The Role Of Political Elites In Enabling Military Takeovers in Africa

By

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1. Introduction

West Africa's recent succession of coups in Mali (2020 and 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023) has revived questions long believed settled after the 1990s wave of democratisation. [1] The paradox of the region is striking. The constitutions abound, yet constitutionalism remains frail. While the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have adopted zero-tolerance norms for unconstitutional changes of government, these norms are regularly breached with little domestic resistance. The persistence of military interventions suggests that democratic erosion in West Africa is not simply a story of military ambition but of elite betrayal of constitutionalism.

This chapter argues that the militarisation of politics in West Africa is sustained not by soldiers' autonomous will but by civilian political elites who invite, legitimise, or accommodate military rule. Elites weaken oversight institutions, manipulate constitutions to extend personal tenure, and forge alliances that blur the boundary between civilian and military authority. Their conduct erodes constitutional restraint and transforms the armed forces from guardians of the state into arbiters of political succession. As Cheeseman and Fisher observe, authoritarian durability in Africa depends less on coercion than on elite bargains that sustain regimes under the guise of democracy. [2]

The problem explored here lies at the intersection of constitutional law and political science. West African states formally proclaim constitutional democracy, yet their elites routinely subvert it through patronage, clientelism, and opportunistic alliance-building with security actors. This disjuncture between formal constitutionalism and behavioural authoritarianism reveals the deeper pathology of African governance: constitutions without constitutionalists. [3] Accordingly, the study examines the question:

How have political elites in West Africa enabled or legitimised military takeovers, and with what implications for constitutionalism and democracy?

1. AO Akinola & R Makombe ‘Rethinking the resurgence of military coups in Africa’ (2025) 60 *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 1124.
2. N Cheeseman & J Fisher *Authoritarian Africa: Repression, Resistance and the Power of Ideas* (Oxford University Press 2020).
3. CM Fombad ‘Strengthening constitutional order and upholding the rule of law in Central Africa’ (2014) 60 *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 1 at 4.

The chapter contributes threefold:

- It reframes coups as outcomes of elite agency rather than failures of institutions.
- It integrates theories of civil–military relations, neo-patrimonialism, and constitutionalism to build a multidimensional causal explanation; and
- It offers normative insights on strengthening elite accountability within regional constitutional frameworks.

Empirically, the analysis spans seven West African states, including Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger, from independence to 2023.

West Africa offers a particularly instructive context for examining elite–military dynamics because it combines a dense history of coups with advanced regional governance mechanisms under ECOWAS. Since 1960, the sub-region has experienced more than forty attempted or successful coups, over one-third of Africa's total. Yet it also hosts some of the continent's most elaborate constitutional and anti-coup frameworks.[3] This paradox allows the region to illuminate how political elites adapt to, legitimise, and sometimes resist militarisation within formal democratic institutions. The chapter contributes to existing literature by reframing coups not as institutional breakdowns but as elite governance strategies. It extends classical civil–military theory through an African-centred analysis of constitutional manipulation and elite complicity, bridging political science, constitutional law, and historical institutionalism.

The argument proceeds in seven sections: this introduction; theoretical and conceptual foundations; methodology; historical trajectories of militarisation; elite complicity and mechanisms; constitutional and regional accountability frameworks; conclusion and suggestions for areas of further research.

3. AO Akinola & R Makombe (n 1).

2. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks

The persistence of coups in West Africa warrants a layered theoretical explanation that combines civil–military relations, elite theory, neo-patrimonialism, and constitutionalism. Together, these perspectives reveal how structures, incentives, and norms converge to produce recurrent militarisation.

2.1. Civil–military relations

Classical civil–military scholarship, which is Huntington's notion of "objective control" and Janowitz's sociological account of the "constabulary force", posits that democratic stability depends on the professionalisation of the armed forces and their subordination to civilian authority.[5] In West Africa, however, colonial armies were internal policing instruments rather than national defence forces, creating what Luckham calls "*militarised polities*".[6] Post-independence elites inherited these institutions and used them as tools of internal consolidation, embedding the military within political life from inception. Civilian–military boundaries thus became structurally porous. This historical context underscores the challenges of establishing effective civil–military relations in West Africa, where political elites have frequently exploited military forces for personal gain.

2.2 Elite theory and neo-patrimonialism

Elite theory offers behavioural insight into why civilian actors perpetuate militarisation. From Pareto and Mosca to Mills and Higley, elites are portrayed as cohesive minorities who circulate within, but rarely relinquish, power.[7] Higley and Burton show that stable democracies emerge only when rival elites reach *consensual unity* on the rules of political competition.[8] West African elites have rarely achieved such a consensus; instead, they instrumentalise the military as an alternative pathway to office.[9]

5. SP Huntington The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations (Harvard University Press 1957).
6. R Luckham 'The military, militarisation and democratisation in Africa: a survey of literature and issues' (1994) 37 African Studies Review 13.
7. V Pareto The Mind and Society (Harcourt 1935).
8. G Mosca The Ruling Class (McGraw-Hill 1939).
9. J Higley & M Burton Elite Foundations of Liberal Democracy (Bloomsbury 2006).

Neo-patrimonialism explains the mechanism of this alliance. Bratton and van de Walle describe African regimes as hybrids where formal bureaucracies coexist with informal patron–client networks.[10] In this environment, military officers become clients and patrons simultaneously, dispensing protection and rents in exchange for loyalty. The military thus acquires both political and economic stakes in regime survival. The result is what Levitsky and Way later term "competitive authoritarianism", a system in which elections and constitutions exist but serve to maintain elite continuity rather than promote public accountability.[11]

2.3 Constitutionalism and elite behaviour

Constitutionalism emphasises the subjection of rulers to law and the separation of powers. Fombad argues that Africa's constitutional orders are undermined less by textual deficiencies than by *elite conduct,* which is the manipulation of constitutional mechanisms for private ends.[12] Nwabueze likewise warned that "the spirit of constitutionalism cannot be legislated; it must reside in the moral discipline of those who wield power."[13] Where elites ignore judicial decisions, extend term limits, or silence legislatures, the constitution becomes symbolic rather than normative. This erosion of legal restraints creates a legitimacy vacuum that the military fills under the guise of restoring order.

2.4 Integrative analytical lens

The intersection of civil–military relations theory, elite theory, neo-patrimonialism, and constitutionalism provides a composite framework for analysing how political elites enable militarisation in West Africa. Each tradition isolates a specific mechanism of civilian complicity, but their overlap reveals how structural, behavioural, institutional, and normative failures reinforce one another.

10. M Bratton & N van de Walle Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective (Cambridge University Press 1997).
11. S Levitsky & L Way Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War (Cambridge University Press 2010).
12. CM Fombad (n 3) 418.
13. BO Nwabueze Constitutionalism in the Emergent States (C Hurst 1973).

The four frameworks intersect as follows:

Dimension	Theoretical insight	Implication for militarisation
Structural	Huntington's and Janowitz's civil–military frameworks conceptualise military professionalism as the balance between civilian supremacy and institutional autonomy.[14]	Where civilian leaders politicise command or manipulate promotions, professional norms erode, and the armed forces gain political initiative.
Behavioural	Classical elite theorists (Pareto, Mosca, Mills) show that elites preserve power through circulation and co-optation rather than open competition.[15]	West African elites enlist the military as a coercive broker in intra-elite disputes, transforming coups into instruments of negotiated succession.
Institutional	Bratton and van de Walle's model of neo-patrimonial rule explains how patronage and rent distribution collapse distinctions between public and private authority.[16]	Patron–client ties integrate senior officers into ruling coalitions, fusing civilian and military hierarchies.
Normative	Fombad's and Nwauche's writings on constitutionalism emphasise that constitutional texts are meaningless without elite restraint and judicial independence.[17&18]	When constitutions are manipulated to entrench incumbents, the military acquires a perceived moral mandate to "correct" the political order.

This integrated approach yields a central proposition: militarisation is not an aberration within elite politics but a rational strategy for regime preservation. Coups in West Africa thus represent elite-led renegotiations of political power rather than spontaneous military rebellions.[19] Yet this logic is not universal. In several recent coups, notably Mali (2021) and Niger (2023), junior officers acted before elite coordination, motivated by frustration with corruption and battlefield failures.[20] Subsequent power consolidation, however, followed the familiar pattern of elite co-optation, demonstrating that initial autonomy quickly yields to entrenched political networks.[21] This nuance underscores that militarisation may originate from below but is ultimately absorbed into elite strategies of regime continuity.

14. SP Huntington (n 5) 83
15. V Pareto (n 7)
16. M Bratton & N van de Walle (n 10)
17. International Crisis Group *A Course Correction for Mali's Sovereign Turn* (Africa Report No 315, 2024).
18. AO Akinola & R Makombe (n 1).
19. M Bratton & N van de Walle (n 10)
20. CM Fombad (n 3) 418.
21. AO Akinola & R Makombe (n 1)

African political theorists have long argued that elite domination in postcolonial states derives from inherited colonial hierarchies rather than purely domestic institutional failure. Claude Ake contends that Africa's political elites inherited the coercive apparatus of the colonial state without transforming its moral foundations, turning governance into a project of control rather than service.[22] Peter Ekeh's concept of "the two publics" further explains why elites distinguish between private accumulation and public duty, producing the dual moral economy that sustains corruption and military opportunism.[23] Achille Mbembe expands this insight through his notion of "commandment," describing how postcolonial power reproduces itself through ritualised displays of authority rather than institutional legitimacy.[24] In West Africa, these theoretical perspectives clarify why elites and military actors converge around power maintenance rather than constitutional fidelity.

Understanding this dynamic reframes the military's role from an autonomous actor to an instrument of elite continuity, locating the deeper crisis in constitutional governance and political ethics rather than in barracks discipline.

22. C Ake *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Brookings Institution Press 1996).
23. PP Ekeh 'Colonialism and the two publics in Africa: a theoretical statement' (1975) 17 *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 91–112.
24. A Mbembe *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press 2001) 102–141.

3. Methodology and sources

3.1 Research design

The study employs a qualitative, historical–comparative design, focusing on patterns of elite–military interaction across seven West African states. The comparative logic follows Mill's *method of difference*: cases share similar structural conditions (post-colonial statehood, weak institutions) but vary in outcomes. For example, Ghana and Senegal have remained relatively coup-resistant, whereas Mali, Guinea, and Niger have experienced repeated breakdowns. This variation enables causal inference about elite behaviour.

3.2 Data and sources

Data was derived from triangulated sources, including:

- Primary texts: national constitutions (e.g. Ghana 1992, Nigeria 1999, Mali 1992) and AU/ECOWAS instruments on unconstitutional changes of government.
- Secondary scholarship: peer-reviewed studies in *African Affairs*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, and *African Human Rights Law Journal*.
- Institutional reports: African Union (2023) *Report on Unconstitutional Change of Government in Africa*; ECOWAS (2022) *Peace and Security Report*; and Afrobarometer data on public trust in militaries.
- Historical documentation: archival accounts of coups from 1963 (Togo) through 2023 (Niger).

Triangulation was employed to enhance validity by cross-checking documentary evidence, scholarly interpretations, and institutional data.

3.3 Analytical strategy

The analysis employed process tracing to connect elite actions (constitutional amendment, clientelist militarisation, or discourse framing) with subsequent coup events. Each case is coded under three analytical mechanisms identified earlier, including *institutional erosion*, *strategic alliances*, and *discursive legitimisation*. Comparative synthesis then identifies cross-national patterns.

3.4 Limitations

The study is interpretive rather than statistical in nature. It does not quantify causality but seeks to explain how elite choices shape coup dynamics. It relies on documentary and secondary data rather than interviews, given the sensitivity of civil–military topics. Nevertheless, the combination of constitutional, historical, and policy evidence provides a reliable basis for analytical generalisation across West Africa.[25]

25. V Tarko 'The challenge of empirically assessing the effects of constitutions' (2015) 22 *Journal of Economic Methodology* 46–76.

4. Historical trajectories of militarisation in West Africa

The militarisation of West African politics cannot be understood without situating it within a six-decade historical arc stretching from decolonisation to the current democratic recession. Four distinct but interconnected phases demonstrate how elite conduct has continually shaped civil–military relations.

Global coup data confirm the regional anomaly. Powell and Thyne (2011) record 486 coup attempts worldwide between 1950 and 2010, of which over one-third occurred in sub-Saharan Africa.[26] While the global incidence of coups declined after 1990, West Africa's rate plateaued, with recurrent cases in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. Between 1960 and 2023, West Africa recorded 47 coup attempts, of which 22 succeeded, representing 36 per cent of Africa's total.[27] Five of seven countries analysed experienced at least two coups since 2000, underscoring the region's persistent vulnerability despite formal democratisation. This persistence underlines that military intervention here is structurally recycled, not historically extinguished. Elite continuity, rather than institutional weakness alone, explains why the same political families reappear before and after coups, perpetuating a cycle of negotiated militarisation.

4.1 Colonial inheritance and the militarised state

Colonial administrations created armies designed not for national defence but for internal coercion.[28] Colonial elites and expatriate officers institutionalised a command culture premised on hierarchy and obedience, thereby cultivating what Luckham termed '*militarised polities'*.[29] At independence, African political elites lacked both trained administrators and coercive capacity; they thus relied on the military to maintain order and enforce emergent nationalist projects. In Ghana, Nkrumah's use of security forces to suppress opposition and expand the Convention People's Party blurred civil–military boundaries. Similarly, in Nigeria, post-independence politicians politicised the army through ethnic patronage in recruitment and promotions, laying the groundwork for the 1966 coups.

26. JM Powell & CL Thyne 'Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: a new dataset' (2011) 48 Journal of Peace Research 249–259.
27. PJ McGowan 'African military coups d'état, 1956–2001: frequency, trends and distribution' (2003) 41 Journal of Modern African Studies 339–370.
28. R Robinson & J Gallagher Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism (Macmillan, 1961).
29. R Luckham (n 6)

This structural dependency forged a reciprocal compact: elites legitimised military power in exchange for regime stability, while the military acquired political leverage as the guarantor of elite interests.

4.2 The coup decades: 1960s–1980s

Between 1960 and 1985, more than half of all West African states experienced successful coups.[30] Each was preceded by elite contestation and institutional decay. In Togo (1963), disaffected elites marginalised by Olympio's government supported Sergeant Étienne Eyadéma's putsch, which was the first post-independence coup in Africa. In Nigeria, political patronage, electoral malpractice, and regional polarisation drove a group of officers to seize power in January 1966, claiming to rescue the republic from elite corruption.[31] Yet within six months, a countercoup reinstated northern dominance, demonstrating that coups often reproduce, rather than resolve, elite factionalism.

In Ghana, the military became a revolving door for political elites, with Nkrumah (1966), Acheampong (1972), and Rawlings (1979, 1981) each justifying intervention as a moral purification.[32] Across the Sahel, officers were courted by disillusioned civilian elites seeking access to office through non-electoral means. The coup thus evolved into a political bargaining instrument, normalised within elite strategy.

4.3 Democratisation and the façade of civilian rule (1990s–2010s)

The post-Cold War democratic wave inaugurated new constitutions and multiparty elections. However, these reforms often reproduced the authoritarian logic of the past under civilian auspices. Ghana's 1992 Constitution, although enduring, incorporated elements of military tutelage; Nigeria's 1999 transition reintroduced many military elites into civilian politics.[33] In Togo and Burkina Faso, long-serving leaders converted military backing into hereditary or personal rule.

30. SE Finer *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (Pall Mall 1962).
31. WF Gutteridge 'The man on horseback: the role of the military in politics by SE Finer' (1963) 1 *Journal of Modern African Studies* 279–280.
32. M Bratton & N van de Walle (n 10)
33. Federal Republic of Nigeria *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999).

Bratton and van de Walle describe such systems as *neo-patrimonial democracies*, where the distinction between public office and personal rule collapses.[34] Elites instrumentalised constitutional reform to legitimise longevity. Compaoré in Burkina Faso amended term-limit provisions in 2005 and 2010, while Guinea's Alpha Condé followed suit in 2020.[35] Each manoeuvre provoked widespread discontent that ultimately led to military arbitration.

Evidence from Nigeria shows that even innovations intended to secure electoral credibility are vulnerable to elite capture. Fatai and Adisa observed that biometric technologies designed to strengthen legitimacy were politicised during the 2015 elections, illustrating how elite behaviour can hollow out democratic reform.[36]

These patterns reveal that elite manipulation of constitutional order precedes nearly every coup, converting law into a political resource rather than a constraint.

4.4 The contemporary resurgence: 2017–2023

The twenty-first century's coups, including Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), occurred within ostensibly democratic contexts.[37] Unlike Cold-War coups justified by ideology, these were framed as *rectifications* of elite corruption, security failure, or constitutional overreach. Civilian actors actively amplified such narratives. In Mali, opposition coalitions (M5-RFP) publicly endorsed the 2020 putsch against President Keïta.[38] In Guinea, political parties marginalised under Condé's third-term amendment welcomed the junta's takeover.[39] These responses illustrate the discursive legitimation of militarisation by elites who calculated that short-term association with soldiers could secure future political leverage.

Concurrently, new technologies and social media enabled elite framing of coups as *popular revolutions*, diffusing accountability across society. ECOWAS and AU condemnations were met with domestic applause, demonstrating that militarisation now coexists with populist democracy rather than openly replacing it.

34. M Bratton & N van de Walle (n 10).
35. African Peer Review Mechanism *Africa Governance Report 2023: Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa* (African Union 2023)
36. A Fatai & LI Adisa 'The use of biometric technology in the success of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria' (2018) 36 *Politeia* 2.
37. TL Moorsom & RL Raber *Militarisation and Shifting Dynamics of Power in Africa* (Institute of African Studies 2024).
38. International Crisis Group (*n 17*).
39. African Peer Review Mechanism (n 35).

4.5 Comparative synthesis

Across six decades, a consistent causal chain emerges:

- Elite fragmentation weakens constitutional consensus.
- Institutional capture erodes checks and balances.
- Legitimacy crises invite military arbitration.
- Transitional bargains between elites and officers restore the cycle.

This history confirms that the militarisation of politics is less a deviation from constitutionalism than a recurring outcome of elite opportunism within weakly institutionalised regimes.

5. Elite complicity and mechanisms of militarisation

Civilian elites facilitate military intervention through interlinked mechanisms of institutional erosion, strategic alliance, discursive legitimisation, and instrumental instability. Each transforms the military from a neutral institution into a political partner.

5.1 Institutional erosion

Institutional erosion refers to elite-driven weakening of the constitutional and oversight architecture that ensures civilian supremacy. In Nigeria, repeated constitutional amendments that expand presidential emergency powers have concentrated coercive authority in the executive, thereby reducing parliamentary oversight.[40] Guinea's 2020 constitutional referendum, engineered to extend Condé's tenure, exemplifies how tampering with term limits delegitimises the constitutional order itself.[41]

Ernest Nwauche identifies institutional fragility by design as a defining feature of elite dominance in Anglophone West Africa. He traces how ruling parties in Nigeria and Sierra Leone re-purposed legislatures and judiciaries through patronage appointments and constitutional amendments that eroded checks and balances.[42] When the courts lose independence, the military inherits residual legitimacy as a corrective force. Elite-induced institutional decay, therefore, becomes a self-fulfilling pretext for intervention, as armed officers justify their actions by citing elite corruption and legal paralysis.

In Burkina Faso, the dissolution of the Constitutional Council during the 2015 crisis removed the last legal obstacle to the RSP's influence.[43] By dismantling institutional checks, elites convert the military into the ultimate guarantor of political continuity. As Fombad notes, African constitutionalism fails when constitutions are treated as instruments of power rather than limits on it.[44]

40. Federal Republic of Nigeria (n 33).
41. African Peer Review Mechanism (n 35).
42. E Nwauche 'Institutional fragility and constitutional design in West Africa' (2018) *African Journal of Legal Studies* 64–70.
43. TL Moorsom & RL Raber (n 37).
44. CM Fombad (n 3) 412.

5.2 Strategic alliances

The elite–military alliance operates through a mutual exchange: civilians provide legitimacy, while soldiers supply coercive capacity. In Nigeria's post-Abacha transition (1998–1999), retired generals negotiated immunity and control of lucrative sectors in return for supporting civilianisation.[45] In Burkina Faso, Compaoré's RSP functioned as both praetorian guard and political broker, mediating patronage between the presidency and the army.[46] Such alliances institutionalise militarisation under civilian façades.

Comparatively, Ghana's relative stability stems from the deliberate dismantling of such compacts. Rawlings professionalised the military post-1992 and subordinated it to the constitutional order, illustrating that elite discipline, not merely institutional design, determines military behaviour.[47]

William Reno conceptualises elite–military alliances as extensions of warlord politics, where control over economic resources replaces formal authority as the basis of power[48]. In Nigeria and Burkina Faso, civilian elites have maintained networks of officers through selective access to state rents like defence contracts, import monopolies, and provincial command postings.[49] These arrangements blur civilian–military boundaries and embed coups within patronage economics.

While analysing 47 African constitutions, Posner and Young add a complementary institutional dimension; they find that regimes violating term limits face a two- to three-fold increase in the probability of a coup.[50] Elite manipulation of tenure rules signals the death of voluntary alternation, a core indicator of democratic institutionalisation. When elites personalise power, they convert the military into a veto actor, thus transforming the coup from an aberration into a predictable corrective.

46. A Mbembe (n 24).
47. R Luckham (n 6).
48. M Bratton & N van de Walle (n 10)).
49. W Reno *Warlord Politics and African States* (Lynne Rienner 1998) 29–34.
50. DN Posner & DJ Young 'The institutionalisation of political power in Africa' (2007) 18 *Journal of Democracy* 126–140.

5.3 Discursive legitimisation

Elites also legitimise coups through discourse, portraying the military as saviour. In Mali's 2020 coup, opposition leaders characterised the junta as a "corrective transition".[51] Media aligned with political elites propagated narratives of *restoration* rather than rupture. In Guinea, politicians framed Condé's ouster as the *will of the people*. Such rhetorical framing erodes the legal stigma associated with coups and normalises military arbitration. The result is what Levitsky and Way call "competitive authoritarian continuity": military and civilian elites alternate in form but not in function, preserving the same networks of power. [52]

Afrobarometer's 2023 Dispatch 629 reports that 61 per cent of West African respondents trust the military more than elected politicians.[53] This perception gap provides fertile ground for elite rhetoric that frames coups as "people's corrections." In Mali and Guinea, senior civilians publicly endorsed military takeovers as necessary resets. By aligning with widespread frustration, elites sanitise illegality and reclaim political relevance within transitional councils. Such discursive alliances blur accountability and transform unconstitutional seizures into co-produced political projects.

5.4 Instrumental instability and diversionary politics

A subtler form of complicity is the deliberate manufacture of instability. When facing electoral decline, elites may provoke crises, such as security breakdowns, manipulated protests, or constitutional brinkmanship to justify exceptional measures or invite military intervention. In Niger, before the 2023 coup, a political deadlock over governance reforms created a pretext for the armed forces' intervention, which was quietly tolerated by segments of the political class.[54] Similarly, in Mali (2012), civilian indecision during the northern rebellion prompted the army to assume authority.[55] In both cases, elite inaction amounted to tacit consent. This phenomenon underscores that coups often represent elite renegotiations of power rather than spontaneous military mutinies.

51. International Crisis Group (*n 17*).
52. S Levitsky (n 11).
53. Afrobarometer *Dispatch 629: Trust in Institutions in West Africa* (2023).
54. African Union (n 37).
55. International Crisis Group (n 17).

5.5 Counterarguments and synthesis

Alternative explanations, such as economic hardship, terrorism, or foreign interference, are insufficient without accounting for elite mediation. Poverty and insecurity create discontent, but coups require elite signals of permissibility.[56] When elites defend constitutionalism, even severe crises do not trigger intervention (as seen in Ghana and Senegal). Conversely, where elites abandon restraint, militarisation becomes the rational route to power.

Thus, elite behaviour is the proximate causal variable linking structural fragility to the occurrence of coups. Figure 1 below conceptualises this as a recursive cycle:

Figure 1: The Recursive Cycle of Elite Behaviour

Breaking this cycle requires transformation not only of the military but also of elite political culture, a theme explored in subsequent chapters.

56. F Viljoen *International Human Rights Law in Africa* (Oxford University Press 2012) 393–396.

6. Constitutional and regional accountability frameworks

6.1 Constitutional design and elite manipulation

African constitutional texts have long included clauses regulating civil–military relations and prohibiting unconstitutional changes of government. Yet, as Nwabueze observed, the mere existence of constitutional provisions does not guarantee constitutionalism; compliance depends on elite morality and restraint.[57] Most West African constitutions, such as Article 34 of Ghana's 1992 Constitution, Section 217(2) of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, and Article 145 of Burkina Faso's 2018 Constitution, proclaim the subordination of the armed forces to civilian authority.[58] However, enforcement mechanisms remain weak because the same elites who draft these provisions often manipulate them for political continuity.

Cameroon scholar Charles Fombad argues that the central weakness of African constitutionalism lies not in the text but in the elasticity of executive interpretation. He notes that post-1990 constitutions often embed contradictory clauses that enable incumbents to extend mandates or re-engineer oversight institutions under the pretext of reform.[59] In West Africa, this elasticity has enabled presidents in Guinea and Togo to alter term-limit provisions without overtly breaching the law. Such "constitutional coups," as Fombad terms them, transform the constitution from a social contract into a political weapon.[60] This outcome directly legitimises military arbiters who claim to restore the original democratic order.

In Guinea, the 2020 constitutional amendment, framed as a referendum to "modernise governance," effectively reset presidential term limits.[61] In Togo, constitutional revisions in 2002 and 2019 facilitated dynastic succession from Gnassingbé Eyadéma to his son Faure Gnassingbé.[62] These examples demonstrate how legal instruments are converted into elite technologies of power. The erosion of term-limit sanctity directly correlates with coup recurrence: empirical data from Freedom House show that among West African states without adequate term limits, five experienced coups between 2010 and 2023.[63]

57. BO Nwabueze *Constitutionalism in the Emergent States* (Hurst & Company 1973).
58. Constitution of Ghana (1992) art 34; Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (n 33) s 217(2); Constitution of Burkina Faso (2018) art 145.
59. CM Fombad (n 3) 115–118.
60. CM Fombad (n 3).
61 African Peer Review Mechanism (n 35).
62 African Union (n 37).
63 Freedom House *Freedom in the World 2023: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Freedom House 2023).

Hence, constitutional texts are necessary but insufficient; elite conduct is the decisive variable. Without internalised commitment to rule-bound governance, constitutionalism degenerates into ritualism.

6.2 Judicial and parliamentary oversight

Judicial institutions theoretically serve as guardians of constitutionalism, yet in practice, they often reflect elite patronage. In Mali, the Constitutional Court's controversial validation of disputed election results in 2020 triggered mass protests that the military exploited to justify intervention.[64] In Burkina Faso, the Constitutional Council's dissolution during the 2015 transitional crisis revealed the judiciary's vulnerability to executive and military capture.[65] Parliaments, similarly, rarely exercise budgetary or oversight control over defence sectors; opaque military expenditures escape scrutiny, reinforcing the perception that coercive instruments are private elite assets.

Compared to Ghana and Senegal, these countries offer instructive contrasts. In Ghana, the Supreme Court's assertiveness in adjudicating electoral disputes since 2012 has bolstered public faith in civilian institutions. In Senegal, legislative oversight of defence and security budgets has remained relatively strong, preventing the militarisation of political succession.[66] These cases confirm that institutional independence, not merely textual inclusion, constrains elite abuse.

Frans Viljoen observes that African regional bodies exhibit "normative density but enforcement vacuum."[67] Despite robust anti-coup provisions in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, ECOWAS sanctions remain inconsistent and easily politicised. Elites exploit this gap by invoking sovereignty to resist suspension or by lobbying neighbouring heads of state for leniency. The weakness of supranational enforcement, therefore, transforms regional frameworks into performative instruments that legitimise, rather than deter, elite complicity in unconstitutional changes of government.

64. International Crisis Group (n 17).
65. TL Moorsom & RL Raber (n 37).
66. F Viljoen (n 12)
67. F Viljoen (n 12)

6.3 Regional accountability mechanisms

The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have developed normative frameworks to deter coups: the Lomé Declaration (2000), the AU Constitutive Act (Article 30), and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007).[68] ECOWAS adopted the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), which codifies a zero-tolerance policy against unconstitutional changes of government.

Yet enforcement has been inconsistent. ECOWAS sanctioned Burkina Faso in 2015 and Mali in 2021, but failed to respond decisively to Chad's 2021 military coup, reflecting geopolitical selectivity.[69] The AU's 2023 Report on Unconstitutional Changes of Government acknowledges that sanctions alone are ineffective without domestic elite accountability mechanisms.[70] Moreover, regional interventions often target soldiers while ignoring the civilian elites whose constitutional manipulations precipitate coups.

Eddy Maloka's analysis of the African Peer Review Mechanism reveals a paradox of self-regulation without sanction. Although the APRM has exposed governance failures, including elite patronage and term-limit evasion, its recommendations lack binding force.[71] Participating states selectively implement findings, often converting peer reviews into image-management exercises. The result is a system where elites acknowledge accountability discursively while evading it institutionally, reinforcing the very permissive environment that sustains militarisation.

A robust regional framework must therefore extend culpability to civilian enablers. Possible reforms could include:

- Amending the ECOWAS Protocol to criminalise constitutional tampering as a precursor to unconstitutional change.
- Empowering regional courts to adjudicate elite complicity, and
- institutionalising peer-review sanctions for leaders who subvert term limits.

66. African Union *Lomé Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government* (2000).
67. African Union 'Communiqué on the Situation in Chad' (2021).
68. African Peer Review Mechanism (n 3).
69. E Maloka *Africa Peer Review Mechanism: Lessons and Prospects* (2021) 214–218.

6.4 Towards a culture of constitutional accountability

The restoration of constitutional order requires transforming elite incentives.[70] Fombad proposes embedding constitutional accountability within political culture through transparent governance, civic education, and credible sanctions. Regional legalism must be complemented by elite re-moralisation, a re-orientation from power accumulation toward public trusteeship. Without this normative shift, legal reforms risk remaining decorative.

The analysis underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in how political elites perceive their role in governance, emphasising accountability and adherence to constitutional norms.

70. CM Fombad (n 3) 115–118.

7. Discussion, synthesis, and conclusion.

Table 7: Comparative overview of elite–military dynamics in West Africa (1960–2025)

Country	Coup history (1960–2025)	Elite–military relationship	Constitutional context	Current trend / outcome
Ghana	5 coups (1966–1981); democratic stability since 1992	Transition from military dominance to civilian institutionalisation under Rawlings; elite restraint sustained by term limits and electoral credibility.	1992 Constitution entrenched separation of powers and independent electoral commission.	Stable civilian control; professionalised military; high democratic resilience.
Nigeria	8 coups (1966–1999); return to democracy in 1999	Elite–military collusion; retired generals occupy political and economic positions; overlapping patronage networks.	1999 Constitution maintains strong presidency and weak legislative oversight.	Hybrid system; democratic façade with persistent militarised patronage.
Mali	5 coups (1968–2021)	Civilian elites depend on military for regime survival; repeated cycles of coup–transition–election–coup.	1992 Constitution suspended twice; weak enforcement of term limits and accountability.	Chronic militarisation; weak party system; elite–military fusion.
Guinea	3 coups (1984–2021)	Political elites legitimise coups to reset power balance; 2020 constitutional revision to extend tenure precipitated 2021 coup.	Frequent constitutional amendments; judiciary subordinated to executive.	Ongoing military rule; elites repositioned within transitional council.
Burkina Faso	8 coups (1966–2022)	Elite–military alliances driven by factionalism and regional security crises; popular support used to justify interventions.	2015 Charter of Transition briefly restored civilian rule; fragile institutions.	Volatile hybrid regime; alternating civilian–military coalitions.
Niger	4 coups (1974–2023)	Recurring elite–military compact; 2023 coup toppled an elected president amid security and corruption crises.	Progressive 2010 Constitution overturned; ECOWAS suspension.	Reversion to junta rule; elite co-optation of military leadership.
Senegal	No successful coup; isolated mutinies (1962, 1988)	Civilian elites maintain firm control through institutional rotation and professional military ethos.	2001 Constitution and constitutional court enforce alternation of power.	Democratic resilience; credible elections; effective civil–military separation.

Source: Author's synthesis from Powell & Thyne;[71] African Union;[72] Freedom House;[73] Afrobarometer;[74] national constitutions.

This comparison reveals three broad patterns: entrenched militarisation (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger); hybrid elite–military governance (Nigeria); and stable civilian consolidation (Ghana, Senegal). These categories illustrate how elite behaviour, not military culture alone, determines democratic durability.

71. JM Powell & CL Thyne (n 26).
72. African Union (n 37).
73. Freedom House (n 63).
74. Afrobarometer (n 53).

7.1 Synthesis of findings

Across the comparative cases examined, a consistent pattern emerges. Military coups are the culmination of elite-driven constitutional decay. Civilian elites manipulate institutions for personal gain, creating legitimacy crises that the military exploits. The study identifies three primary causal mechanisms. These include institutional erosion, strategic alliance, and discursive legitimisation, which operate within broader historical structures of neo-patrimonialism and weak constitutionalism.

The historical survey demonstrates that since independence, elites have alternated between co-opting and confronting the military, depending on their immediate political calculus. When regimes rely on military patronage for survival, coups become not anomalies but negotiated transitions within the elite system. Conversely, where elites maintain normative consensus, such as in Ghana and Senegal, constitutionalism endures despite socio-economic pressures. The findings underscore the importance of understanding the interplay between political elites and military forces to comprehend governance dynamics in West Africa.

The analysis thus advances a theory of elite–military equilibrium, whereby political stability in West Africa hinges less on the professionalism of soldiers than on the moral discipline of ruling elites.

7.2 Theoretical implications

The integrated framework combining civil–military relations, elite theory, neo-patrimonialism, and constitutionalism yields several theoretical contributions:

1. Re-centring elite agency: Coups should be analysed not as institutional breakdowns but as elite-driven recalibrations of power within hybrid regimes.

2. Constitutionalism as behavioural norm: The endurance of constitutional democracy depends on elite internalisation of constitutional limits, not solely on textual design.

3. Regional constitutionalism: West African constitutionalism operates within a nested hierarchy, comprising national and regional levels, where elite behaviour at one level can undermine commitments at another.

These insights invite a rethinking of civil–military relations: the ultimate guarantor of civilian supremacy is not military subordination per se but elite restraint.

7.3 Policy and normative recommendations

a. Legal Reform:

It is imperative to introduce explicit constitutional provisions that not only criminalise the violation of term limits but also address the complicity of civilians in unconstitutional changes of government. This legal framework should delineate clear penalties and consequences for both political leaders who overstay their mandates and civilian actors who support or facilitate such actions. By embedding these clauses within the constitution, we can create a robust deterrent against the erosion of democratic norms and ensure accountability at all levels of governance.

b. Institutional Reform:

To bolster the independence and effectiveness of key institutions, it is crucial to enhance the autonomy of the judiciary and parliament. This can be achieved by instituting guaranteed tenure for judges and parliamentarians, thereby insulating them from political pressures and interference. Furthermore, implementing transparent military budgeting processes will promote accountability and oversight of defence expenditures, ensuring that military resources are allocated in a manner that serves the public interest. Additionally, establishing a constitutional court with the authority to review executive decrees will provide a necessary check on executive power, safeguarding against potential abuses and ensuring that all actions taken by the government align with constitutional mandates.

c. Regional Enforcement:

The protocols of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) must be amended to extend sanctions beyond military actors to include civilian elites who facilitate coups and other unconstitutional acts. By holding these individuals accountable, we can create a more comprehensive framework for regional stability and governance, reinforcing the principle that all actors, regardless of their status, are subject to the rule of law.

d. Civic Transformation:

A concerted investment in political education and value-based leadership training is crucial for cultivating a new generation of leaders committed to the principles of democracy and public service. This initiative should focus on instilling a strong ethos of civic responsibility and ethical governance among future elites, equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate the complexities of political life. By fostering a culture of integrity and accountability, we can ensure that tomorrow's leaders prioritise the welfare of their constituents and the health of their democracies.

These comprehensive measures should be seamlessly integrated into the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the governance benchmarks established by the African Peer Review Mechanism. By doing so, we can promote normative coherence across the continent, ensuring that all member states adhere to shared values and principles that uphold democratic governance and human rights. This alignment will not only strengthen institutional frameworks but will also contribute to a more stable and prosperous future for Africa as a whole.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the endurance of coups in West Africa reflects elite complicity rather than military autonomy. From the first post-independence interventions to the 2023 Niger takeover, political elites have alternately invited, endorsed, or normalised military arbitration. The erosion of constitutionalism is therefore not a failure of law but a failure of leadership.

Democracy in West Africa will remain fragile until its custodians, who are the political elites, embrace constitutionalism not as a procedural formality but as a moral creed. The future of the region's democracy, therefore, depends less on barracks discipline than on the ethical discipline of its political elites.

8. Areas for further research

This study examines the pivotal role of political elites in facilitating military coups across West Africa. However, several critical gaps remain that necessitate further empirical and theoretical investigation.

First, there is a pressing need for micro-level studies examining elite-military interactions within specific national contexts. Utilising interviews, party archives, and social network analysis could help uncover informal channels of influence that often go unnoticed. Second, a comparative constitutional analysis could be instrumental in mapping the variations in civil-military clauses across African constitutions, enabling an assessment of their practical enforceability.

Third, conducting quantitative research using Afrobarometer and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data could provide insights into the correlation between elite behaviour indicators, such as corruption and term-limit manipulation, and the propensity for coups. Future research should also explore the gender and generational dimensions of elite complicity, examining how emerging youth and women leaders may disrupt entrenched patronage and military networks.

Finally, interdisciplinary approaches that link AI governance, digital surveillance, and militarisation could unveil new modes of elite control within contemporary African politics. Collectively, these research avenues would not only enhance the theoretical framework proposed in this study but also contribute to the development of more resilient constitutional orders in West Africa and beyond.

75. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) *Dataset Version 13* (University of Gothenburg 2023) https://v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/; Afrobarometer (n 53).

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