the closure of schools, affecting millions of children (United Nations, 2023). The levels of insecurity in the Sahel undermined public confidence in civilian governments, as citizens perceived the administrations to be weak and inefficient in responding to the crisis (Mbulle-Nziege and Cheeseman, 2023). Steadman (2020) notes that corruption is a major factor that has contributed to the spread of terrorism in the Sahel. Armed groups have thrived in areas neglected by governments, where limited development and minimal state investment, often due to corruption, have created a vacuum that these groups exploit by positioning themselves as providers of basic services and security (Transparency International, 2023; Axelrod and Aning, 2020). These dynamics underscore how corruption is not only a by-product of fragility, but a key driver of the insecurity plaguing the Sahel.

Alongside internal legitimacy crisis, this study applies norms diffusion theory to assess the external dimension of the democratic decline in the Sahel. As outlined by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), international norms such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are diffused through a lifecycle involving norm emergence, cascading, and internationalisation. Since the 1990s, the US and other Western actors have made efforts to promote liberal democratic norms through development assistance, diplomatic engagement, institutional capacity building and governance reforms (Carothers, 1999; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Notwithstanding,

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the recent suspension of US aid in military-led governments and the rise of geopolitical competitors like Russia and China, who offer support without normative conditions, have triggered a counter-norm diffusion dynamic. These emerging powers promote alternative governance models rooted in non-interference and strategic realism without any governance conditionalities (Cooley, 2015; Tolstrup, 2014). As a result, democracy promotion efforts by the US and other Western actors have not only lost traction but also faced legitimacy backlash when tied to the underperforming democratic regimes. These theoretical frameworks allow the paper to examine how internal governance failures and shifting global normative influences are contributing to the erosion of democracy and the rise of alternative political models in the Sahel.

### **Research methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design based on content analysis of secondary data sources to examine the evolving dynamics between US development assistance, security, democratic governance and geopolitical competition in West Africa. The research aims to unpack the complex and interlinked factors contributing to democratic backsliding and shifting international alignments in the region. The analysis draws from a wide range of materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, Afrobarometer survey data, policy briefs, government reports, think tank publications and media articles. These sources were selected to ensure a broader coverage of regional political trends, US foreign policy approaches and the increasing strategic influence of non-Western actors, such as Russia. To enhance the reliability of the findings and minimise potential bias, the study triangulated perspectives from diverse institutional, geographic and ideological sources. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the varied narratives shaping governance and security in the Sahel.

The chapter is structured into five sections. Following the introduction, the next section explores the political landscape in West Africa, focusing on the interplay between governance, insecurity and the rise of military coups. The third section assesses the US role and support for security and

democratic governance in West Africa, highlighting the potential impact of the Trump administration's actions on democracy in the region. In section four, the paper discusses the possible consequences of Russia's growing influence on the region's political environment. The final section examines political and governance developments in West Africa in relation to emerging global patterns and suggests policy recommendations to enhance security and governance in the region.

## **Democratic governance crisis in West Africa**

West Africa is facing democratic setbacks following the recent military takeovers, with four affected countries currently under military rule. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) responded to these coups by suspending the four countries, and in the case of Niger, the bloc threatened to use force to reinstate the ousted president and restore democracy (Mathur, 2024). Various West African heads of state and governments also engaged in bilateral talks with the junta leaders to return their countries to civilian rule; however, these efforts yielded no results. On 29 January 2025, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS, complicating efforts to restore democracy in the three countries (Ewokor, 2025). They have since established the Alliance of Sahel States (AES/ASS), a bloc which is working on deepening ties with Russia. The foreign ministers of AES held their first official meeting in Moscow on 3 April 2025, where Russia promised to continue supporting their fight against Islamic insurgency (Radio France International, 2025). The departure of the three countries, thus, reflects a combination of complex security challenges, shifting geopolitical alliances and institutional failures (Aboagye, 2025). But how did the region reach this point?

Since adopting democracy in the 1990s, many West African countries have made little progress in developing and implementing governance structures and processes that address their citizens' needs. A 2023 socio-economic profile of West Africa indicated that an estimated 32.47 per cent, amounting to 141.32 million people in the region live in extreme poverty (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2023). Most

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constitutional reforms introduced in the 1990s either failed to tackle the region's socio-economic challenges or lacked the robustness to resist authoritarian resurgence (Fombad, 2013). Consequently, successive governments have employed diverse tactics to undermine the legislature and judiciary, restrict active citizen participation in politics by arresting and detaining opposition leaders, show disregard for the rule of law, and in some cases, exert total control over government machinery, leading to state capture (Atta-Asamoah, 2020; Dulani and Tengatenga, 2019; Gerzso and Van de Walle, 2022). In Benin, for instance, President Talon has been accused of using the justice system to attack his political opponents, enabling him to consolidate power. Once considered one of the stable democracies in West Africa, the 2019 Freedom House report classified Benin as partly free, a rating that has remained to date (Freedom House, 2024). These developments, which have contributed to weak governance institutions, corruption and ineffective governance policies, are factors that have led to the ongoing crisis in the region.

While state weakness has been a dominant narrative in West African governance processes, the surge in violence exposed the depth of governance challenges in the region. The junta leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger said they acted because of poor governance, corruption, ineffective policies and lack of resources that inhibited their ability to counter the rising jihadist attacks (Diallo and Ross, 2020; Robertson, 2024). The military, civil society organisations and pressure groups blamed the elected leaders for the persistent violence in the Sahel. In Mali, opposition leader Soumaila Cisse criticised the government for betraying the army by not providing sufficient support for the military to fight the insurgents (Devermont, 2019). Popular youth activist Mohammed Youssouf Bathily also pointed to corruption as the primary reason for the military's defeat by the terrorists. At the same time, there were reports that Mali's political and business classes had incentives to prolong the conflict because they benefited from international financial flows (Devermont, 2019). In Burkina Faso, many citizens expressed frustration with President Kabore's regime, which they accused of corruption, laxity and nepotism. Financial misappropriation led to persistent equipment and supply problems and limited operational capacity, which weakened

the armed forces in their fight against the jihadists (Koné and Moderan, 2022). The coup d'état, therefore, highlighted the government's failure to meet the people's expectations and respond decisively to the deteriorating security challenges in the country.

### Growing support for military rule

The poor performance of elected leaders has diminished the people's trust in democracy, as indicated by an Afrobarometer (2024) survey, which showed a decreased satisfaction with democracy in most African states. On the other hand, the military leaders have continued to enjoy support from a section of their citizens. Between the round 8 surveys of 2019/2021 and the round 9 surveys of 2021/2023, the rejection of military rule fell by ten points. In Mali, for instance, 39 per cent of respondents rated democracy above other forms of government in the 2021/2023 survey, down from the 62 per cent recorded in the 2011/2013 surveys, indicating a 23 per cent decline from 10 years ago. Meanwhile, the disapproval rating for authoritarian rule dropped from 58 per cent to 18 per cent. In a 2024 survey conducted by Mali meter, which is run by Germany's Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, nine out of ten respondents considered the country moving in the right direction (Bøås and Haavik, 2025). The figures indicate the support President Goita enjoys from the Malian populace.

Ibrahim Traore, the president of Burkina Faso, is courting the admiration of many people, not only in Burkina Faso, but among young Africans on the continent and in diaspora for what they perceive as the pursuit of a transformational agenda much needed for economic, social and infrastructural development in the region. On 30 April 2025, solidarity protests were organised across several countries in Africa and beyond, to rally behind Captain Traore and celebrate him for his Pan-Africanist stance and resistance to imperialism (Banchereau, 2025; Mwangi, 2025). The protest aimed to support Traore's leadership and efforts to assert Burkina Faso's sovereignty against perceived neo-colonial influences. This growing support for Traore not only boosts his popularity, but it also

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demonstrates a trend of tolerance for military rule in Africa, especially among the youth (Aikins, 2025).

Whilst the weak domestic governance structures have been the main drivers of these crises, geopolitical developments in the region have exacerbated the situation. After abandoning their historical and traditional alliance with France and the Western countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have embraced Russia as a key international partner, a development considered as a threat to the restoration of democracy in the Sahelian countries. These developments demonstrate the complexities influencing the future of West Africa's governance and politics.

### **US support for security and democracy in West Africa**

Since 2012, West Africa, especially the Sahel region, has experienced an increase in terrorist and violent extremist activities, posing a significant threat to human rights, livelihoods and the very existence of the affected states. In 2024, Burkina Faso ranked first among countries most impacted by terrorism, recording 1 532 deaths, a 21 per cent decrease from the 1 935 deaths recorded in 2023 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024). Mali ranked fourth, with 604 deaths, a 21 per cent decrease from the data recorded in 2023. The US has thus, supported efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorism to improve regional security. The Biden administration prioritised peace and security in the Sahel and instituted diverse strategies to curb the growing instability in the region. In 2021, approximately US\$60 million was donated to support the Trans-Saharan counter-terrorism partnership programme. This programme, established by the US Senate, aimed to assist countries in North and West Africa to combat terrorism and violent extremism through a more coordinated interagency approach (US Congress, 2021).

However, the situation is not expected to remain the same under Trump's administration, as the president's actions and utterances suggest that security matters in Africa are of lesser importance to him. The region's counter-terrorism efforts have been adversely affected by the funding freeze announced by the US president. In Benin, a multi-year programme

to train the army for counter-terrorism operations has been put on hold (Hourdel et al., 2025). Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, a four-year programme to train local troops has been paused. Furthermore, there are reports that the Trump administration is planning to dismantle the US Africa Command and transfer it under the European Command, a decision believed to be part of Trump's goal of withdrawing troops from certain parts of Africa (Oluwole, 2025). The jihadists, on the other hand, are increasing their assault. A recent terrorist attack on a military site in Benin, which led to the death of 54 soldiers, indicates the intensity of the crisis in West Africa's littoral states (Abubakar, 2025). Already, there are reports that the Jamaat Nusratul Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) Islamic group is seeking to expand its attacks and influence in the region, with Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire being part of their targets (Thompson, 2024). Trump's actions could undermine regional efforts to combat the expansion of Islamic jihadist activities from the Sahel to the coastal states of West Africa (Lozada, 2024).

The US support for democracy in West Africa aims to promote human rights, independent media, free and fair elections, and strengthen political institutions to ensure effective and efficient governance. Since the 1990s, Washington has supported elections, the rule of law, governance and civil society organisations that advocate for human rights, and political participation (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Owusu-Mensah, 2015). With initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership and the West Africa Cooperative Security Initiative, the US has assisted countries in the region in increasing citizen engagement and establishing structures for transparent and accountable governance processes (The White House, 2014). Additionally, in 2022, the US invested over US\$115 million to support economic and development assistance, focusing on democracy and governance (The White House, 2022). With the rising number of coup d'états in Africa, President Biden announced the creation of the African Democratic and Political Transitions (ADAPT) initiative at the 2022 US–Africa summit (US Department of State, 2023). This US\$75 million initiative aims to enhance America's political and technical support for democratic transitions in partnership with regional bodies, governments and civil societies. The ADAPT initiative, thus, demonstrates the Biden administration's interest in restoring democracy in military regimes in

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West Africa. Michael Heath, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for West African Affairs, stated, 'Our ADAPT programme is intended to demonstrate that there are still ways to get out of these situations. We are not just going to give up on countries that have had coups. We want to continue to maintain open lines of communication and to let them know that if they do take this path back to restoration of democratic rule, there are substantial benefits.' (Pecquet, 2023: para. 12). President Trump, however, has shown little or no interest in supporting a democratic transition in West African states currently under military governments. His dismantling of aid programmes that support fragile democracies has diminished America's credibility as a supporter of human rights, the rule of law and media freedom (Lyngaa, 2025). The administration's attempt to close down *Voice of America*, a news outlet that has promoted US values of freedom of speech, human rights and the rule of law, further indicates Trump's disregard for free speech and democratic consolidation (Knauth, 2025). Even if the Trump administration decides to support democratic transition in West African countries currently under military rule, two issues could some present difficulties.

First, President Trump has not shied away from openly expressing interest in running for a third term in office (Baker, 2025). With such utterances coming from the president of a leading democracy, this could incentivise and embolden West African leaders who seek to entrench their authoritarian (military) rule or manipulate the constitution to extend their stay in power through what is popularly termed a constitutional coup (Abebe, 2022; Mbaku, 2020), aggravating the democratic setbacks in the region. Although the governance crisis in West Africa mainly stems from internal challenges such as bad governance and weak state institutions, Trump's actions could amplify the trend and weaken the US position in condemning authoritarian rule. Meanwhile, Trump's administration's actions, such as the breach of the justice department's independence and illegal detention of US citizens, have led political commentators to accuse the President of turning the US into an authoritarian state (Levitsky, 2025; Smith, 2025), questioning Washington's moral authority to condemn authoritarianism or military rule in West Africa.

Secondly, the US has upheld its relationships with undemocratic

countries, a practice that has continued through both Democratic and Republican administrations. Factors such as security, energy investments, arms sales and critical minerals deals have shaped this strategy (Carothers and Feldman, 2023). Of all these factors, security concerns, especially counterterrorism relating to Islamic extremists, remain the primary reasons for these relationships. For instance, the US has maintained close relationships with authoritarian countries, including Egypt, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, since they are considered vital security partners in combating Islamic extremist activities. In its fight against terrorism in West Africa, the US constructed a US\$110 million drone base in Niger which hosted about 1 000 US troops (Bath, 2024). After the military takeover, the junta leaders revoked Niger's military cooperation deal with the US and requested the withdrawal of the US troops. The departure of the US saw the arrival of Russian military instructors and equipment, making Moscow a key partner in Niger's fight against terrorism and violent extremism (Stewart and Ali, 2024). In addition to Niger, Russia has military presence in Mali and Burkina Faso with the military junta in these countries severing ties and distancing themselves from Washington. As US–Russia geopolitical competition intensifies in the region, the US may have more reason to set aside its concerns for democracy and human rights to draw these countries closer to its camp (Carothers and Feldman, 2023). Although section 7008 of the Department of State prohibits assisting any government whose elected leader is deposed by military coup d'état, the Biden administration contemplated assisting Burkina Faso's government for two reasons. First, some officials raised concerns about Burkina Faso becoming a gateway for terrorism in the coastal states of West Africa and, therefore, suggested providing military assistance to the leaders (Chason and Hudson, 2023). However, others argued that assisting a regime that lacks democratic legitimacy and a poor human rights record could encourage army excesses and further inflame the insurgency. Secondly, some officials expressed worry about Russia or China filling the void should the US decide not to assist Burkina Faso. A senior official of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies said, 'If these governments lose battles or decide to call in the Russians, that has a

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serious and measurable effect on national security' (Chason and Hudson, 2023: para. 25). Currently, Russia has a security cooperation agreement with Burkina Faso, and the Kremlin has become a close ally of the junta (Reuters, 2024). It remains to be seen how these dynamics will play out in the relationship between the US and military governments, especially in restoring democracy.

### **Russia's strategic engagements and influence in Africa**

Russia's ambition to become one of the great powers in an emerging multipolar world has motivated the Kremlin to reinvigorate its engagement and influence on the African continent (Cooley, 2025). Moscow's relationship with Africa is rooted in Soviet-era ties established with the continent, which continue to drive engagements with various African states (Droin and Dolbaia, 2023). In the 1950s, the USSR became an important player in the African political landscape by supporting Marxist elements and pro-independence movements. They provided weapons, equipment and military training for the armed wings of pro-independence movements. Thus, having supported many African countries in their fight for independence, Russia has used these historical relationships to rekindle and strengthen ties in the region. Moscow's effort to re-engage the continent has culminated in high-profile visits by top-ranking Russian officials since the mid-2000s. President Vladimir Putin's visit to South Africa in 2006 was followed by his successor Dmitry Medvedev's trips to Egypt, Angola, Nigeria and Namibia in 2009 (Droin and Dolbaia, 2023). Russia's diplomatic re-engagement efforts have also seen the foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, embarking on visits to several African countries to establish and strengthen bilateral security and economic ties (Africanews, 2024; Jalloh, Bushuev and Van Eyssen, 2022; The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018).

Moscow's efforts to strengthen diplomatic, economic and political engagements in Africa have motivated the establishment of platforms to promote sustained dialogue with African countries. A key milestone in this effort was the inaugural Russia–Africa Summit held in Sochi on

23–24 October 2019, which brought together 43 African leaders to discuss issues of mutual interest in economics, trade, investment and security (Madden, 2019). The summit signified the beginning of a new era of cooperation between Russia and African states. In line with its long-term objectives, Moscow has institutionalised platforms such as the International Youth Forum ‘Russia–Africa’ to entrench its interest in Africa. During the fourth forum held on 23 April 2025, Russia inaugurated and held the first Russia–Africa Young Diplomats forum (Klomegah, 2025a). The Kremlin established these platforms to facilitate dialogue between the young people of Russia and Africa, promote African studies, and cultivate a positive image of Russia on the African continent (Roscongress Foundation, 2025). In his opening speech, Sergey Lavrov stressed the need for Russia and Africa to oppose modern practices of neo-colonialism, amplifying the anti-French and anti-Western sentiments and narratives on the continent. He stated, ‘We believe it is important to combine our efforts in order to create mechanisms for economic ties and international trade services that are beyond Western control’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025). Further in its agenda to strengthen its interest in Africa, Russia created the Department for Partnership with Africa in January 2025 under its Foreign Affairs Ministry (Klomegah, 2025b). This department is assigned to promote political, economic, scientific, educational and cultural ties with the African states. Moscow’s aim of establishing these platforms is not just to strengthen engagement in Africa, but also to challenge Western dominance and, by so doing, assert itself as a key geopolitical and security actor on the continent.

### **Russia’s security and political cooperation in the Sahel**

Russia has emerged as a key ally of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in their fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Following the fallout between Col. Goita and France, which resulted in the withdrawal of the French troops, and the failure of Operation Barkhane to deliver security improvements, the military junta in Mali chose to collaborate with the Kremlin’s paramilitary group, Wagner, to combat the Islamic insurgents

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(Faulkner and Parens, 2025). Wagner's arrival in Mali in 2021 was met with optimism by the military, as the Group's willingness to deploy alongside the Malian Armed Forces and employ heavy-handed tactics resonated with the military junta's counterterrorism strategies (Faulkner and Parens, 2025). Similarly, after shifting bilateral assistance from Western partners, the junta leaders in Niger and Burkina Faso established ties with the Kremlin, leading to the deployment of Russian military personnel, instructors and equipment. Despite some success, such as recapturing Kidal (Roger, 2023), a stronghold of the rebel forces in Mali, Islamic insurgents continue to undermine security and stability in the Sahel. The Wagner and its successor Africa Corps, have also been accused of violating human rights by unlawfully killing and executing civilians during their counterinsurgency operations. Investigative reports confirm a pattern of deliberate violence against civilians, which further destabilises the region (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Politically, Moscow has supported the AES military governments since they assumed power. After Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger withdrew from ECOWAS, Russia declared its support for the bloc and hosted the foreign affairs ministers of the AES countries in Moscow, where Sergey Lavrov stressed Russia's readiness to assist the Alliance in three priority areas: defence and security, the economy and diplomacy (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024). Furthermore, Lavrov reiterated Russia's commitment to strengthening the AES's counterterrorism capabilities by equipping and training the united armed forces of the three countries to enhance their combat readiness. The growing alliance between Moscow and the AES presents challenges to restoring civilian rule in the Sahel region, as Russia does not consider democracy a prerequisite in its partnerships and agreements. The Kremlin's deepening security and political ties with the AES regimes could reinforce military rule, undermine prospects for constitutional governance, and prioritise regime security over democratic institution-building. This development could impede efforts to restore democracy in the Sahel region.

## Disinformation campaigns: False narratives or the people's reality?

Another strategy employed by Moscow to promote its political interests on the continent is disinformation. According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2022), disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of false information with the intention of advancing a political objective. Africa has been a major target for disinformation campaigns, with Russia being a leading purveyor of such information on the continent (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022). Yevgeny Prigozhin, the former leader of the Wagner group, has been accused of exporting disinformation campaigns to every country where Wagner has operated, promoting anti-Western sentiments (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022). He carried out these campaigns by paying activists and influencers and using fake social media accounts to amplify Russia's propaganda (Africa Defence Force, 2021). Reports indicate that Russia's disinformation played a role in the military takeovers in the Sahel region.

288 In Burkina Faso, an Israeli company, Percepto International, hired by President Kabore with the mission of providing him with intelligence information, advised the president to launch an online counteroffensive against Russian disinformation, or risk being removed from power by the military (Dwoskin, 2023). This was after they discovered the full scale of Russia's disinformation in the country. In the lead-up to the September 2022 coup d'état in Burkina Faso, there was a spike in pro-Russian messages. Some stories urged the Burkina Faso leadership to explore a Burkina–Russia coalition and encouraged the authorities to diversify their partnerships, considering Russia as a partner in the fight against terrorism instead of relying solely on France and its Western allies (African Digital Democracy Observatory, 2023). Thus, a coordinated campaign of false and misleading messages by Wagner and other groups denigrated democratically elected leaders, facilitating the military coups in the Sahel (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Without doubting Russia's disinformation campaigns and their attempt to hamper efforts to consolidate democracy in West Africa, the poor performance of elected leaders has been a key factor that softened the ground for the military to wrest power. For instance, Ghana is one

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of the success stories of democracy in the region, having held successful elections and experienced a peaceful transition of power since adopting democracy in 1992. The country, however, loses US\$3 billion annually to corruption, an amount twice the yearly foreign direct investment inflow of US\$1.5 billion (Agambila, 2025). While in opposition, the current president of Ghana cautioned that the country is not immune to the coup d'état happening in the Sahel, judging from the waning trust of the people in the country's democracy resulting from poor governance (Schumacher, 2025). Thus, Russian disinformation messages sometimes reflect realities and resonate with the grievances of the people, amplifying local sentiments and making the elected leaders unpopular. Moreover, platforms such as TikTok, Twitter and Facebook have made it easy to disseminate and access political information, enhancing citizens' political knowledge and understanding of governance issues (Akeusola, 2024). These platforms have created opportunities for citizens to examine the performance of their leaders and discuss governance challenges, including the impact of corruption on socio-economic development. Increased public scrutiny of their performance has created the imperative for elected leaders to implement policies that respond to the needs of the masses; failure to meet the demands of the citizens will not only delegitimise the leaders, but it will also create fertile ground for the military to take power, knowing that their actions will receive public support. If elected leaders refuse to implement people-centred policies, citizens could become disillusioned with democracy, making them susceptible to military governments.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that West Africa, especially the Sahel region, is going to be an ideological battleground between the liberals and authoritarians. Whilst the US is decreasing its presence in the region, Russia has taken steps to strengthen economic, diplomatic and security ties with the junta leaders, casting doubt on the prospects of restoring democracy in the three Sahelian countries in the immediate future, as the Kremlin's support and engagement with AES is likely to encourage the junta leaders to hold on to power. Membership of ECOWAS could have facilitated the

process of restoring democracy within the three countries. However, their withdrawal has closed the window for the regional bloc's intervention. Consequently, the US, as one of the key supporters of democracy in West Africa, must support the Sahel countries to address the political and security challenges and restore civilian rule. According to norms diffusion theory, the US has promoted liberal democratic values in West Africa through aid, diplomacy and technical assistance. However, in the Sahelian context, these norms have failed to improve the living conditions of the citizens or strengthen institutional governance. As a result, democracy has struggled to gain legitimacy. Meanwhile, the rise of alternative partners, such as Russia, which support regimes without conditionalities, reflects a shift in normative alignment. America's failure to act will only entrench Moscow's influence in the Sahel and possibly other parts of West Africa over the long term.

As indicated in the Afrobarometer (2024) survey, citizens of West Africa are generally dissatisfied with democracy, because successive governments have failed to address the basic needs of the masses, resulting from corruption, poor government policies and nepotism, among other factors. While this may not suffice as justification for a military takeover, the direct impact of the government's actions and inactions on the security of the armed forces and civilian populations played a key role in the coup d'états. As posited by the legitimacy crisis theory, the failure of elected officials to deliver essential political goods, such as security, justice, and development, eroded the public's trust in the leadership and created an opening for the junta. The military's action, therefore, does not reflect the armed forces' dissatisfaction with the country's leadership but rather a general sentiment among the populace, enabling the military leaders to gain legitimacy and popularity. Instead of applying section 7008 to desist from assisting military governments, the US should engage with the Sahelian leadership to understand and appreciate the political and environmental context that contributed to the current situation. While restoring democracy remains the optimal outcome of US engagement, the process should not be rushed, as simply restoring civilian rule will not prevent future military takeovers. Rather, discussions and support during the transitional process should focus on addressing the root causes of the

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challenges and assisting countries in implementing governance reforms that will reduce corruption, promote accountability, enhance political participation, and drive socio-economic development and stability. Without addressing the legitimacy deficit, any democratic gain will likely remain superficial and reversible.

US interest in the Sahel includes enhancing America's security by increasing the capacity of Sahel countries to counter violent extremist organisations and combat transnational organised crimes (US Department of State, 2022). Initially concentrated in the Sahel, West Africa has witnessed the expansion of terrorist activities to its coastal states, evident in increased attacks in Togo and Benin. A recent terrorist attack on a military site in Benin, which led to the death of 54 soldiers, indicates the intensity of the crisis in West Africa littoral states (Abubakar, 2025). The US should strengthen the capacity of security officials and implement interventions to prevent small arms and light weapons proliferation, not only in the Sahel but also in coastal West African states. Washington's disengagement will not only contribute to a decline in democracy, but also an increase in terrorists and violent extremist attacks, which can affect US national security, the security of its citizens and its economic interests in the region.

The suspension and withdrawal of US aid assistance should serve as a wake-up call for West African countries to build and strengthen state structures that reduce corruption, ensure efficient use of resources, and promote the conceptualisation and implementation of results-oriented policy initiatives that drive sustainable human development. President Trump's actions demonstrate that African countries cannot always rely on foreign support and assistance to address their internal challenges. Every year, Africa loses an average of US\$60 billion to illicit financial flows and more than US\$140 billion to corruption (DefenceWeb, 2023). This amount is three times more than the US\$59.7 billion received as overseas development assistance from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in 2023. Building robust anti-corruption institutions to cultivate a culture of transparency and accountability will ensure optimal use of resources, thereby reducing the region's reliance on international aid to address its social, economic,

education, health, political and security challenges. Although aid can assist in responding to some of the challenges, the leaders and citizens are primarily responsible for addressing their issues and should acknowledge that no amount of foreign assistance can compare to building effective structures that reduce inefficiencies and promote development. Instead of perceiving the withdrawal of US aid as a setback, it should rather challenge West African states to redefine their priorities and chart a path towards long-term prosperity.

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