Interrogating International Peace and Security in West Africa, Sahel Region after the COVID - 19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the world's governance, peace and security. Even though Africa was not affected like the magnitude in Europe and America, the pandemic has threatened international peace and security in the West African sub region. Political change and coup d'états in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger have presented security challenges in West Africa. Threats by terrorists' groups during and after the pandemic has also posed threat to human security and cooperation among countries in the ECOWAS bloc. Insecurity has increased, especially when terrorist groups have used the pandemic to cause political instability. In some countries in the sub-region, the COVID-19 pandemic delayed progress in implementing reforms and has stalled efforts by governments to provide efficient and effective services to the citizenry, invariably hampering government's efforts at improving on the needs of the people in the region. This has been a major catalyst to the military take overs that has occurred in the West African, Sahel region worsening the already precarious situation in Africa. It is recommended amidst the negative effects that, leaders in the sub-region strengthen measures to improve on human security among member states, harness resources in the region to build robust infrastructural amenities and to improve the living conditions of the youth in order not to be recruited by armed insurgent groups to cause extreme violence.

Keywords: Peace; human security; terrorists; pandemic and Sahel

Introduction

The coronavirus disease, COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in China in 2019 and its subsequent expansion have had a number of detrimental implications for human lives globally (Umukoro, 2020). As at 28 January 2022, the World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasised that, the disease had affected 364, 191, 494 million lives worldwide with 163, 532 lives lost in Africa. This is an increase compared to about 1,120,768 on August 17, 2020 with 25, 659 deaths in Africa as reported by the Africa Centre for Disease Control (ACDC) (Africa CDC, 2020). Even though several researches have been carried out on the nature, causes, mode of transmission as well as fatalities of the pandemic, this paper adds to the human security implications of the pandemic for the West African sub region. It examines the potential threats of the pandemic to international peace and security in West Africa, Sahel region and interrogate some of the issues that have led to political instability in the ECOWAS sub-region during and after the pandemic. The pandemic has contributed to the insecurity in the West African sub-region and has exacerbated the tensions between the citizenry and governments (International Organisation for Peacebuilding, 2020).

The pandemic unleashed the new normal and worsened the already security challenges in the world (Agunyai & Ojakorotu, 2021). Initially, the virus spread from Wuhan-China to Europe and then to the US before moving to low and middle-income countries where there is a lack of robust health systems to deal with the threats brought by the health emergency due to the pandemic (Laborde, Martin & Vos, 2020). Poverty and food insecurity has also grown dramatically since COVID-19 in view of the fact that, the virus spread faster across countries (Laborde et al., 2020). Due to the pandemic, many businesses closed, with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020) estimating that close to about 200 million workers had their livelihoods affected as a result of the health emergency. In the view of Coleman (2020), one potential danger of the coronavirus pandemic was that, since no country anticipated the health consequences of the disease, countries which had been providing logistics to deal with violence in areas of conflict were likely to divert their attention and resources to support their own domestic issues caused by the virus.

Connor (2019) has opined that 9 out of 10 people worldwide were unable to travel due to restrictions on immigration and also governments restricting the movements in and out of countries to deal with the transmission of the virus. According to Gegout (2018) the major security challenge in Africa before the pandemic was protracted ethnic conflict, extremism and religious fundamentalism. Epule et al. (2012) and the UN (2011) have all stated that political upheavals in most African countries resulted in insecurity, which invariably distorted the development, unity and diversity of the people in the continent. This has also been buttressed by Willett (2001) in a study who stated that, civil conflicts and political instability are the main sources of violence and insecurity in Africa. Agunyai and Ojakorotu (2021) have intimated that insecurity results when one foresees incoming danger, uncertainty, risk and fear that affect the tendency of people in society or a country to undertake their roles reasonably.

Methodology

This study applied the qualitative research method. Desk study was conducted using documents that are relevant to the impact of the pandemic on security, and the emergence of military coups in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the West African-Sahel region. This paper will focus on those countries that fall within the West African, Sahel region such as Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Mali. Through the adoption of desktop research due to the availability of relevant literature and official documents, including vital reports in newspapers, reputable journals, textbooks and websites related to the subject under consideration, the article examined the root and immediate causes of the instability in the Sahel region during and after the pandemic and identified the interests of the actors involved in the Saheli-conflicts. According to Pickard (2013), a desk review is a method in research geared towards the acquisition of previously published material, rather than collecting data directly from the field. Through the use of these secondary sources of data, the researchers were able to verify information available, identify trends that emerged from it, and made inferences to arrive at a reasonable conclusion. Journal articles were the principal materials that were engaged during the research which was supported by books, newspapers, reports and other official materials that were relevant to the study. The data was then processed through analysis and discussion which helped in reaching an informed conclusion. After the raw and systematic extraction of 250 publications linked to the keywords used, the research focused on the extraction of key materials to obtain the desired results relating to the study.

Economic outlook for the African region during the pandemic

According to the African Union (2019) and OECD (2020), Africa's gross domestic product was estimated at 3.6 percent together with growth per capita of about 0.7 percent respectively. These were not only enough to drive the much-needed development and economic transformation needed in the region, only for the pandemic to break out (OECD, 2020). One of the natural endowments for most countries in the African continent has been oil reserves and mineral resources, but during the pandemic prices of these raw minerals went down drastically which severely affected countries in the region making most of them unable to settle their external debts due to the shocks experienced. To make matters worse, the continents gross government debt doubled to an estimated value of 57.6 percent of GDP in 2019 (Calderón & Zenfack, 2020). This is indicative of the fact that, economic indicators and outlook were not even good in the pre-pandemic period.

According to Umokwo (2020), the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic negated the economic growth of Africa. Governments' uncertainty and anxiety due to the infectious nature of the virus and policies such as lockdown measures and sealed borders led to the low demand of raw materials. There was also a sharp decline in demand for manufactured goods due to the economic slowdown and workers being forced to stay away from work due to the pandemic (United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, 2020). The decline in the growth of the economies in Africa have had negative consequences on livelihood and social support for most people in the continent. In the pre-pandemic period, it is estimated that about 42 percent of people in sub-Saharan Africa were surviving on less than $1.90 per day, putting them in the extreme poverty bracket. However, the pandemic which had a devastating consequence on the economies of even developed countries, significantly increased the incidence of poverty in the African region (Save the Children, 2020). According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (2020), between 5 and 29 million people joined the number of people in the abject poverty bracket to the dire effects of the COVID-19 pandemic while another 17.1 percent of households experienced short-term poverty.

Even though the number of cases in Africa, those infected and deaths are low compared to the rest of the world, lockdown policies affected employment and livelihoods with serious implications for human security (OECD, 2020). In effect, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected Africa due to 'economic decline and rising poverty, authoritarianism, urban violence and increasing social inequalities' (Haer & Demarest, 2020). Economic growth forecasts painted a gloomy situation in Africa. In April 2020 the African Development Bank (ADB) (2020) projected GDP reduction of between 0.7 and 2.8 percentage points in 2020. Data from the World Bank as at June 2020 indicated that sub-Sahara Africa's economy was to shrink by 2.8 percent - one of the severest contractions to be recorded (World Bank, 2020b). Heightened poverty levels were also likely to have a corresponding effect on crime, with idle hands joining extremists' groups to fuel political upheavals and insurgency in the continent (Haer & Demarest, 2020). Even though violent extremists are contingent on a multiplicity of factors, severe economic constraints and shocks have the potential to destabilise weak economies that have suffered from intractable conflicts (Haer & Demarest, 2020).

According to data projections by Development Initiatives, it is estimated that international development aid reduced by $25 billion in 2021 (Smith & Chadwick, 2020). Reduction in peace initiatives in conflict areas as well as deteriorating humanitarian assistance further worsened the insecurity situation in some African countries (Haer & Demarest, 2020). Women who are the main care givers at home also had their livelihoods disrupted due to the fact that they had to leave work and care for those who were affected by the disease with its attendant economic challenges. It is estimated that, about 70 percent of people who worked in health facilities are women, while they also constitute a sizable number in the informal sector that was severely affected by lockdown and the caring of children while schools were closed amidst limited medical care (GANHRI, OHCHR, UNDP, 2021). Gender-based violence also increased as a result of frustrations at home due to lockdowns (GANHRI, et al., 2021).

In the view of the ILO (2017) sub-Sahara Africa is the region where majority of the people do not have most of the basic necessities of life and also lack social support inclusive of health care infrastructure, and with the greatest incidence of poverty (Brookings Institute, 2019). Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mali are clear cases in point of a situation where people keep struggling to access government health centers due to several restrictions (Turse, 2020). This has affected the region and in addition the pandemic has impacted negatively on vulnerable groups (UN Habitat, 2020). Africa is heavily dependent on natural resources as the largest contributor to its GDP (UN Habitat, 2020). Restrictions due to lockdown measures had dire consequences on all these sectors because in most of these sectors, workers cannot work from home thereby leading to joblessness (UN Habitat, 2020).

UNECA has indicated a dip in GDP growth of 1.4 percentage points for the African region, that is from 3.2 percent to 1.8 percent (IMF, 2020). The pandemic had serious repercussions for government revenue due to tax reductions and limited access to foreign exchange earnings (UN Habitat, 2020). All these have led to huge budgetary deficits and put enormous pressure on the economies of African countries which invariably has disturbed the peace and security in the continent (UN Habitat, 2020). The COVID-19 epidemic impacted the economies of almost every country on the planet and it has caused widespread socio - economic damage. According to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the world economy was projected to decrease by 4.3 percent in 2020 (UN,

2020). The Vice President for the World Bank representing Africa, Hafez Ghanem also intimated that, the pandemic will bring to the fore additional challenges in the area of economic, social and political to most countries and the region that will suffer most will be Africa (World Bank, 2020a). It is these that will compound the already stressful challenges and insecurity in Africa and exacerbate tensions in the continent (Neat & Desmidt, 2021).

According to World Gold Council (2020), West Africa's economy had become very promising among the various regions in the world before the pandemic. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) made up of 15 countries have a gross domestic product (GDP) of US$1 trillion (World Gold Council, 2020). It occupies around a fourth of Africa and is rich in natural resources with approximately 462 million people as of 2024 (Worldometer, 2024). In 2019, the sub-region's average growth rate was predicted to be 3.6 percent up 0.2 percentage points from the previous year. Economic growth in West Africa increased a little after a slowdown in 2016, but this has not been the same across the region. Effects of COVID-19 have also diminished the successes made from economic growth, with huge implications for human security and stability in the region. Before the pandemic, economic growth was estimated at a 4 percent increase in 2020 for the sub-region (OECD, 2020). Growth in West Africa has been affected by reduction in prices of raw materials, remittances and earnings from tourism according to Good Governance Africa (2021).

There is also overwhelming evidence to point to the fact that, the West African sub-region has not achieved the much-needed development due mostly to intractable conflicts, ethnic rivalry, insurgencies and political instability through coup d'etat (Khannenje, 2021). Flagrant disregard for rule of law has led to the rise of dictatorial governments, resulting in political instability amid ethnic violence. These developmental challenges have been the main impetus for the military intervening through coup d'états. Extremists' activities have contributed significantly to West Africa's insecurity and have thwarted the well - intended policies such as cross border trade, security cooperation through intelligence sharing and the most important, having a common market for the whole of West Africa (AU & UNDP, 2020).

Youth unemployment in the African continent stands at a staggering 60 percent, with 34 percent of the youth living on less than $1.9 a day, 59 percent also live on less than $3.2 a day, while 80 to 83 percent live on less than $5.5 per day in 2019 during the pandemic year (Boti Phiri, 2022; UNCTAD, 2021). The UN has estimated that, worldwide the population will reach 10 billion by the year 2055, with 95 percent of the growth believed to occur in least developed as well as middle-income countries. Majority of the population growth that is 57 percent that is about 1.4 billion is expected to occur in Africa (Akinola, 2023). About 60 percent of the African continent's population are currently below the age of 25, which makes it the world's region with the highest youth population (Policy Commons, 2020). The people in the West African sub-region are not enthused about the efforts put in place by their home governments in tackling poverty and the security situation of the region. This has resulted in weak institutions and poor socio-economic well-being of the citizenry in the various democracies in the West African region (Espelund, 2022; Espelund, 2023; Mbara & Graham, 2023).

International peace and security in West Africa, Sahel region during the COVID - 19 pandemic

In 2020, violent and intractable conflicts were reported within Mali and Burkina Faso and also along the border areas between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (Good Governance Africa, 2021). Instability in Burkina Faso led to the toppling of the government on 23 January, 2022 in the midst of the pandemic (BBC, 2022), while there was an attempted coup in Guinea-Bissau on 1 February 2022. Insurgents and extremists' groups have continued their attacks amidst the devastating health emergency brought to the world by the COVID-19 pandemic. Burkina Faso, has been experiencing insecurity in the North, Central North, East, Central East, and Boucle du Mouhoun regions of the country (Gnassou, 2021). These attacks increased during the pandemic with a heavy toll on public finance and human lives. In the Lake Chad Basin, about 765 violent incidents have been documented since 2019, an increase of about 35 percent from the preceding year. According to the AU and UNPD (2020), Boko Haram is known to be responsible for most of the violence, extremist and insecurity incidents being reported in the area. It is estimated that fatalities resulting from these attacks were about 3,225 in 2019 an increase of 4 percent from the preceding year 2018.

In 2020, precisely on 23 March, Boko Haram carried a fatal attack on a town called Boma, in the Basin of Lake Chad which led to a reprisal exchange of fire with military forces in Chad. The said military response by the military in Chad named "Operation Wrath of Boma" was superintended by the President of the country - Idris Déby (AU & UNPD, 2020). Even though there have been renewed assurances by the Group of 5 Sahel countries towards having a lasting peace with commitments from the international community in supporting counter-terrorism, the region is yet to know peace and stability (AU & UNPD, 2020). The insecurity in the area will be difficult to resolve without external donors help (Avis, 2020). The pandemic, together with its devastating consequences have given impetus to the various groups that are in the Sahel, such as *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to take advantage of the precarious security situation and vulnerabilities of the local communities to pursue their agenda (Coleman, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened the already insecurity in the Sahel region with Burkina Faso experiencing a high rate of fatalities due to extremists' attacks between 2018-2019 (Eisentraut, Miehe, Hartmann & Kabus, 2020). In view of the existing insecurity in the area, national governments have already channeled their meagre resources in combating armed groups including militias that have been operating in the area. There are about 14,000 UN peacekeeping forces in the area as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In addition to this, there are about 5000 troops provided by France to support the Barkhane operation to eliminate extremists' groups (Khannenje, 2021). Even though there is enormous support from the international community, armed bandits such as JNIM and ISGS have been unleashing terror against civilians as well as government forces with its attendant consequences of worsening the situation on the ground (Eisentraut et al., 2020). It is also evident that counter-insurgency by government forces against rebels has led to repression of civilians on a larger scale, especially during the pandemic. Statistics from ACLED indicate an increase of about 30 percent of government repression, with a corresponding increase in violence against civilians in about four months before the pandemic outbreak (Eisentraut et al., 2020).

Governments used emergency powers during the lockdown to suppress the rights of citizens, including excessive force on perceived opponents and perpetuated discriminatory practices against minority groups. During the lockdown in Nigeria in early April, it is believed that more people died in the hands of government armed security forces from lockdown measures than deaths resulting from COVID-19 (Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2020). In the view of HRW (2020), these state repression incidents have increased the citizenry's perceptions about governments perpetrating violence against them, heightening the rulers' dictatorial tendencies and thereby eroding the gains made under democracy.

Postponing elections due and extending term limits as occurred in Guinea and Togo have all undermined the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Human Rights and the Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government (AU, 1999) fueling the region's insecurity and providing a justification for the military to intervene through coup d'état. In Burkina Faso, extended-term limits led to an attempted coup which triggered new conflicts in the country in 2014 (IFES, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has also intersected with security institutions and governance in the African region (Haer & Demarest, 2020). It distorted elections-related activities such as registration and campaigns and even led to the postponement of elections in some countries (Haer & Demarest, 2020). According to IFES (2020), by mid-December 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic had led to the postponement of about 116 elections across about 69 countries globally including about 17 in the African region.

During the crisis in Mali, there were extra judicial killings of about 23 people, while 27 others were arrested by the military forces of Mali in the towns of Diabaly and Dogofry in between 3 February and 11 of March 2020 (AU & UNDP, 2020). There were also deadly clashes that occurred regularly between the Fulani and Dogon in addition to the Bambara people, particularly in areas where government control is not well pronounced. Restrictions due to lockdown measures from COVID-19 led to a series of human rights abuses. This has also exacerbated domestic and sexual violence, access to food and electoral restrictions (GANHRI et al., 2021). According to the AU and UNDP (2020), unemployment, loss of livelihood, poor governance systems and heightened insecurity have the tendency to trigger intractable violence.

In Niger, it is estimated that security forces arrested about 102 people from Tillabéry in the south-west region during "Operation Almahou" between March 27 and April 2 2020 (AU & UNDP, 2020). Amnesty International (AI) has also reported that 48 people were detained while on their way from a market fair in Ayorou. This occurred between the 27 and 29 March by forces belonging to the Niger government. Security forces again arrested 54 others from several villages on 2 April. Extremist group Boko Haram is believed to be responsible for human rights violations that occurred in Chad during the period. Armed insurgents in the Lake Chad province were responsible for violent attacks that led to the displacement of about 169,000 people. The attack by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin also led to the displacement of thousands of civilians (AU & UNDP, 2020).

Nigeria's first case on COVID-19 was reported on 27 February 2020 and during that period, the country was having challenges with respect to its war with Boko Haram. The biggest challenge for the Nigerian security forces was in the area of the North East, which in the view of Global Conflict Tracker had costs about 37,500 lives due to the battle between the security forces and the group. It is also estimated that about 2.5 million people have been displaced due to the conflict in Nigeria and resulted in about 244,000 refugees since 2009 (Hamrouni, 2020). Another security challenge has been that of banditry and cattle theft in the North West and the Niger Delta in the South which continues to experience insecurity despite the amnesty granted to the militants who have been vandalising oil installations and kidnapping for ransom (Albert, 2019). These security breaches have been wreaking untold havoc on human beings and even beyond international borders. The COVID-19 pandemic also added to the already precarious situation and also became another source of unconventional war being battled along the traditional threats to security (Albert, 2020).

In Nigeria, one of the positive impacts is that, the pandemic led to the pulling of resources together by both government and non-governmental organisations to support the battling of the pandemic. Religious organisations came together to stage peaceful events which brought followers of both Christianity and Islam together (Ossai, 2021). COVID-19 again helped to enable religious leaders to come to the realisation that, it is in their interest to see to it that there is a robust health system to tackle the virus and that what they should be concerned with was poor governance in Nigeria. Cardinal John Onaiyekan who used to be the Catholic Archbishop of Abuja intimated during the pandemic that, "COVID-19 has demonstrated that the whole of humanity is one. There is no distinction between Christians, Muslims or Buddhists, Africans and Europeans, black and white" (Ossai, 2021).

In addition, some self-employed people who lost their source of livelihood due to the pandemic who had no means of survival and compensation from the government resorted to criminal acts to enable them to cater for their families (Hamrouni, 2020). Some of the criminal acts included illegal mining, armed robbery, kidnapping and stealing. Campbell et al. (2020) have observed that the vacuum left in respect of lack of support for those who lost their livelihoods led them to undertake criminal acts further worsening the already unstable conditions in some African countries. This had implications for regional and sub-regional security in the continent (Al Jazeera Africa, 2020). Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2021) shows an increase in armed violence and the associated casualties between March and May 2020. Since the pandemic had caused people to remain indoors and under lockdown, insurgents also took advantage of restrictions imposed on the citizenry and attacked their victims at home (Attah, Sambo, Sule, Bello, & Saragih, 2021).

In March 2019, a group of militia from the Dogon area attacked and massacred about one hundred and sixty Fulani which included women and children. Further, in January 2021, religious fundamentalists massacred over 100 people at the Tillabéri village in Niger who were unarmed closer to the border of Burkina Faso and Mali (Pye, 2021: 4). In June 2022, another 89 people were killed in the northern village of Seytenga, which is deemed as one of the worst attacks in the history of the people in Niger (Aljazeera, 2022). Other countries in the Sahel have also experienced atrocities by militia groups in the region due to the militarisation of the area. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reported that, in Nigeria alone attacks by Boko Haram, and its breakaway group - Islamic State West Africa Province, and Fulani herdsmen have caused the internal displacement of about 2.7 million internally and about 350 000 deaths (Akinola, 2021). Political instability and insecurity in the Sahel have undermined all attempts made at developing the area to ensure sustainable human development and human security (Akinola, 2023).

Terrorists' activities by Boko Haram continues to unleash terror on the people in Nigeria and some parts of Niger. Operations by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) stretches from Northern Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, while Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its militia groups like Ansarul Islam operates mainly in Burkina Faso (Pye, 2021). Burkina Faso, indeed has become the country in the Sahel with extreme violent activities in the Sahel, which has resulted in the displacement of over 1.9 million people (Al-jazeera, 2022). The ISGS was responsible for 66 percent of the entire deaths from organised political violence in Niger. Compared to its two neighbours Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger has a smaller number of armed militia groups, but continue to face a series of terrorist attacks from Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin and other insurgencies in the Tillaberi area (ACLED, 2021).

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), about 2.5 million people in the Sahel region have been displaced internally since 2013. The highest number of these internally displaced people are in Burkina Faso, numbering about 1.5 million by 2021, the highest since (UNHCR, 2021). Mali also recorded about 400, 000 internally displaced in 2021. In the same year 2021, Niger also experienced a 53 percent increase in IDPs from the 2020 figure (UNHCR, 2021). It is estimated that, as at March 2021, a record number of 20, 000 to 30, 000 civilians flee due to attacks by armed militia because of attacks in the Bohoma area, a village situated in the area of Lac province of Chad, and this number was added to the already 208, 000 who had been displaced earlier in addition to 13, 900 refugees (Akinola, 2021).

The violent conflict between the Dogon and Bambara ethnic groups, the Fulani as well as insurgent groups in Mali have continued up to date. It is estimated that the rival parties have been responsible for the loss of lives of about 700 people and 236 insurgencies in the Mopti and Segou areas, with a further displacement of about 80,000 people internally (Good Governance Africa, 2021). There has also been increasing concerns about the synergy between drug trafficking and extremist groups in the North of Mali and the Sahel area, triggering "narcoterrorism" (Good Governance Africa, 2021). Terrorist groups such as the 'Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) or the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA) in the Sahel, and the Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)' have all provided several accounts of trading in illicit drugs across the Sahel (Al Jazeera Africa, 2020).

Violence by armed groups in Mali also increased by 38 percent leading to a lot of civilian casualties, with 'nearly a third of these incidents perpetrated by Malian security forces or the Wagner Group'. Violent attacks by extremists' groups in Niger was under decline due to the leadership of President Bazoum and concerted efforts between the Nigerien security, U.S. and European forces. But violence rose by 42 percent one month after the military take-over (Congressional Report, 2023). Data from some credible sources have indicated that, in 2022 alone, there were about 5,000 violent incidents in Mali and 4,000 in Burkina Faso (Congressional Report, 2023). The Congressional Report also emphasised that, in the last five years many people have lost their lives in terrorists attacks in the West African sub region than the rest of the world put together and this is being exploited by some armed groups (Congressional Report, 2023).

The humanitarian situation in the Sahel has deteriorated. The COVID-19 pandemic, food insecurity, the negative effects of climate change have all worsened the humanitarian conditions in the Sahel contributing to worsening human security which has affected most of the marginalised and vulnerable which includes women and children. This has affected other important sectors such as the educational sector which has led to the closure of about 5,000 schools (AU, 2022). It is estimated that, in 2019 alone, about 4.3 million people in Chad faced worsened humanitarian crises and were in need for assistance desperately, with about 46.7 percent of the citizens in the country living below the poverty level, and 3.3 million facing food insecurity (OCHA, 2020). This was indicated by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN, and the Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas that, since January 2020, "In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, casualties from terrorist attacks have increased fivefold since 2016 with over 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 as compared to an estimated 770 deaths in 2016" (UNOWAS 2020). These attacks by armed militia groups led to the displacement of more than 500,000 people (United Nations, 2020). In the first six months in 2020 alone, the Central Sahel region made up of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger suffered over 4,660 casualties as a result of insurgency by militant and terrorists' groups (ICRC, 2020).

During the first half of 2021 alone, an estimated number of over 540 conflicts resulted in several civilian casualties in Niger (Amnesty International, 2021). Children have faced mounting challenges in Niger. Out of the 3.8 million people requiring humanitarian assistance, 2.1 million are children, while 1.6 million children suffer malnutrition (United Nations Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2021). According to the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, within one year that is from February 2021 to February 2022, about 2,000 civilians were killed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The International Committee of the Red Cross has also stated that, a record number of about 1.5 million people in the Sahel live in communities that are "virtually impossible to access humanitarian aid and essential services" (ICRC, 2022). In 2020/2021, 64.5 percent out of the 150 million people who lived in the Sahel were young people who were less than 25 years. This youthful population when properly developed could be a vital human resource who can help propel the development in the region as well as the global market. Good governance and investment in education of the youth in the Sahel can help ensure economic growth and development in the region. This can help check the increasing insecurity due to political instability and violent extremism since the youth who are unemployed and are easily recruited into these terrorist groups will find something worth doing in order not to fall into extremist groups since 'the devil finds work for the idle hand'.

COVID-19 was also a hot topic among terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State which released statements about the pandemic on their social media platforms (Wilson Centre, 2020). These two extremist organisations gave their followers notices concerning the spread of the infectious virus and how to combat it, with al-Qaeda providing information to the effect that "Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion" (Wilson Centre, 2020). When all countries were pulling resources together to combat the devastating effects of the infectious virus from the pandemic, the groups also took the opportunity to recruit militants. The groups also resorted to propaganda both in English and Islam by attributing the outbreak of the pandemic to 'the oppression of Muslims and on the decadence of the West.

Threats to peace, governance and security in the West African-Sahel region

The Sahel region, is 'a semi-arid belt of land' in the African continent which extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea and includes countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Nigeria, Mauritania, Sudan, and Eritrea. The Sahel region 'lies astride the Maghreb States and stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Horn of Africa, Indian Ocean', and spans about ten million square meters (Zoubir, 2022). The region is characterised by a transitional ecosystem which extends from the Sahara Desert to the north and from the savannas to the south, with peculiar environmental as well as socio-economic challenges. It is primarily known for its vulnerability to droughts, desertification, food insecurity and political instability due to climate change (Brottem & Turner, 2019). The Sahelian region has experienced devastating consequences from a myriad of socio-political issues such as poor governance, political instability, terrorism, ethnic rivalry, youth unemployment, drug and human trafficking (Zoubir, 2022).

The region is fraught with security challenges due to several militant groups such as Ansar Dine, the Movement of Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al-Mourabitoune, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), and other extremist armed militia groups (Zoubir, 2022). The Sahel has become the theater of armed violence in the last two decades. These challenges confronting the sub-region include the states there being fragile, weak governance structures, youth unemployment, ethnic rivalry, climate change, foreign exploitation of resources, and political crisis due to frequent coup d'etat (Zoubir, 2022). In addition to these, there has been democratic challenges in recent times due to "creeping acts of impunity' where democratic governments who are intoxicated from the riches of political power change their countries constitutions to have unlimited terms to continue to hang onto power (Good Governance Africa, 2021).
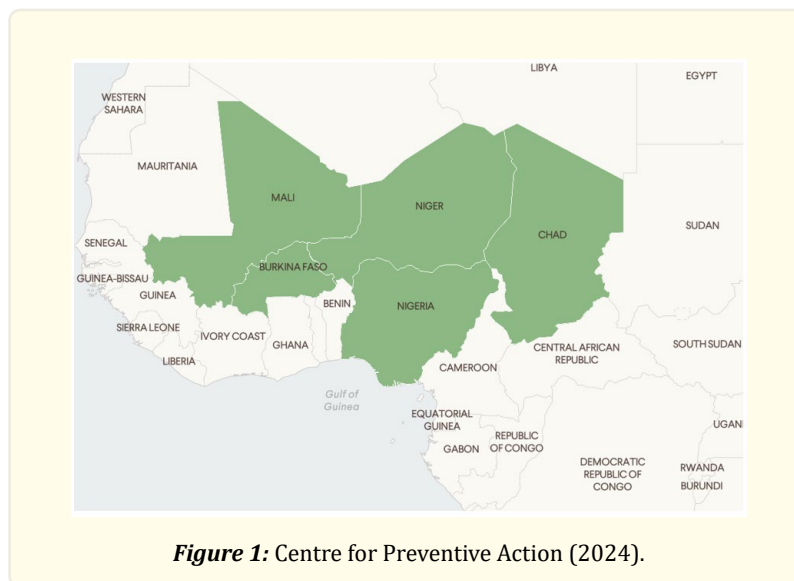
Figure 1: Centre for Preventive Action (2024).

ACLED (2023) has indicated that, the citizenry in Central Sahel, namely Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are experiencing extreme violent conflict and inter-ethnic violence in the ongoing instability in the Sahel in the last decade caused by armed Islamist groups with links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Sahel Province. ACLED intimated further that an estimated 12,000 people mostly civilians were killed only in 2023. Moreover, a record number of 2.8 million people are internally displaced in Central Sahel, which includes about 2.1 million in Burkina Faso alone. Violence has also occurred between rival ethnic armed militias and community-based armed groups leading to reprisal attacks and several human rights abuses (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). Armed Islamist groups have been perpetuating attacks against civilians, amidst egregious violation of the rights of children and sexual violence against women. These militia groups use sieges, kidnappings, lethal weapons as tactics of war in order to have advantage and control over logistics supply routes. Moreover, these Armed Islamist groups have been committing war crimes by destroying civilian objects, blocking and looting humanitarian aid and convoys supplying deliveries to civilians resulting in starvation, destroying places of worship, historical artefacts, health centers, food and water supply services in clear breach of International Humanitarian Laws.

Insurgents, in addition target secular educational institutions that belong to the state, threaten, abduct and kill teachers. State backed - militias in Burkina Faso, particularly the 'Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland' (VDP), are complicit in crimes against humanity along ethnic lines.

Since the inception of 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has been highlighting the deteriorating security in Burkina Faso, where it is believed over 2,100 civilians have suffered fatalities many of them through attacks by armed militia groups. In late August, 2024 a group affiliated to al-Qaeda-for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) staged a deadly attack in the country, that killed between 200 to 600 people in Barsalogho (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). In the midst of escalating tensions and violent clashes in the north of Mali since August 2023, several thousands of civilians have been displaced, while others have moved to safe places to avoid being recruited by armed militia groups. Violent attacks by the Military of Mali (FAMa) and Russian paramilitary groups were characterised by incessant and indiscriminate killing of unarmed civilians, especially the Tuareg, Arabic-speaking and Fulani ethnic groups with attacks on their properties and gross abuse of their basic liberties.
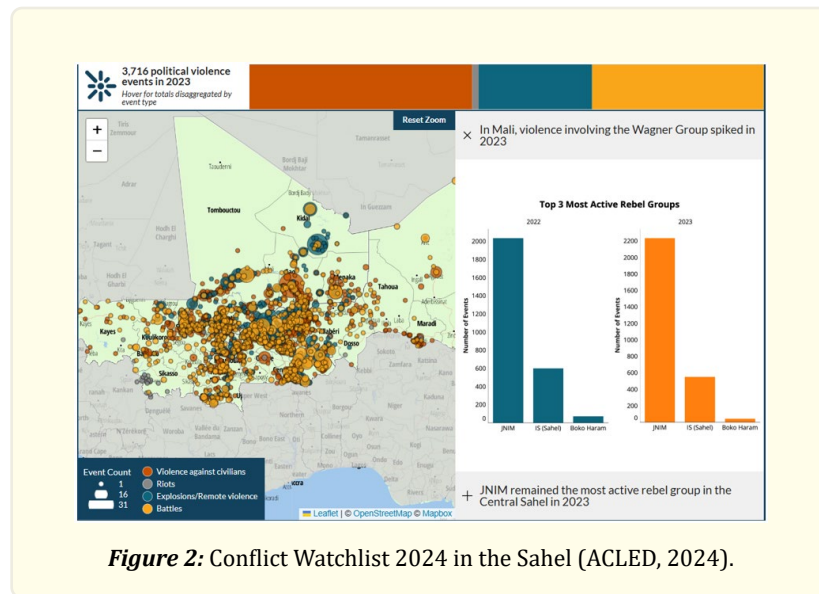
Figure 2: Conflict Watchlist 2024 in the Sahel (ACLED, 2024).

In September 2023 JNIM staged an unprecedented deadly attack in Mali's capital, that resulted in the burning of a World Food Programme (WFP) plane. After the attack, many individuals from the Fulani community were arrested (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2024). Armed Islamist groups have been attacking civilians deliberately, ostensibly to put pressure on communities to cooperate with them or displace them forcibly, using blockades to seal communities as forms of punishment to punish those that support the military. These strategies block access to people who needs assistance and also inhibit human rights groups from accessing vital information. The new Special Representative and Head of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Leonardo Santos recounted political violent attacks that continue to occur in the Sahel region, especially in the Alliance of Sahel States or l'Alliance des États du Sahel (AES) in September 2023 to the UN Security Council (Security Council Report, 2024).

Violent attacks in AES countries "reached a record-high of 7,620 in the six months of 2024, an increase of nine percent compared to the previous year's figure, 37 percent as compared to the 2022 year, and an exponential increase to a staggering 190 percent compared to 2021" (Security Council Report, 2024). In addition, the AES countries are also losing large territories to armed militia groups. This is rapidly occurring in the Gao and Menaka regions in Mali and in Burkina Faso, which lost about half of the country to terrorist groups. On 17 September 2024, JNIM staged a violent attack on a Police Academy and Bamako international airport, Mali, which led to the death of several people. Security Council members condemned these attacks in press releases issued on 29 August and 20 September, 2024 respectively (Security Council Report, 2024).

These security breaches have fueled the litany of insurgencies and political upheavals in the sub-region. The coup in Mali, Niger, Guinea and Burkina Faso are typical examples of "coup culture" in West Africa in total disregard of the Lome Declaration of 2000. Even, the government of Togo, Faure Eyadema has changed the country's constitution to have unlimited term in office. In recent times, leaders in Mali, Burkina Faso and Chad have all had their leaders coming from the country's army. According to the African Union Peace and Security Council (PSC) these have been recurring due to deficiencies in good governance. Freedom House (2020) report documents information about insecurity in five West African countries namely - Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Nigeria which have been retrogressing in democratic dividends. The army in Mali staged a coup d'état on 18 August, 2020, which resulted in the overthrow of President Boubacar Keita leading to the dismissal of the government and the dissolution of Parliament. An interim government was formed in November 2020, presided over by President Bah N'Daw (Al Jazeera Africa, 2020). In Guinea, President Alpha Conde was ousted through a military coup which resulted in the country being suspended from the sub-regional grouping ECOWAS. The leaders of the coup in both countries are now using populists means to perpetuate their rule in the country.

Endorsement for these military interventions results from poor governance by the democratic leaders and attempts to extend their term limits through the manipulation of the country's constitutions. The continued stay of the military in power after staging a successful coup and the sub-regional bloc inability to enforce the various ECOWAS and AU principles towards the return to constitutional rule have undermined good governance in Africa and the sub region (KAIPTC, 2020). Current happenings in post-coup countries in Guinea, Mali, Chad, Sudan, and Burkina Faso, coupled with failed coup attempts in Niger and Guinea-Bissau, where the military juntas' are not showing any signs of returning those countries to democratic rule are clear manifestations of deficits in democracy in the sub-region (Elischer & Lawrance, 2022). It is well-known that many West African economies are on the brink of collapse due to the resurgence of "new wars", which has resulted in a lot of fatalities and has become a huge concern for the international humanitarian community (Mendy & Mendy, 2024).

Source: (ACLED, 2022).
Figure 3: Political violence events between 2019 and 2022.
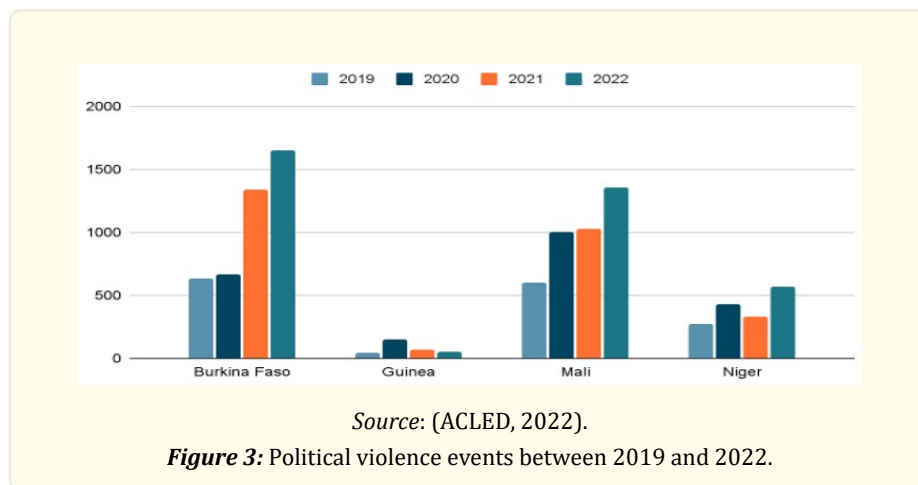
Extreme violence in these communities converge around several causes which include poverty, lack of respect for fundamental human rights, poor governance, corruption, racial and ethnic marginalisation, and proliferation of small arms (Annan, 2014). It is on record that, from January 2019 to December 2021, the West African sub region had the highest number of cases with respect to terrorist attacks on the African continent. It is estimated that, during this period, the sub region experienced about 2,602 armed attacks which resulted in about 10,899 deaths (ACSRT, 2022). It is estimated that in 2019 alone, spending on security in Burkina Faso constituted about 3.7 percent of GDP (Gnassou, 2021). This was expected to rise to 4 percent in 2020 while the government tries to have control on the security situation in the country. The humanitarian crisis has reached alarming proportions since jihadist attacks sored up and worsened the insecurity in the country. In the view of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNO-CHA), internally displaced persons (IDPs) have increased from '81,964 to 843,329,' from 27 January, 2020 to 22 April 2020 (Gnassou, 2021). In addition to this worsening insecurity, the Conseil National de Secours d'Urgence et de Réhabilitation (CONASUR) has stated that, the estimated IDPs is over a million people as at 10 November, 2020 (Gnassou, 2021).

The World Food Program (WFP) (2020) estimated that there will be a 70 percent rise in food insecurity to 21 million people in West Africa before the outbreak of the pandemic and forecasts that an extra 22 million will be dependent on food aid. The pandemic has worsened this situation.
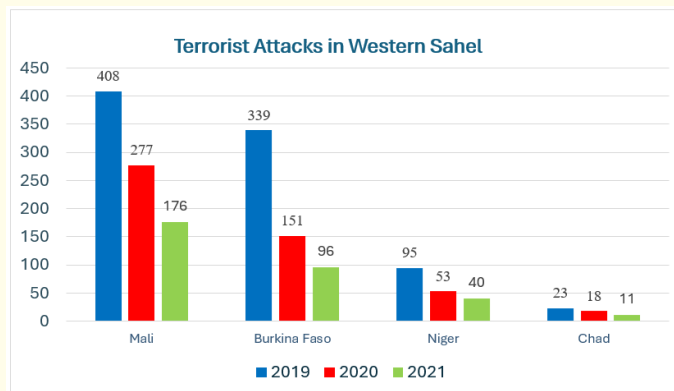
Source: ACLED (2022).

Figure 4: Number of Political Violence Occurrences, 2019-2022.

Blattman and Miguel (2010) have intimated that 'low levels of economic development, slow or negative economic growth and increases in food prices' heighten 'social unrest and violence' in society. Dr. Ibn Chambas, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and the Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, has stated clearly the security implications of COVID -19. He has opined that, insurgents and extremists' groups took advantage of the health emergency to stage attacks in the Sahel area (KAIPTC, 2020). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also indicated that instability in Niger has resulted in 237,000 refugees and 300,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Further attacks in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions in Niger led to an increase in additional 4,000 refugees and 2,000 displaced persons in 2021in addition to the already high numbers.

In June 2021, armed men within the locality of Solhan in northeast Burkina Faso near the Nigerien border staged violent attacks on the village. This led to the death of 138 people in addition to 40 injuries. By January 2022, the military in Burkina Faso overthrew the civilian government of President Roch Kaboré. ACLED (2023) has observed that, jihadist activities have increased exponentially since 2018 in Niger, and this led to the country being labeled as the highest record holder for violence in 2021, with unprecedented fatalities. The personalisation of political power in the hands of the leaders in the West African, Sahel region has been the bane of military insurrections in the politics of the region. In Guinea alone, the citizens and the military were discontent about the long stay in power of two regimes after the country's independence—President Sékou Touré and Lansana Conté, who together were in power for 26 and 24 years respectively totaling five decades of the country's history. Africa was the region that was hit hard by terrorism in 2021 (Ledererun, 2021). The Sahel region has continued to be the epicentre of violent extremism and intractable conflicts in Africa, and this has been compounded by military insurrections, jihadists activities, local armed conflicts, such as farmer-herder conflicts, drug and human trafficking and proliferation of weapons (Akinola & Ramontja, 2023).

In the view of Pye (2021), there is the need for a concerted effort to ensure good governance in the Sahel as a strategic intervention towards dealing with violent extremism to end the cycle of political instability confronting the sub-region, as emphasised by the EU and Africa strategy.

Coup d'etat and the worsening insecurity in West Africa-Sahel region

During the 20th and 21st centuries, the military in Africa staged coups more than any other continent (Falola, 2022). Coup d'états occur when the military overthrows a 'legitimate sitting government' by the use of the armed forces of a country and in some instances the use of outside forces such as mercenaries. Luttwak (1979, p.26 - 7) sees a coup d'état as the "infiltration of a small, but critical

segment of the State apparatus which is then used to displace the government". Clayton Thyne defines coup d"état as 'overt and illegal attempts by the military and other elites working with the state apparatus to forcefully unseat the sitting executive'. Out of the four hundred and ninety-two (492) coups and attempted coups that has occurred globally, two hundred and twenty (220) alone have occurred in the African continent which has seen the most coups in the world, from 1952 to October 2023. One hundred and nine (109) out of the two hundred and twenty (220), were successful, putting Africa first on the score sheet on the list of regions of the world where the military has ruled the longest.

Further, of the 54 countries in the African continent, 45 have experienced at least one coup since African countries gained independence (Angalapu, 2023). The first coup in Egypt served as the catalyst for others in the continent, leading to the overthrow of several other constitutional governments such as that of the Sudan in 1958, Ethiopia in 1960, Zaire, Kinshasa in 1960, Togo in 1963, Congo - Brazzaville in 1963 and Benin, Dahomey in 1963. Added to this, the military was emboldened to overthrow constitutionally elected governments in Gabon in 1964, Algeria in 1965, Burundi in 1965, the Central African Republic in 1966, Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) in 1966, Ghana in 1966, Nigeria in 1966, Sierra Leone in 1967, Mali in 1968, Libya in 1969 and Somalia in 1969. Since then, military takeovers have become a recurring feature of Africa's political landscape (Eshiet, 2022). There was a decline in the surge of military coup in Africa, until during and after the pandemic between 2020-2023 coups resurfaced in sub-Saharan Africa, a stark reminder of the fragility of many countries in Africa. They took place amid heightened pressures in the aftermath of the global pandemic, deteriorating security situation, domestic socio-political instability, and rising geopolitical tensions. It is worthy to note that, the number of coups d'etat had reduced drastically in Africa in the last seven decades until after the pandemic.

It is abundantly clear that, with about 220 coup attempts that have occurred in the continent since independence, one can pinpoint that there is a 'deep-rooted, structural civil-military imbalance' that has become endemic in the African continent (Wilén, 2024). Sudan holds the highest record with 17 coup attempts, while Burkina Faso comes first on the list of countries with successful coups with a record 9. During the first two decades of the new century, coup attempts in the African continent went down to 39, but rose again between 2020 and 2023, with 16 coup attempts and 9 successful ones, a success rate of 56 percent. However, Ayoola, Ojo and Kugbayi (2024) put the number of coups in the world since 1950 at 486, with about 214 occurring in Africa alone. Out of this figure, 106 of them were successful in the overthrow of both civilian and military governments. These military coups in Africa have largely occurred in West Africa. Between 1960 and 1969, the West African sub-region was responsible for 51.3 percent of all coups occurring in Africa (Wilén, 2024). 49.5 percent of all coup d'etat occurring in Africa between 1970 to 1989 occurred in West Africa, while an astonishing 53.7 percent of coup occurred between 1990 to 2010.

Mendy and Mendy (2024) have intimated that, the prevalence of coup in Africa has been very challenging, especially with the happenings in West Africa. There has been sixteen coup attempts in Africa in less than 4 years, 9 of which were successful (Duzor & Williamson, 2023). Further, two more coup attempts occurred in Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau in November and December 2023 (Ochieng'Opalo, 2024). This depicts a record increase in the number of attempted coup as well as those that were successful with some scholars describing it as an 'epidemic of coups' (Nichols, 2021) or 'contagious coups', with 'coups within coups' (Wilén, 2024) occurring in no less than three African countries after the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, the continent saw six coups and three coup attempts, a vast increase over the previous two decades (UNDP, 2023, p. 3). Over all globally, sub-Sahara Africa has experienced the highest number of coups, that is the largest 46.5 percent, next is Latin America and the Caribbean 24.1 percent and the Middle East region with 11.2 percent. In the last two decades, the relative incidence of coups soared higher towards sub-Saharan Africa between 2000-2023, with about 70.7 percent of military take overs occurring in this region, followed by East Asia and the Pacific with 10.7 percent and Latin America and the Caribbean 8 percent.

Most of the coups that have occurred, happened in the Sahel region, which has been a region where jihadists activities have soared the last decade (Wilén, 2024). The Sahel region has been transformed into 'an impressive ecosystem of international security assistance' over the past decade. In countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, key roles are played in governance by the military historically, giving them the opportunity to intervene when there are deficits in democratic rule to serve their narrow parochial interest

(Obinna & Semudura, 2024). In the view of Elischer (2018), Niger gained independence from France in 1960, but has since experienced several military interventions and political insurrections (Elischer, 2018). Similarly, Burkina Faso and Mali have also had their fair share with coups, dictatorial governments and complaints of ethnic marginalisation right after independence.

From the inception of its independence, Mali has witnessed five military coup d'etat. The country was stable from 1992 to 2012, when it was under democratic rule. But, after the coup in 2012, and France's intervention thereafter, Mali has been experiencing political instability (Zoubir, 2022). After the coup, the military junta expelled the United Nations' stabilisation mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in June 2023 which had kept about 13,000 troops in the country for a decade. The military leaders further expelled France in 2022, which was spearheading the largest counter terrorism operation in the region with about 5,000 troops. The European Union (EU), until 2024 had four Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions ongoing in Niger and Mali all geared towards ensuring security and the rule of law in the two countries (Wilén, 2024). These historical pasts have in no small way contributed to the vulnerability of these countries to military interventions (Obinna & Semudura, 2024). As the epicentre of the violent conflicts in the Sahel, Mali continues to be fragile due to the inter-jihadist violence between the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) - operating in the country as well as Burkina Faso and Niger - and the ISGS continue to destabilise the country (ACLED, 2021).

Since 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic in three years down the line, there have been thirteen coup attempts in Africa, with eight of them being successful resulting in military take overs in Burkina Faso, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Sudan (Akumah & Osuagwu, 2023). Indeed, to depict clearly about the current situation in West Africa, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2023 has opined that, the recent spate of military take overs in Africa is not showing any sign of ending. And that, military insurrections in Africa are back on the table of Africa's security agenda (Akumah & Osuagwu, 2023).

Source: Fleck (2023).
Figure 5: Number of coups d'état per year in Africa since 1950.
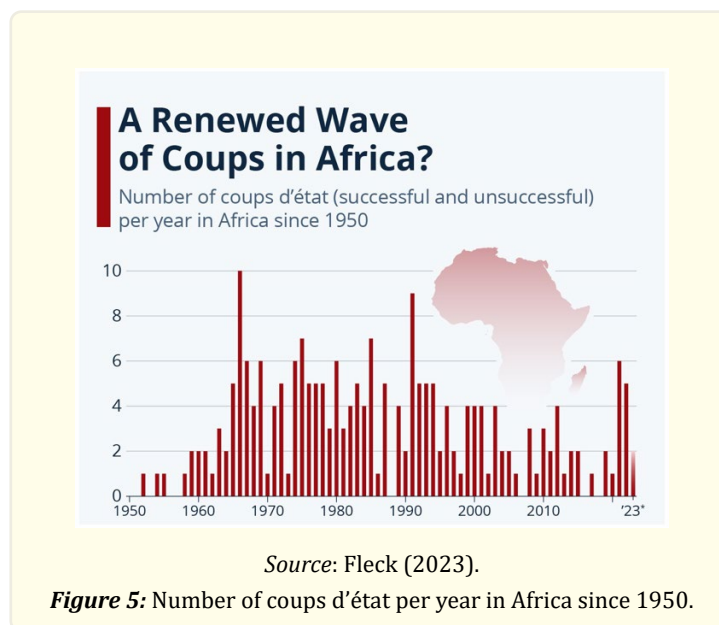
Democratisation and democratic consolidation in the African continent progressed steadily until 2020 when the continent, again slipped to the arena of coup d'etats in Burkina Faso in January 2020, Chad in April 2021, Mali in August, 2021 and Guinea Conakry in September 2021. Sudan also experienced a military take-over in October, 2022, Niger in July, 2023 and Gabon in August 2023 (Elischer & Lawrance, 2022; McGowan, 2023). In 2021, 14 African countries had its leaders engaging in extra constitutional extensions of their term limits beyond two terms, which in no doubt has engendered coup in the region since 2015 (Wilén, 2024). The high rise in coups in the Sahel region is due to the poor performance of civilian regimes, and this makes it imperative for leaders in the African continent to respond appropriately to the socio-economic needs of the citizenry (Mbara & Graham, 2023).

The worsening security in the Sahel went up by about 50 percent in 2022, due mainly to the activities of violent extremists' groups (Wudil et al. 2022). The leaders of the coup in Niger have proposed 'a three-year transition' before handing over power to democratically elected governments and the junta in Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso have also sounded the same chord (Engels, 2022). The consequences of the crisis in the Sahel are legend, with widespread despair among the citizenry, high inflation, burgeoning youth unemployment, food insecurity, energy crisis and increasing drought due to climate change. From the perspective of the rational choice approach, prospective coup plotters usually compare the benefits to be derived from staging successful coups as compared to the continuous stay of the ruling government in power (Mendy & Mendy, 2024).

Coup d'etats occur in response to complaints by the citizenry on pressing social issues, especially when there is poor governance, deteriorating standards of living, and worsening insecurity (Mendy & Mendy, 2024). In view of the fact that, these unpleasant conditions prevail in sub-Saharan politics, the military always steps in through coup d'etat when civilian governments manipulate the constitution to elongate their rule and justify their removal from office (Mendy & Mendy, 2024). Coup d'états undermine the rule of law, constitutionalism, and electoral processes, invariably eroding trust in democratic institutions. Moreover, anytime the military takes over fundamental human rights of the people are abused, repression occurs amidst clamp down of political opponents, which stifle dissent and civil liberties. One of the cardinal virtues of democratisation is decentralisation, and countries all over the world use it as a measure of growth of effective governance (Rahayu, 2023). Powell et al. (2019), have opined that the inability of governments in sub-Sahara and Western Africa to consolidate democracy is due to lack of participation by the people on the ground to the governance of the country, hence the military intervening through coup.

State fragility theory is the approach used by researchers to understand and analyse the key features as well as causal factors that predispose a state to being vulnerable to failure or collapse. The theory helps one to examine the challenges and significant causes in a state that result in its inability to govern effectively and ensure the provision of essential services to the citizens. The key underlying premise of the theory is the absence of a functioning authority within the state to primarily ensure security within its borders. In essence, it emphasise the inability of a government to maintain the rule of law, ensure justice delivery by the lawful institutions within the state to ensure fairness (Okunade & Ogunnubi, 2022). Even though scholars differ in opinion as to the main causes of fragility and its characterisation, fragile states have some minimal features such as weak, ineffective and inefficient institutions, widespread poverty, high unemployment, a disintegrated society, inability to deal with governance and economic challenges, violent extremism and intractable wars. Rosvadoski-da-Silva et al. (2021) on the other hand have emphasised that, fragile states lack legitimacy and the capacity to enforce rules, uncertainties in governance and poor economic indicators such as poor human development and low GDP. Gardner (2021) has also opined that, a fragile state is characterised by 'rule of the might' as compared to the rule of law.
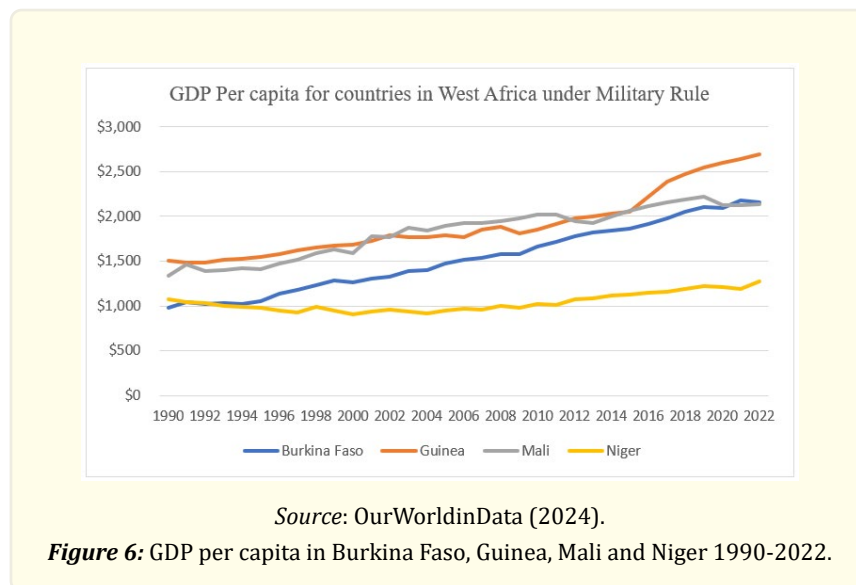
According to Obasesam and Iwara (2021), dictatorial and repressive regimes in Africa results in declining living conditions and multidimensional poverty due to the failure of the leaders to develop the economies of these countries to ensure prosperity. For the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the resurgence of coups in the West African sub-region has negative implications in the political, socio-economic, and security situation in the continent. It is therefore incumbent on ECOWAS to uphold the tenets of democracy in the West African sub-region in line with the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections, Governance and Human Rights in Africa. Some scholars are of the view that, the resurgence of coups in Africa is as a result of the recession of democracy in the continent (Harkness, 2016).

Coups and unstable political environment threaten economic development and growth in the economy. The effects of the coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali extended beyond the borders of these countries consequently affecting negatively regional security and stability. The worsening security situation has affected coastal West African nations such as Ghana, Togo and Benin experiencing attacks and terrorist activities. Military insurrections in the Sahel region have also led to the proliferation of armed groups, human and drug trafficking, terrorism and transnational crimes which poses challenges to international peace and security (Obinna & Semudura, 2024).

## Effects of coup d'etat on economic growth and human security

The Sahel region is one of the most deprived with extreme poverty in the African continent and the world. About 4.2 million of its inhabitants are displaced according to the UN refugee agency in 2023, a further 3.7 million people are also internally displaced, and over 10 million people required humanitarian intervention in 2022 alone (Buettner, 2022). These statistics depicts clearly the worsening security situation as a result of the military coups, which is having a negative toll on humanity in the Sahel region. Leaders of the various military coup have also been emboldened by divisions in the front of West African nations, with some lending support to the junta and others threatening to offer support to the group should the ECOWAS intervene militarily in Niger (Singh, 2022). Further, dynamics in power relations and more security interventions by global powers in the region has contributed significantly to the worsening security situation in the Sahel region. It is common knowledge that, France and Western powers are the key suppliers of 'weapons and ammunitions to the West African subregion. Currently, there has been shift in power relations with mercenaries from Russia's Wagner intervening under the guise of protecting humanitarian abuse of the Sahel region and to also promote development (Nadzharov & Entina, 2023).

Even though, the people in the sub - region prefer democracy as compared to military governments according to Afrobarometer Network report (2023), poor economic conditions under democratic governments have been serving as a catalyst for military adventurism. Day to day, the citizenry are not sure whether the democratic governments can fulfill their aspirations, the governments are also unstable, amending the constitution to perpetuate their rule amidst poor socio-economic conditions (UNDP, 2023; Afrobarometer Network, 2023; Afrobarometer, 2023b). Countries such as Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, and Guinea-Bissau where there have been coups have had adverse effects in their economies. Investor confidence dips down when there is political instability and this deters business and investment leading to capital flight and economic decay. Further, coups shift attention from social spending to heightened expenditure in security which disrupts government spending in the long run, increase government budgetary deficits which consequently affect public services leading to increased poverty amidst high unemployment. The dire effects of these economic downturn from coups exacerbate social tensions and grievances and further leads to the cycle of political instability and conflict (Obinna & Semudura, 2024).

Source: OurWorldinData (2024).
Figure 6: GDP per capita in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger 1990-2022.

Note: This data is adjusted for inflation and for differences in cost of living between countries.

Moreover, the economy suffers a lot any time there is a coup d'etat, because it has a negative toll on the state's development. Research has shown that, coup d'etats slows down the GDP growth of a country by 2 or 3 percent (Ero & Mutiga, 2024). Before the military take-over in Niger in July 2023, the World Bank had projected a drop in the level of poverty in the country. After the military junta, the Bretton Woods institution indicated that extreme poverty levels will go up as high as 44.1 percent, meaning that an estimated record number of about 700,000 people will fall into the extreme poverty bracket in 2023 alone (Rizk, 2023). In 2020, Mali's economy went into a recession (World Bank, 2022). This development is occurring while resources are being channeled to security spending to the detriment of social and infrastructural spending for the people. Commercial transactions in the country's rich resources such as gold, uranium and oil have the potential to reverse this downward trend, but the revenue will be channeled into defence spending to maintain the military in power (Wilén, 2024).


Figure 7: (World Bank, 2024).
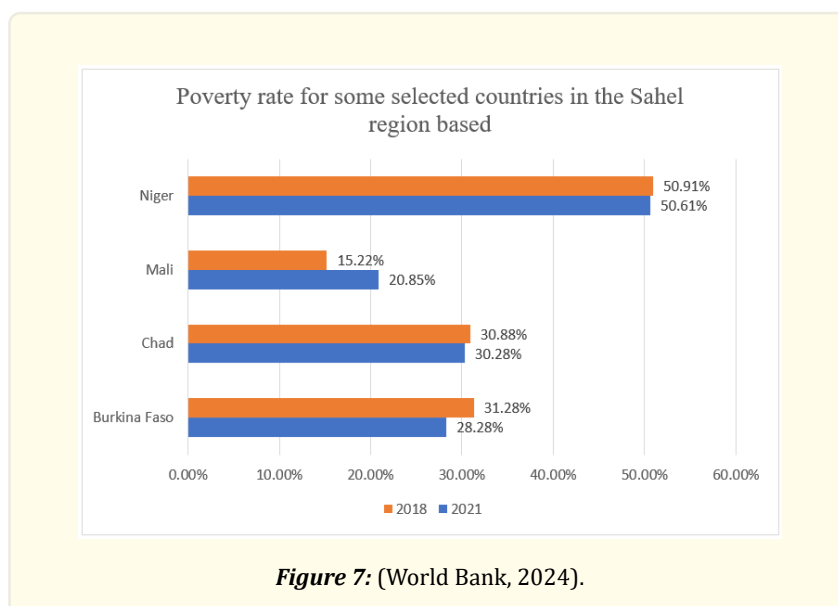
The Sahel region risk experiencing more coups as the success rate has become high recently serving as a catalyst, with existing norms and values not being deterrent enough amidst deterioration in security as the military dominate in politics while other authoritarian regimes engage these coup leaders (Ero & Murithi, 2024 Mutiga). There is stark difference between civilian and military governments when it comes to the sharing of scarce resources, which always tilt in favour of defence when the military is in power so as to consolidate their stay (Bonga & Mahuku, 2022). Coup d'états in Africa of late and in the recent past have posed a significant threat to democratic governance, security of the people as well as political stability in the region. Beginning from the 1990s many countries in Africa made significant progress in democratic rule, but military interventions have been the bane of the development of the continent, posing risks for governments, violation of fundamental human rights, deteriorating economy and insecurity (Obinna & Semudara, 2024).

The Institute for Economics and Peace define terrorism as 'the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation' (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020: 6). During the year that the pandemic broke up in 2019, the impact of terrorism on the economy of countries in sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to be US$12.5 billion, while globally its impact was US$26.4 billion (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). The economic effects entails both direct and indirect costs, among which are deaths, injuries, destruction of property and negative impact on Gross Domestic Product (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). The direct costs entail costs incurred by people who are victims of terrorist acts, cost by government to maintain security as well as repairs on infrastructure destroyed, with the indirect costs stemming from loss of income in the future, physical as well as psychological trauma (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020). The social impact of

extreme violence is interpreted in terms of how governments or activities by groups within the society affect people or policies. There is therefore an intricate relationship between the economy and social issues.

In Burkina Faso, about 40.1 percent of the people in the country live below the poverty line. The country occupies 185th position out of 188 states on the Human Development Index (HDI), and ranks 144th out of 157 countries on the World Bank's new Human Capital Index (HCI), while Mali and Niger occupy the 184th and 189th rank respectively (UNDP, 2020). Only 60 percent of the Burkinabe territory is controlled by the state authority with the remaining territories in the hands of extremists' groups that have 'turned the country into an arena of conflict (Aljazeera, 2022). In Mali, the state is fragile which has led to crisis in governance with high levels of poverty, youth unemployment, climate change and socio-economic and political inequality. These unresolved issues are what has contributed to the springing up of armed non state actors such as the ISGS and the AQIM who mobilise to recruit new members in areas that the government do not have representatives to provide law and order (Akinola & Ramontja, 2023). This is replicated in most of the countries in the Sahel - Nigeria, Chad, Cameroun, The Gambia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Mauritania, Senegal and Sudan. These countries are characterised by leadership that is weak, poor socio-economic conditions, political crisis, high rate of poverty and insecurities.

Figure 8: World Bank (2020).
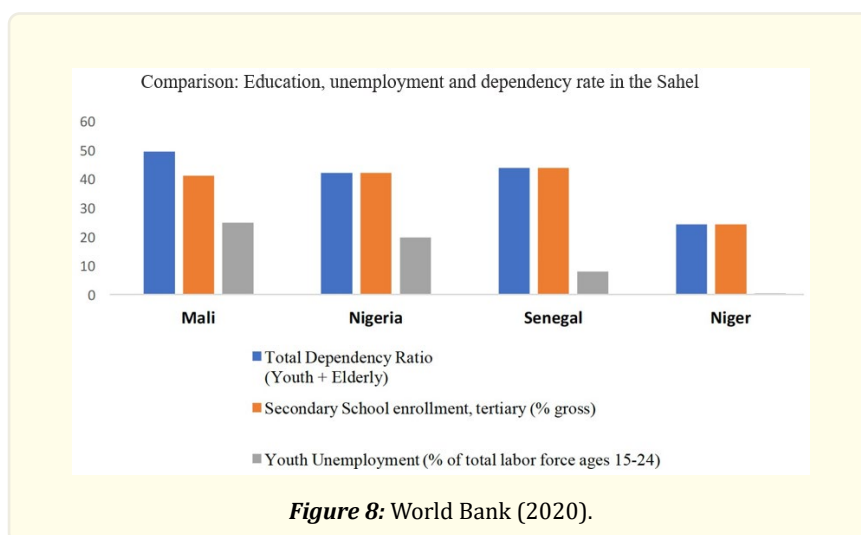
There is abundance of scholarly work that establishes the intricate relationship between governance, peace and security. These have been emphasised in important documents such as the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, as well as the United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These three fundamental issues are key pre-requisites for sustainable development (Akinola, 2023). Using Data from 113 countries, it became clear that, in countries where there is high political instability, economic growth becomes slower as compared to those with stable political atmosphere (Alesina, Özler, Roubini & Swagel, 1996). The findings by Alesina et al. (1996) shows that, the causes of political instability are persistent and manifests with similar features, once a government is toppled or collapses, there is the likelihood that future governments will also experience instability. Gurgul and Lach (2013) in a similar study in changes in ten CCE countries have also confirmed that, political instability results in negative economic growth (Shehzadi, Siddique & Majeed, 2019).

Military expenditure by the governments of Africa was estimated at $43 billion in 2020 (Faria, 2021). The African continent accounts for about 2 percent of military expenditure globally (Saleh, 2022). In 2022, Algeria had the highest defence budget on the African continent with $10 billion, followed by Nigeria's $5.9 billion and Morocco $5.4 billion (Saleh, 2022). In spite of these large military expenditures, violent extremism continues to ravage the continent with armed militia groups visiting terror and mayhem on the people in the

continent. Those who bear the brunt of these hardships are women, children, the disabled and other vulnerable groups in the African region. Even though women constitute more than half of the continent's population, they have few representations in government and have minimum leadership roles. According to the world Bank (2022), women occupy twenty five percent of decision-making positions, while they constitute less than forty percent of the working force in developing countries (World Bank, 2022). The AU has estimated that, it will cost about $12.6 billion to help the poor and marginalised in the region (AU, 2022). Democratic development in the Sahel has been fraught with several challenges as a result of both internal and external causal factors that has hampered the efficiency of the leadership in their performance (Soule, 2024).

Further, in 2019, the WB stated that poverty level in Mali rose to 42.3 percent and the incidence was in the rural areas (World Bank, 2022). In the view of Akinola (2021), anytime the military takes over in Africa they cite poor economic conditions and worsening democratic governance, but military regimes have performed poorly as compared to their civilian counterparts (Akinola, 2021). In 2017 alone, 13 coups occurred globally, but all of these occurred in Africa, except for one that occurred in Myanmar (Dunst, 2021; Duzor & Williamson, 2023). It is also believed that, the presence of the mercenaries from Russia also poses security threats to the civilians in Mali. It is estimated that, the Russian mercenary Group Wagner and the Malian military has been responsible for the massacre of about 500 civilians in Moura in 2022 (Congressional Report, 2023). During the One Hundred and Eighteenth US Congress First Session hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, a member of the Committee reiterated the point that, the military always accused their civilian counterparts of their failure in democracy, hence their intervention. But, noted that, when the military intervenes it worsens the lives of the people, while the report also highlighted the fact that the number of deaths resulting from political violence in Mali increased by 150 percent and 77 percent in Burkina Faso in 2022 alone. The Sahel region has been unstable politically with frequent military take overs especially in Mali from 2012 to 2023 (Mahakwe, 2024).

Conclusion

The pandemic has been a challenge to human security worldwide and contributed to instability and violent conflict across the globe. Developing countries and conflict - ridden areas such as the West African, Sahel have been some of the areas worst affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic. There are pockets of violence in the sub-region due to activities by Boko Haram, IS, AQIM, Al Shabab and other extremists in the Sahel. There have been coup d'états in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Niger and Guinea. The West African region has experienced a reversal in democratic governance, worsening the security challenges in the sub region. The security situation will deteriorate as the effects of the pandemic continues. There is an imperative need, for the leadership for the sub-regional group ECOWAS to pull resources together, resolve the traditional threats to peace and security and improve the development of the sub-region. It is time to do away with rancour, ethnic rivalry and tensions to deal with the security challenges in West Africa, increasing cross border trade and taking advantage of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AFCTA). Lockdown measures affected the economies of most countries in the sub-region and impacted negatively on governance.

Government budgets have been severely strained by the economic fallout from lockdown measures which restricted government effectiveness and placed further stresses on fragile governments. Increased trade among countries in the sub region can help resolve some of these difficulties in the short term. Alternative livelihoods need to be developed so that most of the people in the informal sector, especially women will be able to feed their families as the effects of the pandemic continue to affect the economies of African countries. To protect civilians from attacks by armed groups, the militaries of the various countries in West Africa, Sahel region must put in place clear guidelines during security operations in order to minimise civilian casualties. Further, the political authorities, as well as security forces must refrain from collaborations with ethnic militias with bad human rights records.

It must be acknowledged that, the international community has always directed attention to the resolution of the Sahelian problem by focusing on military solutions instead of socio-economic and political issues, and this has been one of the bane of the coups in the area, hence the need to have a change in approach to understand the continuous rise in violence in the area (Adetula, Murithi & Buchanan-Clarke, 2018). Countries that sell arms to combatants must put down additional measures to end the proliferation of arms in the Sahel region so as to address the ongoing security challenges. Political authorities and military heads in the region should collabo-

rate with both national and international human rights and independent institutions to investigate all human rights abuses that come under the Geneva Conventions regarding war, so that those who are found culpable are brought to the law. The impunity must end, and there must be a day of accountability. Further, harassment against Civil Society Organisations who have been advocating for the protection of civilians and non-combatants must stop and be allowed to carry on their activities without any fear of reprisals.

ECOWAS should remain committed to its principles and even be prepared to intervene militarily as was done in Gambia should any of the leaders attempt to manipulate national constitutions beyond the term limits. There is the need to consider a 'standing army' that could be mobilised to deal with any potential insecurity in the region. There is an imperative need to create opportunities for the youth, since the future belongs to them and a force to reckon with, yet they are excluded from decision - making in pressing national issues even though they bear the highest brunt of economic hardships that occur in the various countries. There is an urgent need towards strengthening democratic institutions and governance structures to ensure peace and stability. It is only under the rule of law, transparency and accountable governance as well as inclusive participation in governance can peace and security be guaranteed.

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