

The Politics of Populism, Ethnic Polarization, and the recent Military coups in West African countries: A focus on Niger and Mali.

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ABSTRACT

Recent waves of military coups in West African countries since 2020 have led to concerns regarding the region's political landscape. This paper attempts to disentangle the causes of the rise of military coups by understanding how populist mobilization of the already present ethnic polarization increases the likelihood of the emergence of military coups in West African countries. While there is vast literature on ethnic polarization, populism, and military coups, none has sought to investigate the intricate relationship between these three concepts. To understand this, first, I conceptualize and measure ethnic polarization as the degree of division or segregation between different ethnic groups within a country. Second, while it is difficult to measure populism, I employ content analysis software to observe the contents of the political speeches and public statements of the leaders of these military coups in my case studies to identify patterns of populist sentiment rhetoric, such as the claim to represent “the people,” anti-establishment stands, and reference to the majority against the corrupt political elites. Third, by adopting a qualitative in-depth approach, this comparative study focuses on the case of Niger and Mali to establish the causal mechanisms linking the IVs and the DV. Lastly, I examined alternative explanations that could influence the likelihood of military coups in these countries.

Keywords: Ethnic Polarization. Segregation. Populism. Mobilization. Military coups. West Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of military coups in Africa in the last few years, particularly in the West African region, puzzles scholars and policymakers for three main reasons. First, the region has known relative peace for decades, but this did not last with 13 coup attempts in Africa between August 2020 and August 2023. Figure 1 shows the number of attempted coups — both successful and unsuccessful ones — in this period. As a result of this, political scientists and policymakers alike have sought to understand the general causes of the resurgence of military coups in the region. The second reason why the recent waves of military coups in Africa puzzle scholars is because of what Chin and Kirkpatrick (2023) referred to as “coup contagion.” The argument goes on that most of these West African countries fell into a “coup trap” due to the contagiousness of coups. According to these scholars, coups beget coups, and “coups often ‘diffuse’ across borders and thus cluster in space and time” (see Chin and Kirkpatrick, 2023. Pg. 12). The extreme implication of this is evident in the case of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso where these countries bordering one another suddenly joined the trend of military coups following the August 18th, 2020, military coup in Mali. Thus, it became imperative for scholars to seek a more nuanced understanding of the causes of this coup epidemic and suggest relevant solutions to why the recent military coups are endemic to a particular region and not others.

The third reason why the surge of military coups in the last few years perplexed scholars is because of its implications on the political landscape of the region. Scholars interested in conflicts, ethnic violence, and civil war usually posit that ethnic heterogeneity, poverty, resource curse, and weak political institutions account for the causes of these political instabilities (For example, see: Kaufmann 1996; Varshney 2001; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Stanton 2016). Particularly, Bell and Sudduth (2017) examined the intricate relationship between civil

war and coups d'état and observed that 75% of the states that saw coup activity also experienced civil war. Their findings confirmed the significant implication of coup activities on the likelihood of civil war. For these political and security concerns, scholars have tried to understand the causes of military coup d'états and explain their synthesis with civil war in order "to gain a more comprehensive understanding of political instability and political violence" (Bell and Sudduth, 2017, Pg. 1450).

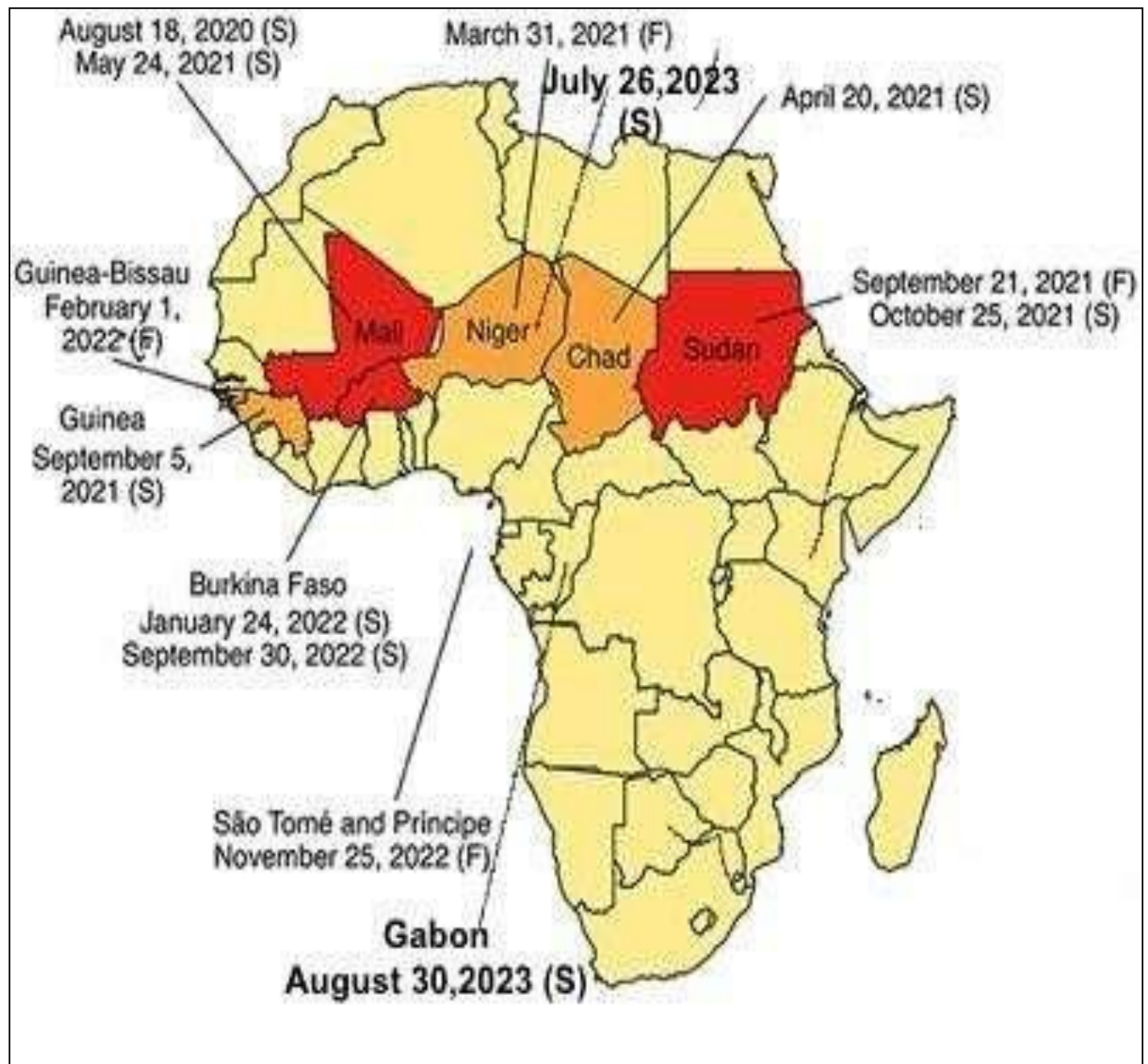


Figure 1. Shows the distribution of coup attempts across African countries with both successful and unsuccessful cases. There were 13 military coups between August 2020 and August 2023, with 9 successful cases and 4 failed coups—sources: Colpus dataset, updated.

Prior research and literature on the causes of military coup d'état attempt to explain these puzzles (see, for example, Thompson 1975; Stepan 1988; Belkin and Schofer 2005; Ohl and Finkel 2013). One strand of the literature on the causes of military coups focuses on the importance of the political and economic structure of the state (For example, see Thompson 1975; Collier and Hoeffler 2005; McGowan 2006; Ohl and Finkel 2013). These scholars argued that material interests, low economic growth, and the balance of power within the military (military ranks) serve as the prime motivation for the occurrence of military coups. Other schools of thought focus on the ethnic composition of a state, institutional grievances, and regime illegitimacy— both domestic and international — as the essential factors causing military coups (For example, see Galetovic and Sanhueza 2000;

Houle and Bodea 2017). In their seminal work, Houle and Bodea (2017) provide the first Large-N test to observe the effect of ethnic inequality on the feasibility of coups. They argued that “in Africa, coup plotters often rely on their co-ethnics as a source of support during and after a coup, whereas in other regions ethnicity may not be as relevant to coups” (pg. 383). Two important things stood out in their argument: (1) while these authors emphasized the important role ethnic inequality plays in the occurrence of military coups in Africa, (2) they were unable to show the causal link between ethnic inequality or divisions and military coups. This, therefore, begs for a closer examination.

Existing explanations, however, failed to explore the complex relationship between ethnic polarization, populist mobilizations, and military coups. The puzzle thus remains that despite similar economic conditions (low income and low economic growth), weak political institutions (the lack of political will and capacity to control), and regime illegitimacy (domestic and international), why are some countries experiencing military coups while others are not in recent years? In other words, what accounts for the recent waves of military coups in some parts of Africa in the past few years? To answer this puzzle, this paper examines the role of populist (military leaders) mobilization of the ever-present ethnic polarization on the emergence of military coups in Africa.

By capitalizing on the cases of Niger and Mali, this paper tests the validity of this theory and examines the logic of the key arguments of this theory. I adopted the Ethnic Polarization Index (EPI) as proposed by Reynal-Querol (2002), popularly known as the RQ Index, as a measure of ethnic polarization. As further evidence, I employed the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software (NVIVO) to analyze the speeches and public statements of the military leaders in my case studies to examine and observe the populist rhetoric and sentiments in their words. Analyzing military leaders' statements and speeches makes sense when establishing their populist stand and mobilizing strategies. Like most literature on the causes of military coups, this paper controls for alternative explanations and further explores the puzzles around how populist mobilization of ethnic polarization increases the likelihood of the emergence of military coups in West African countries in the past few years. The scope of this paper thus lies in the recent military coups in Africa, particularly in the West African region. It's important to note that while this study analyzes the recent military coups in West African countries, its findings could also be generalized to other parts of the world. Hence, populist mobilization and ethnic polarization are necessary and sufficient conditions for the emergence of military coups. While other causes, as observed by scholars, could be a necessary factor, they are insufficient to explain the emergence of military coups in the past few years in this context.

The following sections consider the conceptualization of ethnic polarization as used in this essay and further examine the politics of populism by observing the speeches and strategies of the populist (military) leaders and empirically demonstrating the alternative explanation to conventional wisdom regarding the causes of military coups. In conclusion, the paper proposes an agenda for future research and the policy implications of the results of this work.

Ethnic Polarization, Violence, and Military Coups

This section builds on influential theories of ethnic identity to understand the intersection between ethnic heterogeneity, ethnic polarization, and violence — ethnic violence, civil war, and military coups. Interestingly, while different scholars have endeavored to understand the relationship between ethnic diversity and conflict (see, for example, Easterly and Levine, 1997; Varshney, 2001; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Alesina et al., 2004; Wilkinson, 2004; Montalvo and Reybal-Querol, 2005), few have been written on ethnic polarization and military coups. A common trend in this literature has been to categorize and group all conflicts under the umbrella of “political violence” without necessarily distinguishing between what types of violence they are referring to. The only exception to this is in the case of ethnic violence and civil war.

In this paper, I focus on military coups as a distinct form of political violence and interrogate two possible reasons for the occurrence of military coups in Africa in the past few years. As discussed above, scholars have established the relationship between civil wars and military coups, although this relationship can be complex. I argued that understanding the effects of *populist (military leader) mobilization of ethnic polarization* is key to our understanding of the recent coups in Africa. Bell and Sudduth (2017) were the first to empirically analyze the relationship between ongoing civil war and coup activity. In their work, they argued that “(1) civil war increases

the risk of coup attempt, though (2) wartime coup attempts are significantly less likely to be successful, and (3) the risk of war-time coup is much higher when states face stronger rebel groups that pose greater threats to the political survival of the incumbent government” (Bell & Sudduth, 2017. Pg. 1433). In this regard, coup plotters’ calculus might change in the face of the political survival of the incumbent government. In other words, while potential coup plotters might attempt to engage in coup activity when the incumbent government is at risk of being overthrown, on the one hand. They are less likely to carry out coups when they perceive that they lack the potential or capacity to successfully change the power dynamics of the incumbent government on the other hand. Although it’s important to note that the focus of this paper is not on civil wars and military coups at the same time, it’s essential to note that there is an intricate intersection between civil wars, military coups, and ethnic polarization.

Scholars on political violence and the causes of political instability share a consensus that ethnic polarization is germane to the occurrence of civil wars and ethnic conflicts (Horowitz, 1988; Easterly and Levine, 1997; Varshney, 2001; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Alesina et al., 2004; Wilkinson, 2004; Montalvo and Reybal-Querol, 2005). Following the logic of this argument, while it has been established that there’s an intricate relationship between civil wars and military coups (Belkin & Schofer, 2005; Roessler, 2011; Bell & Sudduth, 2017), by implication, ethnic inequality and polarization are also essential to the occurrence of military coups. The argument goes thus: If x is a necessary condition for y, and both y and z are positively correlated, then x is also necessary (even though not sufficient) for z. In this context, x represents ethnic polarization, and y and z represent civil wars and military coups, respectively. Understanding the medium through which ethnic polarization and inequality influence military coups is important to studying the causes of military coups. This paper, therefore, conceptualizes ethnic polarization according to the following measures: ethnic segregation, ethnic inequality, and political polarization. Doing this enables this study to capture the different indices and indicators of ethnic polarization and how it, by implication, causes military coups.

Ethnic segregation, Ethnic inequality, and Political polarization

Surprisingly, scholars who study ethnic polarization and civil conflict rarely explicitly define what they mean by ethnic polarization. Chakravarty and Maharaj (2011) built on Montalvo and Reynal-Querol’s (2005) definition of the ethnic polarization index as “a measure of the extent to which individuals in a population are distributed across different ethnic groups. While Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005) distinguished between ethnic fractionalization and ethnic polarization, they argued that the index of ethnic fractionalization is “the probability that two randomly selected individuals from a given country will not belong to the same ethnic group” (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol, 2005, Pg 798). I argued that ethnic polarization is the degree of division or segregation between two or more ethnic groups within a given country. This could be measured by the degree of ethnic segregation, ethnic inequality, and the level of political polarization.

In turn, ethnic segregation is the level of spatial, social, or economic separation among ethnic groups in a country. For example, in a given homogeneous society, ethnic polarization would be at its lowest because the society is not separated along the lines of ethnic groups. Table 1 shows the level of ethnic polarization and fractionalization as adopted by Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005). According to these authors, “ethnic polarization is a significant explanatory variable for the incidence of civil wars if we use the RQ index of polarization” (pg. 812). Following this argument, a high level of ethnic segregation illustrates high ethnic polarization. The higher the ethnic segregation, the higher the ethnic polarization. This is different from ethnic fractionalization, which only demonstrates that any randomly selected individuals from a given country will not belong to the same ethnic group. Ethnic polarization shows the relationship between a dominant ethnic group in the face of minority groups that are big enough to pose a challenge to the dominant majority group.

Following the definition of ethnic segregation as a measure of ethnic polarization, another important indicator to consider is ethnic inequality. Ethnic inequality, as used in this paper, is the degree of disparities in access to resources or political representation among different ethnic groups in a given country. The Gini index is one of the most popular measures of inequality among scholars studying ethnic inequality. The Gini coefficient, or Gini index, measures how unequal a society’s level of income distribution is. Ethnic polarization can therefore be measured through the disparities in the level of ethnic groups’ income.

ETHNIC POLARIZATION AND FRACTIONALIZATION (SOURCE: WCE)

Country	ETHPOL	ETHFRAG	Country	ETHPOL	ETHFRAG
Afghanistan	0.786	0.603	Ireland	0.141	0.072
Algeria	0.514	0.299	Israel	0.548	0.286
Angola	0.572	0.805	Italy	0.154	0.080
Argentina	0.579	0.408	Jamaica	0.600	0.354
Australia	0.492	0.315	Japan	0.067	0.034
Austria	0.240	0.128	Jordan	0.982	0.515
Bahamas, The	0.705	0.441	Kenya	0.381	0.890
Bahrain	0.569	0.383	Korea, Rep.	0.028	0.014
Bangladesh	0.132	0.068	Kuwait	0.980	0.513
Barbados	0.366	0.199	Lesotho	0.343	0.185
Belgium	0.871	0.544	Liberia	0.390	0.890
Benin	0.436	0.868	Luxembourg	0.596	0.298
Bolivia	0.767	0.708	Madagascar	0.017	0.050
Botswana	0.650	0.485	Malawi	0.736	0.684
Brazil	0.773	0.644	Malaysia	0.762	0.695
Burundi	0.512	0.286	Mali	0.420	0.862
Cameroon	0.576	0.817	Malta	0.167	0.083
Canada	0.672	0.767	Mauritania	0.536	0.334
Cape Verde	0.822	0.435	Mauritius	0.803	0.482
Central African Republic	0.578	0.787	Mexico	0.654	0.576
Chad	0.665	0.768	Morocco	0.897	0.475
Chile	0.723	0.432	Mozambique	0.499	0.838
China	0.661	0.599	Myanmar	0.650	0.474
Colombia	0.789	0.675	Nepal	0.652	0.682
Comoros	0.127	0.061	Netherlands	0.214	0.113
Congo, Dem. Rep.	0.586	0.799	New Zealand	0.366	0.196
Congo, Rep.	0.674	0.721	Nicaragua	0.681	0.496
Costa Rica	0.420	0.241	Niger	0.698	0.718
Cote d'Ivoire	0.432	0.874	Nigeria	0.404	0.885
Cyprus	0.652	0.357	Norway	0.090	0.045
Denmark	0.097	0.049	Oman	0.408	0.239
Dominica	0.370	0.202	Pakistan	0.698	0.608
Dominican Republic	0.725	0.460	Panama	0.586	0.048
Ecuador	0.837	0.657	Papua New Guinea	0.669	0.354
Egypt, Arab Rep.	0.427	0.247	Paraguay	0.310	0.174
El Salvador	0.279	0.145	Peru	0.817	0.658
Ethiopia	0.778	0.695	Philippines	0.497	0.843
Fiji	0.930	0.559	Poland	0.099	0.051
Finland	0.294	0.148	Portugal	0.020	0.010
France	0.294	0.147	Rwanda	0.401	0.221
Gabon	0.519	0.834	Samoa	0.388	0.199
Gambia, The	0.689	0.728	Saudi Arabia	0.114	0.059
Germany	0.227	0.123	Senegal	0.560	0.809
Ghana	0.661	0.731	Seychelles	0.160	0.084
Greece	0.186	0.099	Sierra Leone	0.600	0.793
Grenada	0.945	0.542	Singapore	0.666	0.421
Guatemala	0.955	0.520	Solomon Islands	0.258	0.139
Guinea	0.843	0.649	Somalia	0.679	0.385
Guinea-Bissau	0.532	0.829	South Africa	0.718	0.469
Guyana	0.813	0.634	Spain	0.693	0.436
Haiti	0.207	0.104	Sri Lanka	0.749	0.452
Honduras	0.430	0.254	St. Lucia	0.958	0.540
Hong Kong, China	0.066	0.034	St. Vincent and the Grenadines	0.773	0.527
Hungary	0.308	0.167	Sudan	0.699	0.711
Iceland	0.055	0.028	Suriname	0.734	0.729
India	0.348	0.901	Swaziland	0.318	0.178
Indonesia	0.529	0.793	Sweden	0.337	0.189
Iran, Islamic Rep.	0.598	0.756	Switzerland	0.724	0.560
Iraq	0.665	0.390	Syrian Arab Republic	0.373	0.207

-Continued.

Country	ETHPOL	ETHFRAG
Taiwan, China	0.685	0.363
Tanzania	0.271	0.959
Thailand	0.582	0.361
Togo	0.673	0.732
Tonga	0.066	0.034
Trinidad and Tobago	0.842	0.662
Tunisia	0.167	0.087
Turkey	0.342	0.185
Uganda	0.279	0.932
United Arab Emirates	0.640	0.320
United Kingdom	0.571	0.373
United States	0.691	0.583
Uruguay	0.426	0.260
Vanuatu	0.285	0.155
Venezuela	0.758	0.539
Yemen, Rep.	0.063	0.032
Yugoslavia, FR (Serb./Mont.)	0.599	0.782
Zambia	0.606	0.787
Zimbabwe	0.698	0.534

Table 1. Shows the screenshot of the ethnic polarization index and ethnic fractionalization index as adopted by Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005)—source: WCE.

Figure 2 shows the Gini coefficient for some randomly selected countries (France, Ghana, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria). This figure illustrates the disparities between the groups' income distribution levels.

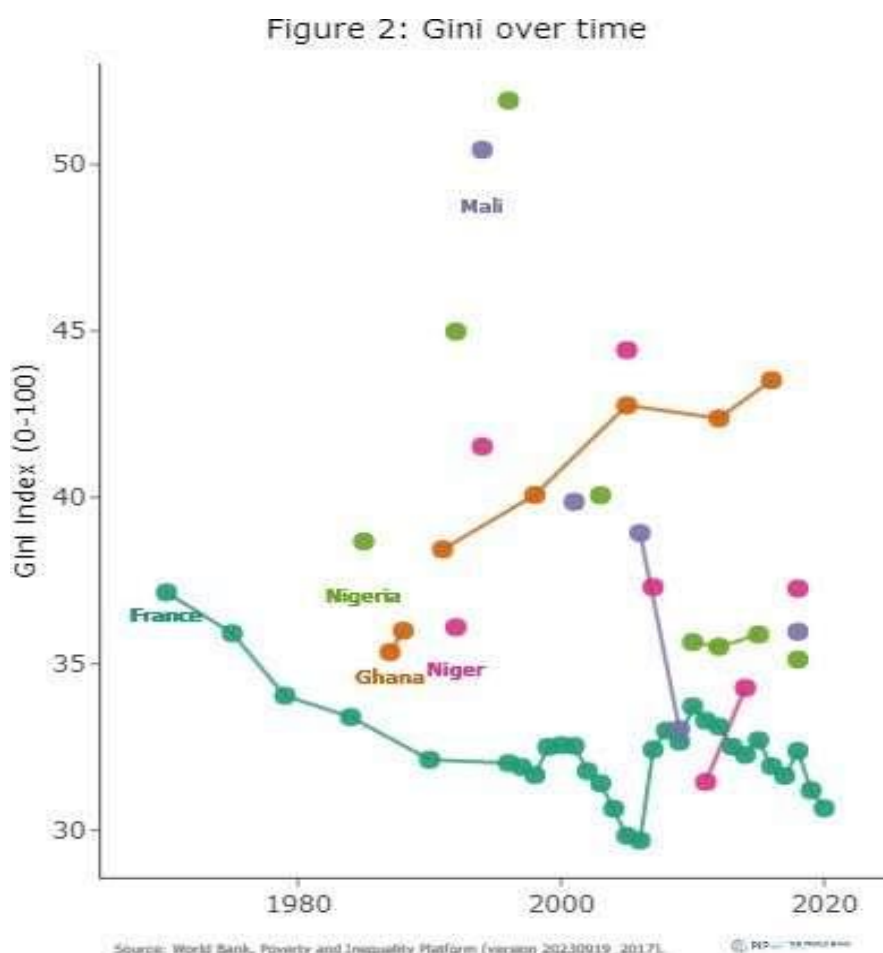


Figure 3:

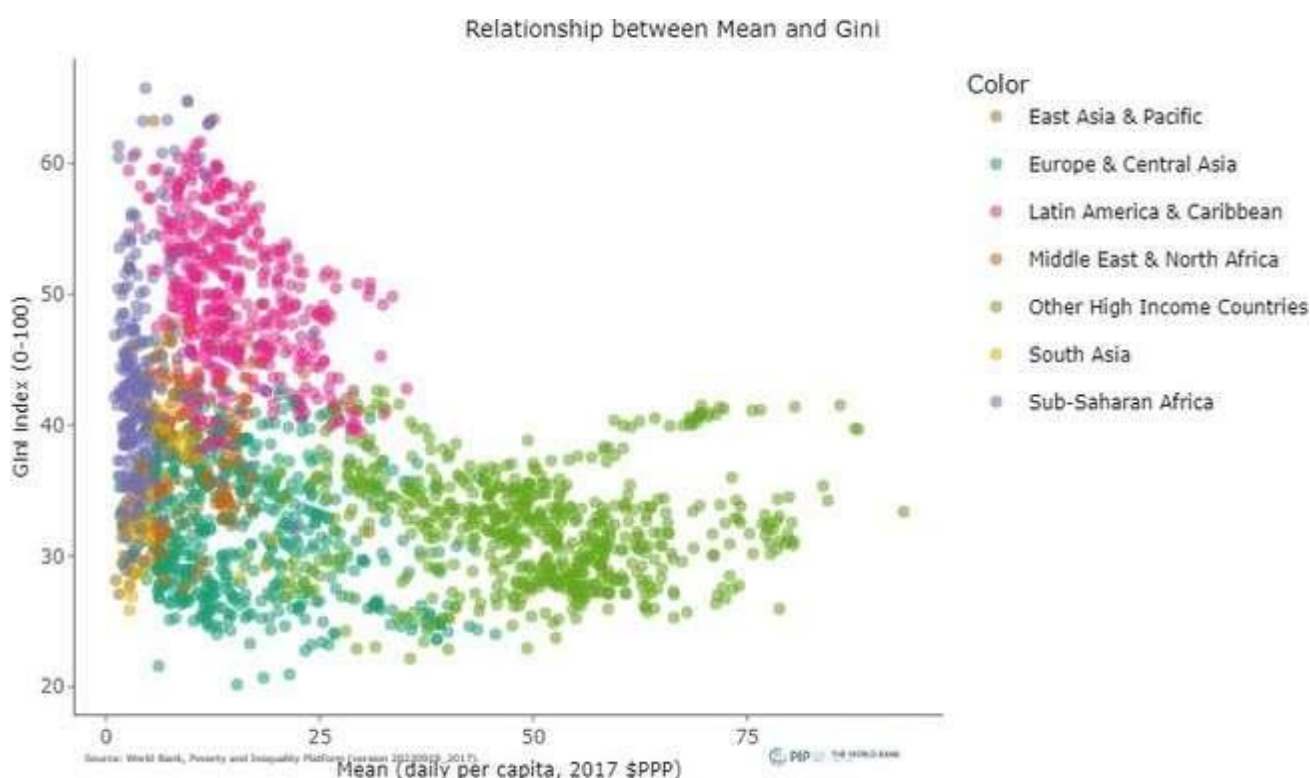


Figure 3 shows the scatterplot diagram for the relationship between the mean income in each of these regions and the Gini index (0-100). This illustration shows to a greater degree the level of inequality in these regions,

with the regions with higher levels of the Gini index having higher inequalities. The above scatterplot shows countries with Low GDP per capita and it's interesting to see that countries with low GDP and at the same time high levels of ethnic polarization always experience more political violence. Houle's (2016) seminal work, "Why class inequality breeds coup but not civil wars", finds that, "(1) Inequality creates greater threats to rulers by fueling political instability; (2) inequality reduces the use of structural coup-proofing; and (3) structural coup-proofing increases the likelihood of civil war".

Figure 4:



Source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). Organized violence between 1989-2022

The data in Figure 4 correlates with the level of the Gini index as shown in Figure 3. This corresponds with Houle and Bodea's (2017) findings that "mapping ethnicity on top of income inequality affects the capacity of would-be coup plotters to muster support from their co-ethnics, and is, therefore, a predictor of which ethnic groups would be likely to take part in a coup" (pg.393). Ethnic inequality as measured by the Gini index is thus an important measure of ethnic polarization and, by extension, has a direct effect on different forms of political violence (particularly, military coups).

Lastly, Political polarization is a significant indicator as well as a measure of ethnic polarization. It captures the extent to which political parties or political institutions are ethnically divided. In most polarized societies, political parties are usually partitioned in line with different ethnic groups. For example, political parties in the First Republic between 1960-1966 are divided between the three major ethnic groups — NPC, NCNC, and AG. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) was mainly dominated by the Hausa/Fulani in the Northern region, the

National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), later renamed to the National Council of Nigerian Citizens, predominantly represented the interests of the Igbo Eastern Region, and the Action Group (AG) was dominated by the Yoruba Western region. Piazza (2023) posits that Political polarization “may facilitate the demonization and dehumanization of individuals associated with rival parties” (482). A high level of political polarization mostly results from ethnic polarization and therefore it’s germane to the study of political violence.

In Piazza’s (2023) empirical study, he observed the relationship between political polarization, individual support for political violence, and the occurrence of political violence using a time series survey of public opinion from the United States and cross-national evidence from eighty-three democracies worldwide. The finding shows that “(1) partisan polarization contributes to individual support for political violence in the United States and (2) political polarization has consequences for actual political violence in democracies globally” (pg. 479). Although Piazza’s findings considered other factors such as political ideology, degree of political engagement, and age among his American subjects, his findings globally still support his theoretical argument. It’s therefore imperative that studies of political violence and ethnic polarization take into consideration the degree of political polarization for a robust explanation.

So far, this study has observed the relationship between ethnic polarization and political violence, particularly military coups. The next section turns into a careful consideration of the politics of populism and how populist (military leaders) mobilization of the already present ethnic polarization increases the likelihood of a military coup.

The hypothesis put forward here is that populist mobilization of ethnic polarization increases the likelihood of the rise of the recent military coups in Africa. To test this hypothesis, this paper uses the recent military coups in Niger and Mali to have a direct test of the relationship between populist mobilization of ethnic polarization and military coups. I adopt Qualitative Data analysis (QDA) software (NVIVO) to analyze the contents of the speeches and political statements of the military leaders in their geographical context. Consistent with this hypothesis, this study finds that the coup plotters or military leaders in these countries usually make use of populist rhetoric such as an appeal to the “people” against the political elites, anti-establishment sentiment (for example, anti-French, United States, and other Western organization) and adopting the notion of representing the “silent majority” against the elected politician. A good example is the military ruling council in Mali, which adopted the name “The National Committee for the Salvation of the People” to showcase its appeal to the people. In line with this complex relationship between the populist mobilization of ethnic polarization and the recent military coups, careful consideration of this strategy is required.

Politics of populism and Populist mobilization

Populism has generated considerable interest from scholars in political science and social science at large. The lack of consensus among scholars studying this concept cannot be overemphasized. Following Gidron & Bonikowski (2013), Müller (2016), Kaltwasser et al (2017), and Mudde & Kaltwasser (2018), this paper seeks to understand the populist strategies and techniques and how populist mobilization causes political violence in the context of military coups. According to Müller (2016), “contrary to conventional wisdom, populists do not have to be against the idea of representation as such; rather, they can positively endorse a particular version of it” (pg.25). In the case of populist military leaders, they tend to claim to represent the true people against the corrupt elites and engage in mobilizing their ethnic group members. This mobilizing strategy is a key technique in the toolbox of populist military leaders. As Harkness (2016) argued, “military loyalty plays a critical role in regime stability, particularly the loyalty of the officer corps” (pg.592)

In a polarized society and especially in the military context, it could be difficult to measure populism because different groups lay claim to the notion of “We are the people,” and military personnel rarely make speeches in public settings. In most polarized countries, the dominant ethnic group tends to see themselves as the true and only authentic group. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018), “The process of polarization has profound implications for party politics in a country”. Ethnic polarization causes division among military officers, and this could in turn lead to a form of sentiment against some groups. As Müller (2016) argued, populists are not against the principle of political representation; they only insist that only themselves are the legitimate representatives. By observing the political statements and speeches of the leaders of the military coups in Niger and Mali, it’s

Figure 5.

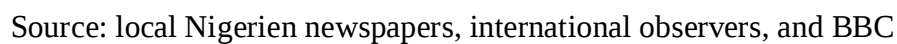
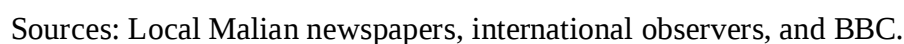


Figure 6



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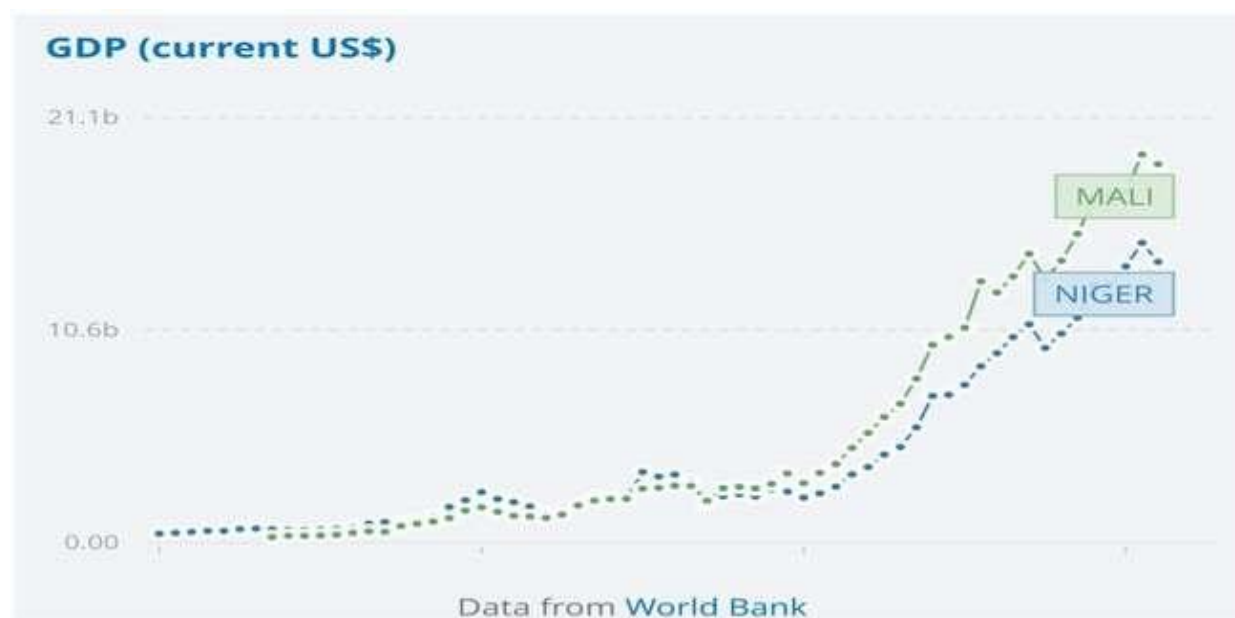
observe populism in the military arm of the state, and therefore understanding the different strategies and techniques used by this group helps to explain the underlying factor behind the rise of the recent military coups in Africa.

The next section considers an in-depth analysis of each of these case studies and establishes the causal relationship between populist (military leader) mobilization of ethnic polarization and military. This study considers the ethnic composition of each of these case studies and theorizes that populist mobilizations without ethnic polarization are less likely to result in military coups.

Combining the Theories of Ethnic Polarization and Populism: A case study of Niger and Mali

Having clarified the meaning of ethnic polarization and populist mobilization as used in this essay, this section proceeds to examine the links between military coups and populist mobilization of ethnic polarization. I analyzed each of these case studies by looking at their ethnic compositions and then did an overview of the military coups in each of the cases. Niger and Mali serve as good case studies because of their comparable features. Both countries are former colonies of France, and their colonial legacy plays an important role in their current political trajectories. Niger shared a borderline with Mali and they both shared similar ethnic compositions. To control the influence of economic growth and development, Niger and Mali serve as good case studies because both countries suffer from economic growth. According to the World Bank report on Niger, the level of extreme poverty is expected to reach 44.1% in 2023, and in Mali, the extreme poverty increased rapidly as a result of the pandemic. Figure 7 shows the graph for GDP per capita graph for the two countries.

Figure 7.



Also, apart from sharing a similar ethnic composition and economic condition, both countries have a population of approximately 26 million. These similarities make the two countries good cases for comparison and theory testing.

Historical Background and Overview of the military coup in Niger

To understand the current political trajectory in the Republic of Niger, a brief historical background is required. The Republic of Niger was formerly a French colony before its independence on August 3, 1960. It bordered Nigeria in the south, Benin and Burkina Faso in the southwest, Mali in the West, and Algeria in the northwest. Following her independence, the country faced numerous political instabilities, economic difficulties, and recurring social challenges. In the early years of independence, Niger witnessed a series of military coups and military regimes. The country's first president, Hamani Diori, was from the largest ethnic group, Hausa. He governed until 1974, when he was ousted in a military coup led by Seyni Kountche. Kountche is from the second-largest ethnic group in Niger, the Zarma. His regime was characterized by authoritarian rule and centralized

control. Following Seyni Kountche's death in 1987, a military council took control, led by Col Ali Saibou. In 1993, Niger transitioned to civilian rule with the adoption of a new constitution and a general election of Mahamane Ousmane as president. The violence in the Agadez region during this period prompted the Nigerien government to sign a truce with the Tuareg rebels in 1995.

However, political instability and ethnic conflicts persisted, leading to another coup in 1996, which brought Col. Ibrahim Maïnassara to power. Following the fraudulent general election in 1999, Maïnassara was assassinated at Niamey Airport in 1999.

Figure 8.

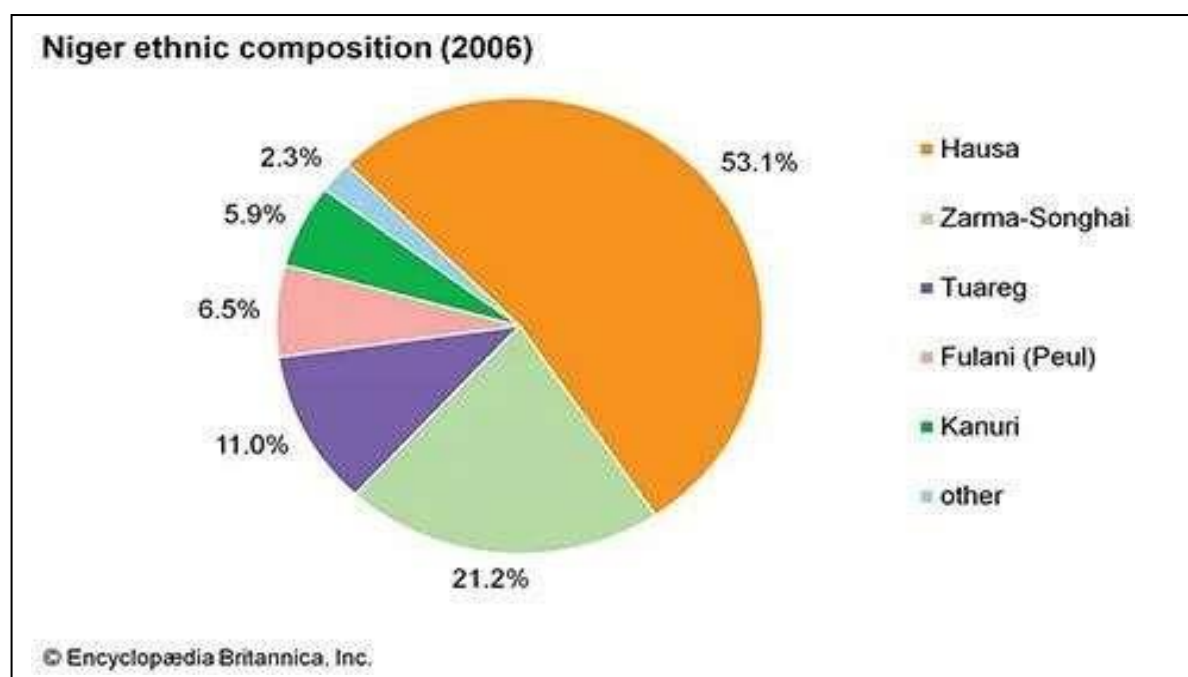


Figure 8 shows the ethnic composition of Niger as a polarized society. Niger's political landscape continues to evolve as Mamadou Tandja because of the president in 1999 until he was ousted from power in 2010. The military junta was led by Salou Djibo in February 2010. Djibo was of Zarma ancestry. Following the adoption of a constitution in 2010, President Mahamadou Issoufou was elected as the president of the seventh republic in 2011 and then re-elected in 2016. Under Issoufou's presidency, Niger focused on economic development and combatting regional threats like terrorism. Niger also faced challenges from internal conflicts, ethnic tensions, and insecurity.

Issoufou is of the Hausa ethnic group. On December 27, 2020, another election was conducted after Issoufou announced he would step down; no candidate won an absolute majority in the vote. Mohammed Bazoum came closest with 39.33%. A run-off election was held on 20 February 2021, and Bazoum won with 55.75% of the vote. Bazoum is from a small minority in Niger, the Ouled Slimane group. Before he was sworn in on 31st March 2021, an attempted coup was carried out against his administration. Later on 26 July 2023, another coup was staged against the Bazoum administration; this time it was successful, and on 28 July, Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani proclaimed himself as the head of state of the country. Gen Tchiani is from the Hausa ethnic group and, since the inception of his regime, has garnered the support of the people by adopting populist rhetoric and sentiment.

Having provided some necessary background information on the nature of the political landscape in Niger in the past six decades, one can understand the degree of the struggle for political power among different ethnic groups in the country. Niger serves as a good example to examine the effect of ethnic polarization and populist mobilization. Following the election of President Bazoum in 2021, there was a military coup attempt before his inauguration. Due to the fact that he's from a minority group in the country, members of the majority ethnic group (i.e., Hausa) are not in support of his administration. This led to the successful coup on July 26, 2023. The military coup was staged by Gen. Tchiani, a member of the dominant ethnic group, who considers himself and

his ethnic group the true people of the country. This populist sentiment can be observed in his speeches and political statements. By shedding light on this strategy of mobilizing co-ethnic members against a government that's not considered an authentic representative of the people, one can understand more about the cause of the July 26 coup in Niger. In addition, the Bazoum administration is seen as being too supportive of the French government.

By observing Gen. Tchiani's speeches, his excessive use of anti-French rhetoric and anti-Western organization pit him side by side with other populist leaders around the world who share anti-elite and anti-establishment sentiments.

Historical Background and Overview of the military coup in Mali

Mali, like Niger and other Francophone countries, used to be a French colony. Mali gained its independence on September 22, 1960. Mali is a landlocked country, and it is bordered by Algeria on the north, Niger on the east, Mauritania on the northwest, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire on the south, and Guinea and Senegal on the west. Following independence, the country faced several challenges, such as political instability, economic difficulties, and ethnic conflict. Under the leadership of Modibo Keita, the country adopted socialist policies but faced internal dissent, and a coup in 1968 led by Moussa Traore. Traore's regime lasted until 1991, when his authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement culminated in widespread protests. This led to a military coup and the establishment of a transitional government that paved the way for multiparty elections. In 1992, Oumar Konare won Mali's first democratic elections 1992 and oversaw a period of political openness and economic reforms. Amadou Toumani Toure was elected president in 2002 and continues the country's democratic government. Figures 9 and 10 show the ethnic composition and the spatial distribution of Mali and how polarized the country is. This, to a large extent, shows the reason why there are constant ethnic conflicts in the country. In 2012, Mali faced a severe crisis when the Tuareg rebels, supported by Islamist groups, seized control of the northern part of the country.

This unrest led to a military coup, and the northern region briefly declared independence as Azawad before Islamist groups gained dominance. In response to this, in 2013, the French-led military intervention aimed to push back the insurgents by working with the government. A peace agreement between the government and various rebel groups was signed in 2015.

Figure 9.

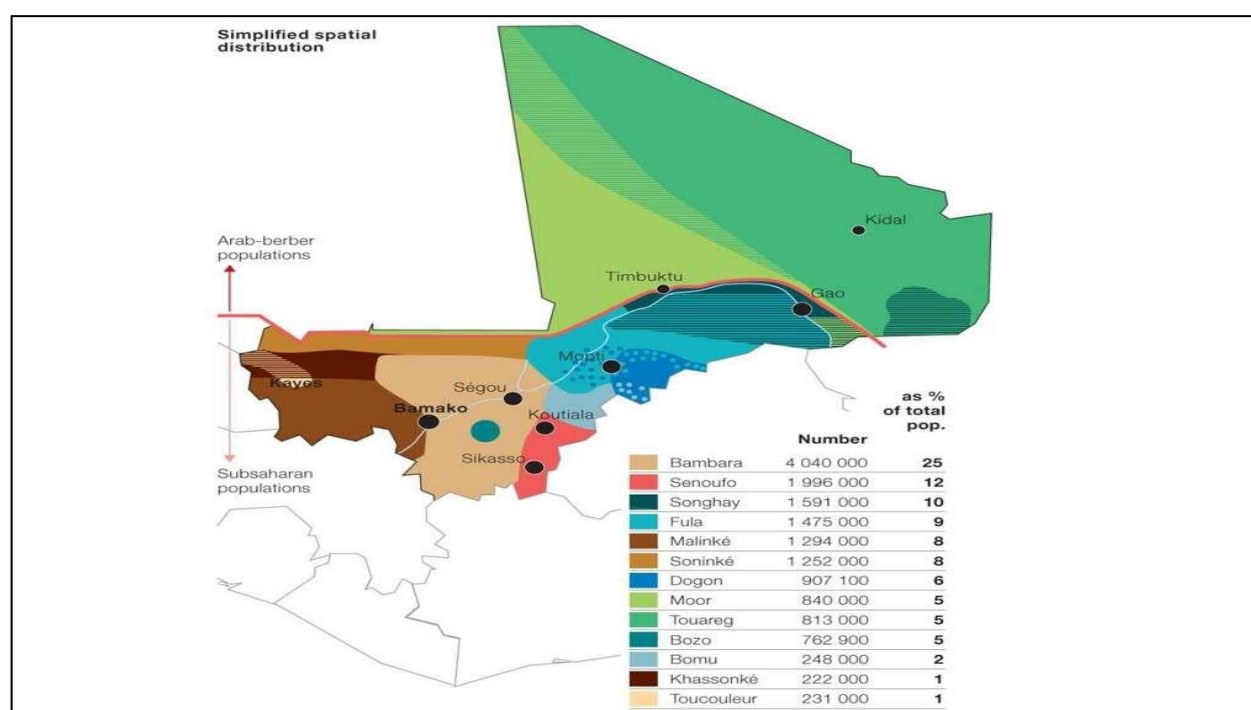
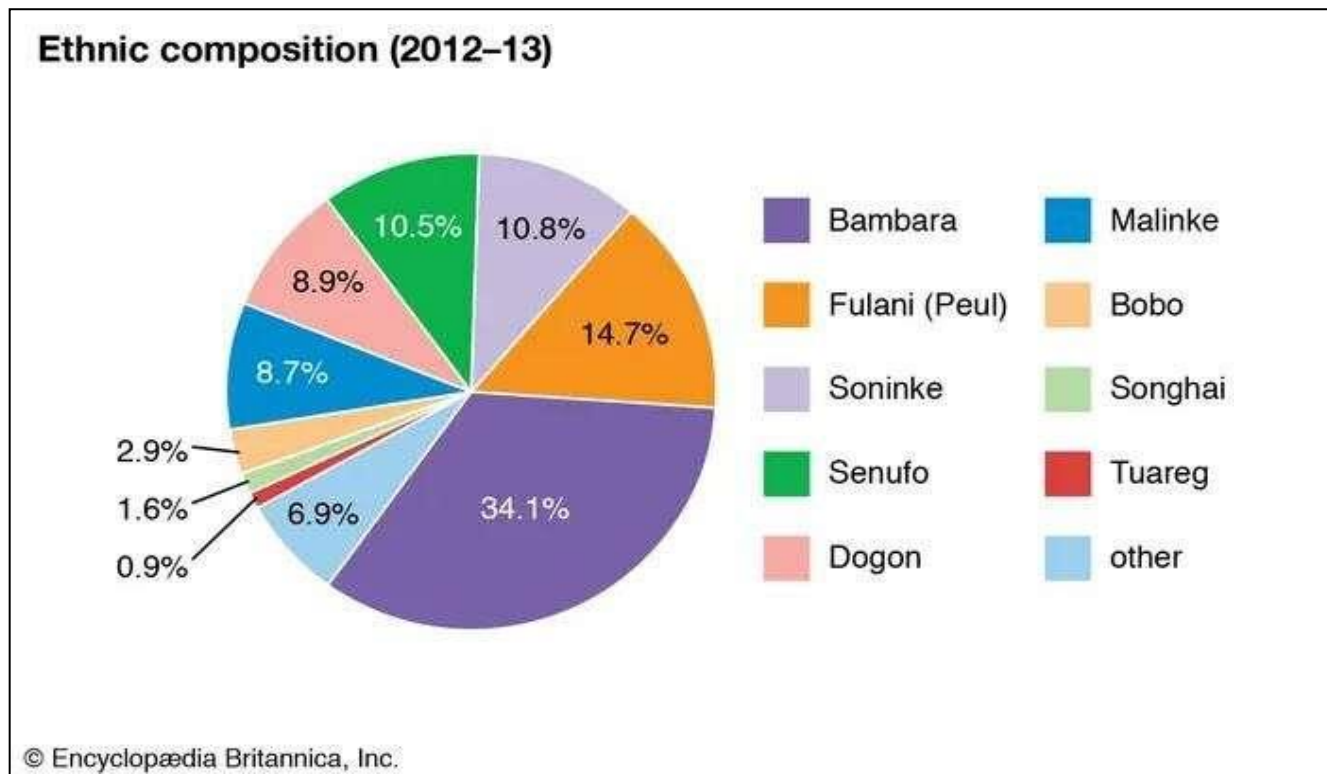


Figure 9 is an overview of the diversity of Mali's ethnic groups. Sources: OECD.

Despite efforts to restore stability and democratic governance, Mali continued to grapple with challenges related to security, political stability, governance issues, and the presence of armed groups in the northern regions. In August 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was removed from power by a group of military officers. The military coup was led by Colonel Assimi Goita and Col-Major Ismael Wague. President Keita was placed under house arrest, and he resigned, saying he did not want to see any bloodshed. On the night of May 24, 2021, Vice President Assimi Goita captured President Bah N'daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane and declared himself the head of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP).

Figure 10



Colonel Assimi Goita belongs to the Fula ethnic group and, since his rise to power, has been observed to use different anti-elitist rhetoric. On June 18, 2023, the Malian government under the leadership of Goita organized a referendum that removed French as the country's official language. According to Africanews, "the decision by Mali to drop French comes at a time of growing anti-France sentiments across West Africa due to its perceived military and political interference" (Africanews June 27, 2023). This anti-French sentiment and the appeal to "the people", as observed in the military (populist) leader since its inception, pits him side by side with other populist (military) leaders around the world.

Finally, Niger and Mali provide a good case for comparison and for testing the validity of the theory proposed in this essay for three major reasons: Geographically, politically, and economically. First, geographically, both countries border each other, and issues related to insecurity usually have spillover effects on one another. The Islamist terrorist groups terrorist both countries, and therefore this could easily be controlled since both countries are experiencing similar security issues. Politically, Niger and Mali have had histories of military coups since their independence from France, and they both shared a similar colonial legacy. This made it possible to eliminate the influence of colonial legacy as a predicting factor for the current political trajectories in the countries because they both shared the same colonial experiences. Economically, Niger and Mali are both endowed with natural resources. Niger is the second-largest supplier of Uranium to European countries and supplies 5% of the world's uranium. Mali, on the other hand, is very rich in gold. Mali is the fourth-largest gold producer in Africa. Ironically, both countries have at least 45.7% of their population living below the poverty line, and 76.1% live on less than \$3.10 per day. The similarities between these countries made them good case studies for comparison.

The military juntas in these countries laid claim to the economic crisis in their country as one of the reasons for taking over the government. Apart from this, the shared security issues in these countries are another reason why

they claimed they seized power from the democratic leaders. They accused the democratic government of not doing enough to tackle the insecurity in their country and expressed their displeasure with the government's sustained relationship with their former colonial master. All these serve as some of the reasons why the military leaders claimed they took overpower from the democratic government.

Having considered the basis of the hypothesis put forth in this essay, it is also important to consider several other factors that scholars have argued to be the causes of military coups in Africa. There's a consensus in the literature on political violence that ethnic heterogeneity plays an important role in the occurrence of military coups and other types of political violence (Horowitz, 1988; Easterly and Levine, 1997; Varshney, 2001; Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Alesina et al., 2004, Wilkinson, 2004; Montalvo and Reybal-Querol, 2005; Bleaney and Dimico, 2016). Thompson (1975) argued that most of the explanatory paths or factors that scholars posit for regime vulnerability can be categorized into five: "(1) legacies; (2) the failure of democracy; (3) the filling of the void; (4) the middle-class spear carriers; and (5) the disjointed system" (pg. 460). These thematic headings generously summarize what scholars theorize to be the causes of military coups. In light of these factors, this study further examines various alternative factors advanced by scholars on military coups.

Alternative Explanations

Following Thompson (1975), Belkin and Schofer (2005), Ohl and Finkel (2013), and Chin and Kirkpatrick (2023), this section succinctly summarizes the alternative sets of explanations that scholars have argued to be the causes of military coups. In this endeavor, I categorized these factors under domestic and external factors. For easy comprehension, these factors must be summarized under the necessary "thematic heading". Each of these thematic headings can then be further broken down into different issues that scholars have examined and argued to be the causes of military coups.

Domestic Issues

Different scholars argued that factors such as coup traps, poor economic conditions, ethnic heterogeneity, the failure of democracy, or democratic backsliding are responsible for the causes of military coups internally. While it's important to note that these factors are necessary for the occurrence of military coups, they are insufficient to explain the resurgence of military coups in recent years in West Africa. The puzzle remains that despite the presence of these factors in some other countries in Africa, why is military coup endemic to some regions and not others? McGowan (2006) observed that "Violent political conflict within and between states has been more widespread in the world, but it is only in West Africa that civil wars and coups so often reinforce each other" (pg. 234). He further argued that West Africa remains the most coup-prone region in the world, and while these factors, as highlighted above, can be easily observed in other parts of the world, the incessant recurrence in West Africa puzzled scholars of military coup and political violence.

As argued in this essay, the populist (military) leaders' mobilization of the already present ethnic polarization (in the face of all these other domestic factors) in this region is key to our understanding of the causes of military coups. The waves of populism, as analogously argued by the "coup contagion" scholars can be observed among the coup plotters. By their continuous appeal to represent the "true people" against the corrupt elites and their constant use of populist rhetoric such as anti-establishment (anti-French, anti-western organizations), the coup plotters' populist strategy and techniques can be understood. If one is to go by the other causes proposed by scholars on military coups, such as the poverty claim or the coup trap, it becomes extremely difficult to explain why other countries with similar economic conditions or history of coups are not experiencing coups now. This shows that some other underlying factors at work need to be examined in other to have a holistic understanding of the causes of the recent military coups in the West African region.

External issues

Another perspective on the study of the causes of military coups involves what scholars argued to be the decline of anti-coup norms globally in recent years; the influence of international actors such as France and Russia; and the presence of Islamist terrorist groups in the region. Following Chin and Kirkpatrick's (2023) argument, the international community's reaction to coups can influence how long post-coup regimes survive and, by

extension, the possibility of another coup. The logic of the argument is that if the potential coup plotters observe that there are weak anti-coup norms in the region or globally, it may influence their calculus and thereby encourage more coups in the future. However, having observed the stringent policies and measures put in place by ECOWAS and the African Union, it becomes impossible to lay claim to this factor. Also, Chin and Kirkpatrick (2023) posit that “despite relatively weaker anti-coup norms in regional bodies like ASEAN,” we are yet to see the same explosion of coup activity in Asia (pg. 12). Thus, this claim does not sufficiently explain the resurgence of military coups in Africa.

Another important external factor is the influence of international actors such as France and Russia. While this is an important factor due to their influence in the countries that have experienced military coups in the past few years, it still does not explain why other countries that have alliances with these countries do not experience coups. As argued above, Niger, Mali (and Burkina Faso) express their anti-French sentiment openly, and Mali and Burkina Faso went as far as removing French as their official language, but this still cannot explain the causes of, military coups in these countries. Hence, this variable could be considered as a necessary condition, but it’s not sufficient to explain the causes of military coups in this region.

Lastly, the increasing Islamist insurgent groups in the region is another cause of military coups, posited by scholars working on military coups. Chin and Kirkpatrick argued that “In Mali and Burkina Faso, regime outsiders moved to oust perceived governments deemed unwilling or unable to defect the insurgencies” (pg.13). As much as this factor instigates coup plotters to engage in coup activity, Singh (2014) dismisses this factor, arguing that insurgencies in the region have been raging for years and yet there were no coup attempts from 2015 through 2020. One could argue that this factor was just developing and transformed into military coups when it reached its limit. However, this claim does not explain the causes of coups in other countries such as Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Chad, where there were no Islamist insurgencies.

In sum, having examined the domestic and external issues that could be the alternative explanations for the cause of military coups in the West Africa region in recent years, this essay hypothesizes the conditions under which military coups occur. This is consistent with the theory posed by this essay.

Table 2. Ethnic Polarization

		YES	NO
Populist (Military) Mobilization	YES	Military coup	Low probability of Military coup
	NO	Failed coup/ counter coups	Very low probability of a military coup

Table 2 explains the conditions under which military coups are more likely or less likely to occur. Consistent with the findings of this study, when there is a combination of populist mobilization and ethnic polarization, the probability of a military coup occurring is very high. This is evident in the cases examined in this essay. In the case of Niger and Mali, where we observe populist (military) mobilizing the already present ethnic polarization, it becomes evident why there were military coups in these countries. This finding can also be generalized to other countries such as Burkina Faso and Gabon, where the coup plotters keep appealing to the “authentic” at the expense of the corrupt political elites. Therefore, both ethnic polarization and populist (military) mobilization can be considered as both necessary and sufficient for the occurrence of military coups. Furthermore, the presence of potential coup-makers and ethnic polarization without populist sentiment that stimulates the mobilization of ethnic polarization reduces the probability of a successful military coup and increases the likelihood of a failed coup or countercoups. In this situation, where there is no populist (military) leader who can mobilize the already present ethnic polarization, different military officers tend to struggle for control of the political power.

In the last two columns, the presence of a populist (military) leader mobilizations without ethnic polarization is less likely to result in a military coup. The logic behind this argument is that in a homogenous society, it would be difficult for the coup makers to garner support for their regime when there is no coalition constituency that they can appeal to for support. This argument does not mean that military coups may not occur in a homogenous society; it simply implies that the occurrence of military coups in this type of society would highly rely on other factors causing military coups as discussed above. Lastly, the probability of a military coup occurring without both populist (military) mobilization and ethnic polarization is very low compared to other cases. The likelihood of

military coups in this type of context would depend solely on the other factor stimulating the occurrence of military coups, as observed by scholars.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to establish the conditions under which military coups occur. Having considered the two independent variables introduced in this essay— ethnic polarization and populist (military) mobilization—I examined how populist mobilization of the already present ethnic polarization influenced the likelihood of the emergence of military coups in West African countries in the past few years. This essay adopts qualitative data analysis software to carry out an in-depth analysis of the speeches and political statements of the military leaders in the case studies. I observed that to understand the causes of military coups in this region in the past few years, we must understand the mechanisms at work. By analyzing the speeches and political statements of these coup makers, I was able to measure populism and capture the strategy and techniques adopted by these military leaders. They tend to consistently appeal to the support of the people, adopt an anti-elite stand, and use anti-establishment rhetoric. The evidence of this can be seen in the way the military leaders garnered the support of the people and relied on them as their coalition constituency.

This paper proposes and tests the theory that populist (military) mobilization of ethnic polarization increases the likelihood of the rise of military coups in the last few years. This theory was tested by examining the case of the military coups in Niger and Mali. While this essay capitalized on these two case studies for essay comparison, the findings of this study can also be generalized to other countries with similar political trajectories. Table 2 shows the conditions under which military coups are more likely to occur. While this study also examined other causes for the occurrence of military coups, as argued by scholars, it is important to note that these Factors are not sufficient to explain not only why some countries experienced military coups but also why other countries with similar preconditions do not. By engaging these other factors that scholars left unexplained, this study advances the literature on the causes of military coups. Bridging this gap accounts for a more nuanced explanation for why some countries are experiencing military coups, while others are not. Further research could also extend the findings in this essay and adopt a quantitative method to establish the applicability of this theory to other parts of the world. In sum, an empirical study can be used by future researchers and policymakers to understand the effect of the findings of this study to reduce the occurrence of military coups in Africa and redefine the future of this region of the world.

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