

Revolution or Personalist rule? The Return of Coups in Africa and the Debate on Marxism vs. Authoritarianism

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This study investigates whether the recent wave of military coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022) represents a revival of African Marxist revolutionary ideals or a regression to authoritarian personalist rule. Coup leaders have invoked revolutionary rhetoric, citing anti-imperialist icons such as Thomas Sankara and emphasizing sovereignty and resistance to Western influence. However, the authenticity of these ideological claims requires critical examination against actual governance practices. Employing historical-comparative analysis grounded in African socialist thought, this article develops an analytical framework derived from the works of Sankara, Nkrumah, Cabral, and other African Marxist thinkers. Four key indices are operationalized: economic transformation, popular mobilization, anti-imperialism and ideological coherence. Findings reveal a significant gap between revolutionary rhetoric and actual practice. Despite extensive use of Marxist symbolism, there is limited evidence of substantive socialist transformation such as wealth redistribution, collective ownership, popular mobilization, or genuine institutional reform. Instead, the analysis demonstrates patterns of elite power consolidation, democratic backsliding, suspended constitutions, and indefinite military rule. The study concludes that these coups are better characterized as "sovereigntist populism"—strategic responses to governance failures, insecurity, and public discontent that exploit revolutionary symbolism to legitimize authoritarian consolidation. This raises serious concerns for democratic sustainability and political development in West Africa.

Keywords: Military coups, authoritarianism, African socialism, Marxist ideology, democratic backsliding, West Africa

Introduction

In contemporary global politics, the military remains a fundamental institution for defending states from external threats. However, in postcolonial contexts, military institutions have paradoxically posed significant security threats to the very governments they are mandated to protect (Feaver, 1999). This contradiction emerges from what Feaver terms the "civil-military problematic" which is the reality that organizations entrusted with coercive force can turn those instruments against civilian authorities. The problem is particularly pronounced in weaker states where soldiers with powerful autonomous military structures can leverage coercive force to destabilize political regimes (Alavi, 1972). As North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009, p. 153) argue, "Societies

experiencing a civil war, by definition, do not have consolidated control of the military."

Since the 1950s, over 486 military coups have been carried out globally, with Africa accounting for 214 attempts, of which 106 succeeded (AJLabs, 2023). According to Powell and Thyne (2011), out of 54 African countries, 45 have experienced at least one coup attempt, representing 83 percent of African nations. When limiting focus to successful takeovers in which perpetrators held power for at least seven days, that number drops to 37, or approximately two-thirds of the continent (Duzor & Williamson, 2023).

West Africa has historically commanded a particularly dominant position in Africa's coup landscape. From the watershed 1966 overthrow of Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah to decades of military incursions in Nigeria, Togo, and beyond, the

region's politics have been characterized by cycles of authoritarianism, elite competition, and failed democratic experiments (Serra & Gerits, 2019). In the post-2020 era, this trend resumed with renewed intensity through coups in Mali (August 2020, May 2021), Guinea (September 2021), and Burkina Faso (January 2022), all of which overthrew civilian governments.

These cases present striking similarities. All three military interventions were justified as necessary responses to pervasive corruption, deteriorating security situations, and democratic decline (Simura, 2024). Each coup featured anti-Western rhetoric and appeals to national sovereignty. Most significantly, all three juntas invoked the language of revolutionary change reminiscent of African Marxist traditions, with Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré being particularly vocal in invoking Thomas Sankara's ideological legacy.

Despite compelling revolutionary rhetoric, fundamental questions of intention and actual outcomes demand rigorous evaluation. While superficial analysis might suggest corrective or people-centered revolutions, observable governance patterns reveal centralized power structures, patrimonialism, delayed democratic transitions, and erosion of democratic norms. This paper employs historical-comparative analysis to examine these three cases through the lens of African socialist thought. The central research question is: Do these military takeovers represent a genuine return to African Marxist revolutionary ideals characterized by anti-imperialism, economic transformation, and popular empowerment, or do they constitute personalist authoritarian regimes that strategically exploit revolutionary symbolism for legitimation? What are the implications for civilian democratic governance and political development in West Africa?

Historical Context: Coups and Ideological Power Struggles

African military coups have traditionally invoked ideological justifications to legitimize extra-constitutional seizures of power, though the authenticity of these claims has varied dramatically. The 1983 Burkinabe coup led by Captain Thomas Sankara represents one of the most exceptional examples genuinely founded on Marxist-Leninist

ideology (Mohamed, 2025). Sankara's regime demonstrated authentic ideological commitment through concrete policy implementation including comprehensive anti-imperialism rejecting French neocolonial domination and IMF structural adjustment; radical land reform redistributing property from chiefs to landless peasants; nationalization of key industries and mineral resources; systematic women's empowerment through legal reforms; mass literacy campaigns; and environmental protection initiatives (ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019; Mohamed, 2025).

Sankara articulated a revolutionary ideology demanding comprehensive decolonization of the African mind and construction of a self-reliant society based on collective ownership and egalitarian social relations. His declarations that "he who feeds you, controls you" and that debt represented "a cleverly managed reconquest of Africa" exemplified his anti-imperialist analysis (Mohamed, 2025). Sankara's personal conduct reinforced his commitment thereby cutting government salaries, sold Mercedes vehicles and replaced them with Renault 5s, flew economy class, dressed simply, and lived modestly while working extraordinarily long hours. This combination of ideological clarity, programmatic implementation, and personal sacrifice distinguished Sankara as an authentic revolutionary leader (Mohamed, 2025).

However, even this most ideologically committed revolution proved vulnerable. Sankara was assassinated in October 1987 in a counter-coup orchestrated by Blaise Compaoré, who subsequently systematically reversed socialist policies, welcomed IMF structural adjustment, restored relations with France, and governed through increasingly authoritarian means until his 2014 overthrow (ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019). This trajectory illustrates both the possibilities for genuine revolutionary transformation and the severe vulnerabilities such projects face.

In stark contrast, the overwhelming majority of African military coups have lacked genuine ideological consistency despite frequently employing revolutionary or nationalist rhetoric. While coup leaders routinely justified interventions through populist appeals promising to end corruption, restore order, or defend sovereignty, such proclamations typically masked personal ambitions, factional rivalries, or ethnic power

struggles (Decalo, 1990). West African coups during the 1960s-1990s predominantly resulted from military corporate interests and grievances rather than coherent ideological visions.

Contemporary coups reveal a consistent "putschist playbook" aimed at consolidating military rule (Vines, 2024). This includes staging coups justified by governance failures, promising democratic transitions with specific timelines, progressively extending transition periods using security justifications, and increasingly penetrating civilian administrative structures. Mali's trajectory exemplifies this pattern. Following the August 2020 coup, the junta initially promised an 18-month transition but subsequently extended timelines repeatedly. In April 2024, Mali's junta suspended all political party activities indefinitely (AP News, 2024). Most strikingly, a forum organized by Mali's military government proposed in May 2025 that junta leader Colonel Assimi Goïta remain president until 2030, effectively abandoning democratic restoration (Hoijs, 2025). According to Amnesty International's Ousmane Diallo, "For many people, even those who initially supported the government, this is a bridge too far. They see it as a move by Goïta to consolidate and hold on to power" (Lawal, 2025).

Literature Review

The Military Modernizer Thesis and Its Critique

Samuel Huntington (1968) advanced the "military modernizer thesis," arguing that in poorly institutionalized newly independent countries, military regimes could serve as disciplined agencies of reform by virtue of their professional ethos and organizational capacity. However, this thesis has been extensively criticized. Claude Ake (1996) rejected the notion that military regimes could usefully modernize, arguing they typically reproduced authoritarian control inherited from colonial administrations. Samuel Decalo (1990) characterized African military regimes as "regimes of survival" primarily motivated by self-preservation and elite enrichment rather than transformative politics. His research revealed that coup-led dictatorships predominantly acted to sustain their positions while defending bourgeois interests rather than pursuing developmental agendas. The empirical record from six decades of military rule across postcolonial Africa validates these critiques, with military regimes

demonstrating consistent patterns of economic deterioration, institutional decay, human rights violations, and democratic regression (Decalo, 1990; Ake, 1996).

Authoritarianism and Developmental Dictatorship

Development scholars including Chalmers Johnson (1982) and Adrian Leftwich (2000) advanced the "developmental dictatorship" concept based on East Asian experiences, suggesting authoritarian governments could effectively accelerate industrialization through centralized planning. However, African military dictatorships overwhelmingly failed to generate comparable developmental outcomes. Cases such as Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko demonstrated how authoritarian consolidation led to economic collapse through kleptocratic governance (Decalo, 1990). Important exceptions merit acknowledgment, including Thomas Sankara's Burkina Faso which implemented land reform and participatory development based on socialist principles (Chwanza Takudzwa, 2019; Mohamed, 2025). However, even these exceptions differ fundamentally from classical developmental dictatorships, representing explicitly anti-capitalist revolutionary projects rather than state-led capitalism. Overall, the developmental dictatorship thesis finds limited empirical support in African political economy (Ake, 1996; Decalo, 1990).

Ideological Narratives and Postcolonial Power

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes complex relationships between ideological narratives and political power. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) analyze systematic erosion of democratic values across Africa, arguing that democratic backsliding partially explains recent military interventions. Amoateng (2022) contends that African military coups should be interpreted as continuations of politics through neo-colonial lenses, reproducing colonial-era patterns despite independence. Earlier scholarship distinguished between ideological and pragmatic motivations, with Decalo (1990) arguing that elite power struggles constitute the primary driver of coups, with ideological motivations playing minimal roles.

However, postcolonial scholarship offers more nuanced perspectives. Robert Young (2001) traces anti-imperialist and Marxist roots of postcolonial

theory, demonstrating that African liberation struggles drew substantively from Marxist traditions while adapting them to African conditions. Michael Neocosmos (2016) advocates for emancipatory politics grounded in popular agency rather than statist liberalism. NgũgĩwaThiong'o (1986) positions language as central to ideological struggle, arguing that continued reliance on colonial languages perpetuates alienation. AchilleMbembe (2001) demonstrates through "necropolitics" how post-independence governments perpetuated colonial techniques of domination based on coercion and terror. These contributions establish that ideological questions cannot be dismissed as mere rhetoric, as ideas about liberation and sovereignty demonstrably shape political mobilization and state formation (Young, 2001; Neocosmos, 2016; Mbembe, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

This study employs African socialist thought as its primary theoretical framework rather than applying generic Marxist theory or abstract authoritarianism concepts developed in other contexts. This methodological choice is deliberate and theoretically significant. African socialism emerged as a distinct ideological tradition during the decolonization era, synthesizing Marxist-Leninist concepts with African communal values, anti-colonial nationalism, and Pan-African solidarity (Young, 2001; Mayer, 2025). While diverse expressions existed across different countries and leaders, reflecting specific national histories, ethnic compositions, colonial legacies, and leadership personalities, several core principles characterized African socialist thought and practice across the continent.

Core Principles of African Socialism

Based on comprehensive synthesis of African socialist traditions as articulated by revolutionary leaders and intellectuals including Thomas Sankara, Kwame Nkrumah, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, SékouTouré, SamoraMachel, and others (Mayer, 2025; Okoth, 2023; ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019), this study identifies and operationalizes six key dimensions that distinguished African socialism from both capitalism and orthodox Soviet Marxism-Leninism.

First: Economic Transformation through Collective Ownership

African socialism fundamentally required restructuring property relations and transforming the economic base of society through multiple interconnected mechanisms (Mohamed, 2025; Mayer, 2025). Land reform constituted the cornerstone of economic transformation, involving systematic redistribution of agricultural land from colonial settlers, traditional chiefs who collaborated with colonial administrations, and large landowners to landless peasants and agricultural cooperatives. This was not merely redistributive justice but a transformation of social relations of production in the countryside where the vast majority of Africans lived and worked. Sankara's Burkina Faso exemplified this principle through comprehensive land redistribution programs that transferred control from traditional chiefs "the Mossi nobles" who had historically controlled land access to peasant farmers organized into cooperatives and village associations, fundamentally altering power dynamics in rural (Tanimu-Saminaka & Tanimu 2025).

Second: Popular Political Mobilization and Participation

African socialism emphasized active, conscious, and organized mass participation in political life rather than elite-dominated governance or bureaucratic administration divorced from popular input (ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019; Mayer, 2025). This principle manifested through creation of mass organizations including independent workers' unions advocating for labor rights and participating in economic planning, peasant associations organizing rural populations and representing agricultural interests, women's groups challenging patriarchal structures and promoting gender equality, and youth movements mobilizing young people for political education and development projects.

Establishment of Committees for Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) or equivalent participatory structures at local levels represented a distinctive institutional innovation of African socialism. Sankara's CDRs organized Burkinabè citizens at village, neighborhood, and workplace levels to collectively address local problems, monitor

corruption, organize production, resolve disputes through popular justice, and participate in policy implementation and evaluation (ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019). These structures aimed to create direct popular participation bypassing traditional hierarchies and bureaucratic gatekeepers, embodying the principle that ordinary citizens could and should govern themselves (Neocosmos, 2016).

Third: Anti-Imperialism and Genuine Non-Alignment

African socialism positioned itself fundamentally against Western imperialism, neo-colonialism, and all forms of external domination (Young, 2001; Mayer, 2025). This principle entailed multiple interconnected dimensions. Political independence required asserting genuine sovereignty against foreign interference in domestic affairs, resisting pressures and conditionalities from former colonial powers, international financial institutions, and great powers seeking to influence or control African policies. Sankara's rejection of IMF structural adjustment programs despite intense pressure exemplified this stance, as did his support for liberation movements in South Africa, Namibia, and Palestine despite Western opposition (Mohamed, 2025).

Economic decolonization involved breaking exploitative economic relationships with former colonial powers and multinational corporations that extracted African wealth while leaving Africa impoverished. This meant renegotiating or terminating unequal treaties and agreements inherited from colonialism, nationalizing foreign-owned assets when necessary for sovereign control, controlling terms of trade and investment to benefit African populations, and pursuing South-South economic cooperation as alternatives to dependency on Western capital. Nkrumah's concept of "neo-colonialism" which alludes that formal political independence could mask continued economic and political control through debt, trade dependence, and military pressure became foundational to African socialist analysis of continued imperialism (Mayer, 2025; Young, 2001).

Cultural decolonization required rejecting colonial languages, names, symbols, and cultural impositions in favor of African identities, languages, and heritage. Sankara renamed Upper

Volta, a colonial designation to Burkina Faso meaning "Land of Upright People" in local languages. Nyerere promoted Swahili as Tanzania's national language. Touré emphasized African cultural values and identities. These were not merely symbolic gestures but understood as essential components of comprehensive decolonization, as NgũgĩwaThiong'o (1986) argued in *Decolonising the Mind*. Language shapes consciousness, and continued dominance of colonial languages perpetuates mental colonization.

Fourth: Ideological Coherence

African socialism embraced Pan-Africanism as both ideology and practice (Young, 2001; Mayer, 2025). Continental integration involved supporting African unity politically through organizations like the OAU, economically through common markets and development cooperation, and culturally through promotion of Pan-African identity transcending colonial borders. Liberation support meant providing material resources, military training and weapons, diplomatic support in international forums, and safe havens for liberation movements fighting colonialism, settler rule, and apartheid in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea-Bissau. Sankara, Nyerere, and others committed substantial resources to supporting these struggles despite their own countries' poverty, viewing this as Pan-African duty and enlightened self-interest since African liberation was indivisible (Mayer, 2025).

South-South cooperation involved building alliances with other Third World nations against imperialism and for economic justice, sharing experiences and strategies among post-colonial nations, and creating alternative institutions and frameworks outside Western control. African socialist leaders participated actively in Non-Aligned Movement, supported Vietnamese and Cuban revolutions, and built solidarity with Latin American and Asian liberation movements.

African socialism required committed revolutionary leadership with clear ideological vision and demonstrated integrity (ChwanzaTakudzwa, 2019; Okoth, 2023). Ideological study and theoretical engagement meant leaders and cadres seriously engaging with Marxist theory, African history, and revolutionary strategy; studying experiences of other revolutions to learn lessons; and developing sophisticated

analysis of imperialism, class, and transformation rather than relying on slogans. Sankara was known for studying revolutionary theory extensively; Cabral developed sophisticated theories of revolutionary struggle and class formation in colonized societies; Nkrumah wrote numerous theoretical works on neo-colonialism and African socialism (Okoth, 2023).

Operationalization: Four Analytical Indices

The four core principles which translate into empirical indices for assessing whether contemporary military regimes embody African socialist revolutionary ideals are: Economic Transformation; Popular Mobilization and Participation; Anti-Imperialism and Genuine Non-alignment; and Ideological Coherence

Complementary Framework: Linz's Authoritarianism

To strengthen analytical rigor and enable identification of authoritarian patterns even when revolutionary rhetoric is deployed, we complement the African socialist framework with Juan Linz's (1964) classic conceptualization of authoritarianism. Linz distinguished authoritarian regimes from both democratic and totalitarian systems through four key characteristics.

First, limited political pluralism means authoritarian regimes restrict but do not entirely eliminate political competition neither is it fully competitive like democracies nor totally monopolistic like totalitarian systems.

Second, mentalities rather than comprehensive ideologies characterize authoritarian rule. Unlike totalitarian regimes with elaborate ideological systems demanding total commitment and penetrating all social spheres, authoritarian regimes operate through looser "mentalities" without systematic theoretical frameworks or comprehensive worldviews demanding total allegiance.

Third, limited mobilization means authoritarian regimes encourage political apathy and demobilization of populations except during occasional regime-staged events.

Fourth, power exercised within ill-defined but predictable limits means authoritarian rulers are not bound by formal constitutional constraints or rule of law like democratic leaders, but neither exercise

the total, arbitrary power of totalitarian systems. Patterns of rule become established through practice, creating informal but real limits on what rulers can do, even if these limits are not legally enforceable (Linz, 1964).

Integrated Analytical Framework

This study employs both frameworks complementarily. African socialist indices assess presence or absence of genuine revolutionary transformation across economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions. Linz's authoritarianism identifies patterns of authoritarian consolidation including power concentration, pluralism restriction, and demobilization. Genuine revolutionary regimes would score positively on African socialist indices while showing minimal authoritarian characteristics, recognizing that revolutionary periods may involve temporary restrictions justified by transformation imperatives and counter-revolutionary threats. Conversely, authoritarian regimes exploiting revolutionary rhetoric would score poorly on African socialist indices while demonstrating clear authoritarian patterns across Linz's dimensions. This dual-framework approach enables nuanced, empirically-grounded assessment avoiding both naive acceptance of revolutionary claims and cynical dismissal of all ideological expression as mere legitimization.

Method

This study employs qualitative historical-comparative research design to investigate whether recent military coups represent revolutionary revival or authoritarian consolidation. Historical-comparative analysis enables systematic examination of similarities and differences across cases, identification of causal patterns, and assessment of outcomes against theoretical frameworks. The three cases of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso were selected based on temporal proximity (all within 24 months), civilian government overthrow, revolutionary rhetoric invocation, shared regional context in the Sahel, and sufficient data availability.

Data sources include academic scholarship from peer-reviewed journals and books analyzing African socialism, military coups, and West African politics; policy reports from International

Crisis Group, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Afrobarometer, Freedom House, V-Dem Institute, and International IDEA; news media from Al Jazeera, BBC, Reuters, France 24, and regional outlets; official documents when accessible including transitional charters and policy pronouncements; and quantitative governance indices measuring democracy, freedom, and conflict. Data collection focused on 2019-2025, enabling pre-post comparisons and assessment of post-coup trajectories.

Assessing Coups Against African Socialist Indices
Index 1: Economic Transformation - The Absence of Socialist Restructuring

African socialism fundamentally required transforming economic structures through land reform, nationalization, cooperative economics, and wealth redistribution (Mohamed, 2025; Mayer, 2025). Systematic examination of economic policies across Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso reveals profound disconnection between revolutionary rhetoric and actual economic governance.

Burkina Faso's Symbolic Revolution Without Economic Substance

Captain Ibrahim Traoré's government has perhaps most extensively and systematically invoked Thomas Sankara's revolutionary legacy among the three cases. Public spaces in Ouagadougou feature murals of Sankara alongside Che Guevara and other revolutionary icons. Mass rallies display red flags, clenched fists, and revolutionary slogans proclaiming continuation of Sankara's unfinished revolution (France 24, 2023). Youth activists wear t-shirts featuring Sankara's image and quotes. Russian flags appear prominently at demonstrations, symbolizing rejection of French neo-colonialism. The government has renamed streets and public buildings after Sankara and other African revolutionaries. State media regularly broadcasts documentaries celebrating Sankara's achievements and revolutionary vision. This symbolic appropriation creates powerful emotional resonance, particularly among youth frustrated with corruption, unemployment, and insecurity who see Sankara as representing authentic African dignity and resistance.

However, rigorous examination of actual economic policies reveals minimal substantive

alignment with Sankara's comprehensive socialist program. Sankara's economic transformation involved multiple interconnected initiatives implemented systematically from 1983 to 1987. Land reform redistributed property from Mossi nobles and large landowners to landless peasants organized into cooperatives and village associations, fundamentally transforming agrarian social relations and empowering rural populations (Mohamed, 2025). Nationalization brought gold mining and other mineral extraction under state control, ensuring revenues benefited Burkinabè people rather than foreign corporations. Textile cooperatives were promoted and supported through credit, technical assistance, and preferential procurement to produce local fabrics—*fasodanfani*—replacing expensive imports while creating employment and promoting cultural identity. Price controls on basic foods, medicines, and essential goods ensured affordability for poor populations. Government salaries were cut dramatically, with Sankara reducing his own salary to \$450 monthly and limiting ministerial salaries similarly, redirecting savings to rural development. State resources were systematically invested in rural health clinics, schools, infrastructure, and agricultural support rather than urban luxury or military hardware (Mohamed, 2025).

In stark contrast, Traoré's government has implemented none of these characteristic socialist economic policies. No land reform redistributing property to landless peasants has been enacted. The mining sector which is Burkina Faso's primary source of export revenue and foreign exchange remains dominated by Canadian companies including IAMGOLD and Endeavour Mining, Australian firms including West African Resources, and increasingly Russian companies including Nordgold, all operating under existing concession agreements negotiated under previous governments (Reuters, 2023). No nationalizations have occurred despite revolutionary rhetoric about economic sovereignty.

Agricultural production, which employs the vast majority of Burkinabè, continues characterized by small-scale subsistence farming, cotton cultivation for export under contract farming arrangements with multinational trading companies, and informal markets. No cooperatives have been systematically created, promoted, or supported through credit or technical assistance.

The cooperative movement that Sankara built was allowed to atrophy under subsequent governments and has not been revived. Land tenure remains governed by customary systems and market transactions rather than being transformed through revolutionary redistribution. Rural credit systems, agricultural extension services, and input supply chains continue operating through existing commercial and NGO channels rather than being restructured around collective principles (Diawara & Ballo 2025).

No wealth redistribution programs targeting poverty or inequality have been implemented. Taxation systems remain regressive, relying heavily on customs duties and value-added taxes that disproportionately burden poor consumers rather than progressive income and wealth taxes on elites. Rural areas remain severely underserved by health and education infrastructure, with most investment concentrated in Ouagadougou and other major urban centers (Tanimu-Saminaka & Tanimu 2025).

The government's economic policy has emphasized security expenditure given the intensifying jihadist insurgency, with military and security budgets consuming increasing shares of government resources. While this responds to genuine security threats that affect ordinary Burkinabè, it differs fundamentally from Sankara's approach of popular mobilization and rural development as primary security strategies. Existing production arrangements and property relations remain intact. Private ownership of land, businesses, and productive assets continues governing economic organization. Wage labor relations persist with workers selling labor power to employers rather than collectively owning and managing enterprises. Market mechanisms continue allocating resources and distributing goods rather than being replaced or supplemented by planning, cooperatives, or direct state provision.

The government has sought to assert greater control over gold exports and mining revenues, implementing new regulations requiring miners to sell gold through official channels rather than informal markets and negotiating marginally higher royalty rates and local employment requirements. However, this represents resource nationalism aimed at increasing state revenues for fiscal

sustainability rather than socialist transformation of production relations (Kumafan et al., 2024).

The fundamental capitalist organization of Burkina Faso's economy remains unchanged from pre-coup patterns. Production is organized through private enterprises selling commodities in markets for profit. Workers sell their labor power for wages. Land and capital are privately owned and controlled by individuals, families, and corporations. Investment decisions are made based on profit calculations rather than social need. International trade follows comparative advantage in primary commodity exports (gold, cotton) and manufactured imports. This capitalist framework contradicts the socialist economic transformation central to Sankara's revolutionary project and African socialism more broadly.

Mali's Anti-French Rhetoric Masking Economic Continuity

Colonel AssimiGoïta's junta has similarly deployed extensive anti-imperialist and sovereigntist rhetoric, particularly targeting France's continuing influence in Mali's economy and security. The government expelled French media outlets including Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24 in March 2022, accusing them of neo-colonial bias and spreading misinformation (Al Jazeera, 2022; Reuters, 2022). French military forces were asked to leave Mali after years of counter-terrorism operations, with the government denouncing their ineffectiveness and alleged complicity in perpetuating insecurity to justify continued French presence. Anti-French sentiment has been actively cultivated through state media, public rallies, and social media campaigns portraying France as the primary obstacle to Malian development and sovereignty. Russia has been positioned as an alternative partner respecting Malian sovereignty, with Wagner Group mercenaries deployed to replace French forces despite their well-documented human rights abuses.

This vigorous anti-French nationalism might suggest fundamental economic reorientation, yet examination of actual economic policies reveals striking continuity with pre-coup neoliberal frameworks that governed under previous civilian administrations. No nationalizations of foreign corporations or assets have occurred. Mali's gold

mining sector which is the country's largest export earner and primary source of foreign exchange continues operating under existing concession frameworks with multinational corporations including Canadian Barrick Gold, Australian Resolute Mining, South African AngloGold Ashanti, and others extracting gold for export under agreements negotiated during previous governments (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Cotton production, Mali's other major export, continues dominated by the Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles (CMDT), a parastatal operating essentially as a private corporation organizing contract farming where peasants grow cotton under supervised agreements with the company controlling inputs, credit, and marketing. This model, inherited from French colonial administration and maintained through independence, subordinates peasant producers to corporate control while maintaining rhetoric of farmer cooperation. No transformation toward genuine cooperatives controlled by farmers themselves has occurred. Agricultural extension, credit, and marketing continue functioning through existing commercial and parastatal structures rather than being reorganized around collective principles or farmer sovereignty (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

No land reform redistributing property to landless peasants has been implemented. Mali's complex land tenure systems combining customary, Islamic, and statutory law continue governing access to land, with frequent conflicts between these systems and increasing commercialization and commodification of land access. Pastoral populations which contributes a significant portion of Mali's rural population continue facing land access pressures from agricultural expansion and resource conflicts, issues that socialist land reform might address through guaranteed communal grazing rights, but which remain unaddressed. Urban land speculation and elite accumulation of property continue unchecked, concentrating land ownership and driving housing unaffordability in Bamako and other cities (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

Mali's economy continues characterized by the same structural features that preceded the coup: overwhelming dependence on gold and cotton

exports making the country vulnerable to commodity price volatility in global markets; limited industrialization with manufacturing comprising tiny share of GDP and employment; high poverty rates with majority of population living on less than \$2 daily; extreme inequality with wealth concentrated in Bamako-based elites while rural areas remain impoverished; and continued integration into global capitalism through export of primary commodities and import of manufactured goods. Military rule has not addressed these fundamental structural problems through socialist economic restructuring. Instead, the government has largely continued existing economic models while seeking marginal adjustments in revenue shares and procurement contracts (Diawara & Ballo, 2025).

Guinea's Pragmatic Resource Nationalism

Colonel Mamady Doumbouya's rhetoric following the September 2021 coup invoked the nationalist legacies of Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea's first president who famously broke with France in 1958, choosing poverty in freedom over prosperity in slavery and Kwame Nkrumah, framing military intervention as patriotic liberation from corruption and elite exploitation under Alpha Condé's increasingly authoritarian civilian regime (Kumafan et al., 2024). Initial statements suggested commitment to economic justice and breaking with exploitative practices that had enriched political elites while leaving ordinary Guineans impoverished despite the country's vast natural resource wealth in bauxite, iron ore, gold, and diamonds.

However, Doumbouya's actual economic approach has been fundamentally pragmatic and technocratic rather than ideological or transformative. The government has engaged in renegotiating mining concessions with multinational corporations to increase state revenue shares, improve local employment and procurement requirements, and enhance environmental and social safeguards, presenting this as recovering national patrimony from corrupt deals made under previous governments. However, these renegotiations maintain fundamentally capitalist frameworks where foreign corporations, primarily Chinese companies including Chalco and China Hongqiao controlling bauxite mining, Russian firms including Rusal, and Western

corporations continue owning and operating mines under revised but still private commercial terms (Kumafan et al., 2024).

Guinea's bauxite mining sector illustrates the pattern. Guinea possesses approximately one-third of global bauxite reserves, making it one of the world's most important sources of aluminum ore. However, bauxite mining remains dominated by foreign corporations operating under concession agreements. While the Doumbouya government has renegotiated some contracts to increase royalty rates from 0.075% to 15% and require increased local processing rather than exporting raw ore, fundamental ownership and control remain with foreign capital. Bauxite continues being extracted by wage labor, processed in foreign-owned or joint-venture refineries, and exported to global markets for aluminum production. Profits are privately appropriated and largely repatriated rather than being socially owned and democratically controlled for collective benefit (Ateku, 2026).

Iron ore mining in the Simandou range which is one of the world's largest undeveloped high-grade iron ore deposits has attracted massive interest from multinational mining corporations and Chinese, Australian, and Singaporean investors. The junta has sought to leverage competition among potential developers to secure better terms for Guinea, but negotiations remain focused on maximizing private investment and state revenue within capitalist frameworks rather than considering state ownership, cooperative development, or alternative models. The underlying logic remains attracting foreign capital through profitable opportunities rather than transforming production relations toward collective ownership (Ateku, 2026).

No nationalizations of foreign assets have occurred despite rhetoric about recovering national resources. No systematic land reform redistributing agricultural land to landless peasants has been attempted (Ateku, 2026). No wealth redistribution programs, progressive taxation reforms, or significant social welfare expansion have been implemented.

Index 2: Popular Mobilization - State Rallies Versus Autonomous Organization

African socialism required active, conscious, organized mass participation through autonomous

popular organizations possessing real decision-making power rather than top-down mobilization serving elite interests ((Ateku, 2026)) Examination of popular mobilization patterns across the three cases reveals consistent disconnection between managed rallies and genuine participatory empowerment.

Burkina Faso: Youth Rallies Without Popular Power

The Traoré government has demonstrated significant capacity to organize mass rallies and demonstrations featuring revolutionary symbolism, anti-French slogans, and expressions of support for military rule. These events have attracted substantial participation, particularly among urban youth frustrated with unemployment, insecurity, and perceptions of elite corruption under previous civilian governments (Reuters, 2023). Rally participants wave Russian flags symbolizing rejection of French neo-colonialism, chant revolutionary slogans, carry portraits of Sankara and other revolutionary heroes, and voice support for the junta's resistance to ECOWAS and Western pressure (Guirou, 2024).

Social media has amplified these mobilizations, with pro-junta youth activists organizing through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms, sharing revolutionary content, coordinating demonstrations, and engaging in online activism defending the government against critics. This creates impression of substantial popular mobilization and revolutionary enthusiasm that government sympathizers cite as evidence of authentic popular support distinguishing current military rule from previous authoritarian regimes (Guirou, 2024).

However, these mobilizations differ fundamentally from Sankara's participatory structures in crucial respects. Sankara established Committees for Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) at village, neighborhood, and workplace levels throughout Burkina Faso, creating institutional structures through which ordinary Burkinabè could actively participate in governance rather than merely attending rallies (Guirou, 2024). CDRs organized local production, distributed resources, monitored corruption, resolved disputes through popular justice, implemented development projects through collective labor, and provided channels for

popular input into policy formation and implementation oversight. Crucially, CDRs possessed real decision-making authority over local affairs and could challenge officials including monitoring government functionaries for corruption or incompetence.

Political party activities were suspended following the coup and remain banned, eliminating organized political participation channels and preventing formation of programmatic alternatives to military rule. While suspension might be justified temporarily during immediate post-coup transitions, indefinite continuation precludes democratic contestation and organized political life. The ban particularly affects parties that might articulate alternative visions for addressing insecurity, corruption, and development which are precisely the issues the coup purportedly leaned on (Kumafan et al., 2024).

Mass education programs characteristic of African socialism such as literacy campaigns mobilizing volunteers to teach reading and writing in rural areas, political education developing revolutionary consciousness and analytical capacities, cadre training preparing committed activists for leadership roles are entirely absent. The pattern suggests mobilization for regime legitimation rather than genuine popular empowerment. Rallies demonstrate support useful for resisting international pressure and claiming popular mandate, but do not transfer real power to participants. This aligns with Linz's (1964) characterization of authoritarian regimes as occasionally staging managed mobilizations while fundamentally preferring demobilized, passive populations who do not challenge authority or demand accountability.

Mali: Banned Politics and Military Dominance

Mali's junta has similarly organized pro-government demonstrations, particularly protesting French military presence, denouncing ECOWAS sanctions, and supporting military rule against external interference. These mobilizations have shown capacity to bring significant numbers into streets, especially among youth and groups previously marginalized in civilian politics. However, systematic analysis reveals even less genuine participatory infrastructure than Burkina Faso (Tanimu-Saminaka & Tanimu, 2025).

The junta suspended all political party activities in April 2024, eliminating even the limited organized political participation that party structures enable (AP News, 2024). This comprehensive ban prevents not only electoral contestation but also routine political organizing, policy debate, grassroots mobilization, and formation of programmatic alternatives. While the government justified suspension as necessary for public order given security challenges, the effect is to eliminate autonomous political organization while reserving mobilization capacity exclusively for state-managed demonstrations supporting military rule.

No participatory structures equivalent to Sankara's CDRs or other mechanisms for popular involvement in governance decisions have been created. The National Transition Council established after the coup to guide transition process is dominated by military officers and appointed civilians rather than representing elected or organically constituted popular organizations. Its deliberations occur in closed sessions with limited public input or transparency. Decision-making remains concentrated within military command structures accountable only to themselves rather than to popular organizations or democratic processes (Tanimu-Saminaka & Tanimu 2025).

Mass organizations essential to participatory socialism remain weak, fragmented, or suppressed. Labor unions, which historically played important roles in Malian politics including supporting protests that helped precipitate the 2012 coup against Amadou Toumani Touré, have been largely sidelined from political influence. Peasant organizations, despite Mali's predominantly agricultural population, possess minimal voice in policies affecting land access, credit, inputs, and marketing. Women's organizations, despite Mali having active women's rights movements, face challenges organizing and advocating given political restrictions. Youth movements exist primarily as pro-junta mobilization vehicles rather than autonomous organizations articulating youth interests and aspirations (Tanimu-Saminaka & Tanimu, 2025).

Mass education and consciousness-raising programs are absent. No literacy campaigns have been launched despite Mali having one of world's lowest literacy rates. No political education initiatives develop analytical capacities among

workers, peasants, youth, or women. No cadre training programs prepare committed activists for revolutionary leadership. While security forces receive expanded training and recruitment, civilian populations are not systematically educated or organized for participatory governance (Simasiku, 2025).

The governance model concentrates decision-making in military institutions operating through hierarchical command rather than dispersing power to popular organizations through participatory structures. Colonel Goïta functions as head of state making decisions in consultation with military inner circle rather than being accountable to elected bodies or popular organizations possessing real power. Policies are announced rather than developed through participatory processes involving those affected (Simasiku, 2025).

Guinea: Militarization of Administration

Guinea has experienced even less visible mass mobilization than Mali or Burkina Faso, with the Doumbouya government enjoying initial popular support for removing long-serving Alpha Condé but not developing systematic popular participation structures. Mass organizations for workers, peasants, women, or youth have not been created or empowered. Political party activities face restrictions despite not being formally banned as in Mali. Labor unions and civil society organizations operate under constraints with limited influence on governance decisions (Bangura, 2025)

Most strikingly, the military government has systematically militarized civilian administration rather than creating participatory structures empowering popular classes. In 2022, the junta replaced civilian prefects governing Guinea's regions and prefectures with military officers, transforming civilian administrative positions into military postings (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). This militarization extended down to local levels, with military personnel increasingly dominating provincial and district administration. The stated justification emphasized improving administrative efficiency, reducing corruption, and strengthening state capacity, but the effect is concentrating power in military hierarchy rather than dispersing power to popular organizations.

In 2024, the government dissolved elected municipal councils throughout Guinea, replacing

them with military-appointed administrators (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). These councils, while imperfect, represented one of few democratic structures enabling local participation in governance decisions affecting communities. Their elimination and replacement with appointed military administrators represents centralization and militarization directly opposite to the participatory decentralization characteristic of African socialism. Rather than empowering local communities to govern themselves collectively through democratic institutions, the government has subordinated localities to centralized military control (Bangura, 2025).

No mass literacy campaigns, political education programs, or consciousness-raising initiatives have been undertaken. Guinea's education system remains severely underdeveloped with low enrollment rates especially in rural areas and among girls, minimal investment in adult education or literacy programs, and no evidence of using education for political mobilization or consciousness development beyond routine civics instruction. The government has not created mechanisms for popular input into policy formation or implementation oversight that might enable genuine participatory governance even within authoritarian frameworks (Bangura, 2025).

Index 3: Anti-Imperialism and Non-Alignment- Changing Masters Rather Than Achieving Liberation

All three regimes have deployed extensive anti-imperialist and particularly anti-French rhetoric, expelled French military forces, terminated defense agreements, and positioned themselves as recovering sovereignty from neo-colonial domination. However, examination of actual practices reveals patterns of imperial substitution, changing from French/Western to Russian/Turkish partnerships rather than achieving the genuine non-alignment and comprehensive decolonization central to African socialism (Bangura, 2025).

Burkina Faso and Mali expelled French troops and military advisors that had been deployed for counter-terrorism operations, with governments denouncing French forces as ineffective against jihadists, complicit in perpetuating instability to justify continued French presence, and representing continued neo-colonial domination incompatible

with genuine sovereignty (Al Jazeera, 2024). Both countries terminated bilateral defense agreements with France dating from independence periods. Both governments formally joined the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) together with Niger, creating a mutual defense pact among the three junta-led countries and signaling regional coordination in rejecting Western security partnerships (Institute for Study of War, 2025).

However, French military and security partnerships have been replaced primarily with Russian alternatives rather than achieving self-reliance or genuine non-alignment. Mali contracted Wagner Group which is the Russian private military company (PMC) notorious for brutality and war crimes in Syria, Libya, and Central African Republic to provide security services including counter-terrorism operations, protection of government installations, and training of Malian forces (Congressional Research Service, 2024). Wagner deployment coincided with French departure, with Russian mercenaries essentially replacing French soldiers. Burkina Faso similarly contracted Wagner forces following Mali's lead, with Russian mercenaries deployed to protect the junta and conduct operations against insurgents (Institute for Study of War, 2025).

This substitution raises fundamental questions about genuine anti-imperialism versus changing imperial masters. Wagner operates as an instrument of Russian geopolitical influence, securing Russian access to resources and strategic positions while projecting Russian power in regions formerly dominated by Western powers. Genuine non-alignment as practiced by Nkrumah, Nyerere, and Sankara specifically accepting selective support from various sources while maintaining strategic autonomy and refusing subordination to any bloc differs fundamentally from observed patterns (Mayer, 2025).

Contemporary regimes show pattern of dependency substitution rather than non-alignment. As French influence declines, Russian and Turkish influence increases through security partnerships, development assistance, diplomatic support, and economic investments. Russia provides military hardware, training, and Wagner mercenaries; Turkey offers drones, development assistance, and diplomatic backing; China provides infrastructure financing and resource extraction partnerships. While diversifying partners may improve

negotiating leverage compared to exclusive French dependency, it maintains fundamental posture of relying on external powers rather than building autonomous capacity through Pan-African cooperation, South-South partnerships, and genuine self-reliance.

The pattern suggests what might be termed "multipolar neo-colonialism" rather than decolonization implying competition with multiple external powers for influence and access to African resources rather than achieving comprehensive independence from all external domination (Okoth, 2023).

Index Four: Ideological Coherence

Genuine revolutionary leaders demonstrated serious theoretical engagement, policy consistency, personal sacrifice, and clear programmatic vision (Mayer, 2025). Traoré extensively references Sankara but shows no evidence of published ideological texts or theoretical writings. Policy inconsistency is evident in revolutionary rhetoric combined with capitalist economic continuity. No political education programs have been established. Goïta's rhetoric emphasizes anti-French sentiment but with minimal ideological elaboration beyond nationalist positions. No theoretical writings or programmatic vision has been articulated. Governance appears reactive rather than programmatic. Doumbouya quickly shifted from initial revolutionary references to pragmatic technocratic governance with no sustained revolutionary discourse or theoretical engagement. Across all cases, revolutionary rhetoric masks ideological shallowness and opportunism, contrasting sharply with Sankara and Cabral's theoretical seriousness (Mayer, 2025). None publish ideological texts, conduct cadre training, or demonstrate sustained engagement with Marxist theory. None adopt personal lifestyles reflecting egalitarian commitments. Revolutionary language serves legitimation rather than transformation, aligning with Linz's (1964) observation about authoritarian mentalities versus systematic ideologies.

Conclusion

Systematic assessment against four indices derived from African socialist practice reveals profound disconnection between revolutionary rhetoric and governance reality in Mali, Guinea, and Burkina

Faso. None demonstrates substantive alignment with African socialist principles. Instead, evidence indicates authoritarian personalist rule exploiting revolutionary symbolism for legitimation, precisely the pattern Decalo (1990) and Ake (1996) identified in previous African military regimes.

Economic transformation, the foundational requirement of African socialism, is almost entirely absent. No land reform, nationalization, cooperative creation, or wealth redistribution has occurred. Popular mobilization through autonomous organizations remains absent, with state rallies replacing genuine participatory structures. The three countries have all witnessed an overall deterioration of democratic norms, civil freedoms, and institutional independence. Freedom House scores for 2024 place Burkina Faso (25/100), Mali (28/100), and Guinea (29/100) in the Not Free category (Freedom House, 2024). The V-Dem Institute records significant declines in electoral democracy, press freedom, and judicial independence scores (V-Dem Institute, 2023). The International IDEA Global State of Democracy Tracker also points to worsening rule of law and political participation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea, with the states becoming more militarized and civic space shrinking (International IDEA, 2024). This trajectory contradicts African socialism's commitment to popular sovereignty and expanded democratic participation, instead demonstrating authoritarian consolidation control (Bangura, 2025).

These findings validate historical patterns identified in scholarship on African military regimes. Despite contemporary revolutionary rhetoric, fundamental dynamics mirror previous military coups: opportunistic ideological appropriation, personalist rule, patrimonial politics, and democratic backsliding (Decalo, 1990; Ake, 1996; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). Sankara's genuine revolutionary commitment becomes more evident through this comparison.

The evidence suggests these regimes represent "sovereignist populism" relating to strategic deployment of nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric to legitimize authoritarian military rule without substantive revolutionary transformation (Amoateng, 2022).

These developments raise profound concerns for West African democracy. The coordinated

withdrawal from ECOWAS and successful consolidation of military rule despite minimal international consequences may trigger contagion effects, with the "putschist playbook" becoming institutionalized (Vines, 2024; Amani Africa, 2025). If military regimes successfully consolidate power, demonstrate regional coordination, and secure Russian backing, authoritarian governance may become normalized across the Sahel. This could create demonstration effects where military officers in other countries facing governance crises perceive intervention as a viable path to power.

As Lawal (2025) reports, there is growing recognition among citizens that revolutionary promises mask authoritarian realities. This disillusionment may yet generate authentic popular movements for democratic transformation, though whether such movements can successfully challenge militarized states remains deeply uncertain. The legacy of African socialism particularly in its theoretical richness, policy innovations, and genuine commitment to popular sovereignty and economic justice deserves better than instrumentalization by military regimes pursuing authoritarian consolidation (Mayer, 2025).

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Not Applicable

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