

Ethnic Diversity and the Likelihood of Military Coups: The Malian Experience

Ebimnamaonye, Herbert Chukwudi, PhD
Rivers State University

Abstract

Despite democratic transitions and the dominance of regional anti-coup norms, Mali has experienced disconcerting return of the military coups, raising doubts about the social and political conditions within the country that allow the unconstitutional seizure of power. The principal issue against this work is that the ethnic diversity in Mali has often been treated as if it was a mere contextual variable and few efforts have been made to understand the interaction between ethnic marginalisation, insecurity and weak civil-military relations that works in favour of increasing coup propensity. The empirical inquiry attempted to assess the correlation between ethnic heterogeneity and the probability of military coups in the West African states, especially the Malian case. In particular, the study focused on how differences in ethnic diversity affect the incidence of coups, the impact of ethnic marginalisation and unequal distribution of state resources on coup predisposition, and the interaction between ethnic diversity, insecurity and civil-military relations as explanatory factors of coup recurrence in Mali. The investigation was based on Relative Deprivation Theory. According to this theory, instability follows when groups feel a gap between their expectations of the state and their actual benefits, security and recognition received. The research methodology that was used in the study was qualitative research. Secondary data was taken from a diversity of sources, such as textbooks, peer-reviewed journal article sources, newspapers, official government publications, and international news outlets. A content analysis method was adopted as the data processing technique. The study argues that ethnic diversity itself does not lead to coups in Mali; instead, coups are more likely to occur in situations where ethnic exclusion, unfair distribution of resources, long-standing insecurity and a weakening of civilian legitimacy combine with fragile civil-military relations all but necessary to weaken civilian legitimacy and make military intervention seem acceptable. As this study shows, the recurrent tendency for coups in Mali is therefore rooted in a dynamic interaction between perceived ethnic deprivation, insecurity and militarised political agency. Policy recommendations flowing from this work include the need for inclusive governance, fair distribution of resources, security reforms around the people and strong civilian oversight of the military.

Keywords: ethnic diversity; military coups; Mali; insecurity; civil-military relations.

Introduction

Ethnic diversity refers to the existence of many ethnic, language and cultural communities within one polity whereas military coups refer to the unconstitutional takeover of political power by the military. While diversity per se is not a curse, tensions occur when it

*Corresponding author : -

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is handled to exclusion, unequal access to state resources, or weak nation building strategies. Contemporary African scholarship indicates that ethnic inequality can exacerbate political conflict and globalize civic distrust, especially when certain communities feel consistent margins of exclusion from representation and development [1]. In the case of Mali, this issue takes on particular salience, based on the country's complex social fabric which involves Bambara, Fulani, Songhai, Tuareg, Dogon, and Arab groups whose relationship with the state has been uneven in the past. The Malian experience demonstrates that ethnic cleavages, combined with insecurity, regional neglect, and contested authority, make for weak national cohesion. Empirical studies of the Tuareg rebellion also further show how conflict can weaken attachment to the nation-state and crystallize identity-based grievances in ways that can lead to a more volatile political situation [2].

West Africa is the sub-region between the Atlantic coast and the Sahel where the states are interrelated due to common heritages of colonial rule, security pressures, and ECOWAS standards in constitutional rules. Mali is at the crossroads of current controversies over the re-emergence of coups because it provides a dramatic setting in which different themes of insurgency, public discontent, elite failure, and praetorian ambition coalesce. According to scholars, in Mali, the 2020 coup took place amid mass demonstrations, allegations of corruption, electoral disputes, and a worsening security climate, which altogether caused a lack of public trust in civil authority [3].

At the regional level, ECOWAS holds a formal “zero tolerance” position on unconstitutional changes of government, but enforcement has too often been hampered by deeply-rooted domestic grievances and shifting public sentiment [4]. Consequently, Mali is an illuminating case study that can help explain why coups continue to occur, even when anti-coup norms exist formally. The current inquiry thus aims to determine whether ethnic diversity, in connection with exclusionary rule and weak institutions, increases the likelihood of military takeovers in West African states. In this regard, Mali is far more than an isolated case, but an enlightening example of a persistent regional phenomenon, and the current research is designed to investigate the impact of ethnic diversity on the likelihood of military coups in West African countries: the Malian experience.

Statement of the Problem

Ethnic diversity in West Africa is often celebrated as a source of cultural richness, but in countries that are already fragile states, ethnic diversity can be politically combustible when public institutions distribute power, security, and development unevenly. Mali is an extreme case for this tension. The recurrence of coups in the country's history could not be simply ascribed to ethnicity but the combination of ethnic mistrust, regional marginalisation, jihadist violence and weak civilian control have fertilised an environment in which military intervention repeatedly seems to be a reasonable option. Recent works on Africa's return to coups focus on poverty, the precariousness of democracy, prior coup history, and insurgency, but are often more concerned with the role of social cleavages as background factors rather than as lived political realities that affect the legitimacy of states and cohesion among elites and populace [5], [6]. This lacuna leaves an important question pending: how ethnic diversity is transformed into a danger when it translates into exclusion, mistrust, and uneven state presence.

In Mali, grievances from the north, center-periphery tensions, and perceptions of selective state protection have all caused a loss of belief in civilian authority and have made national integration difficult. The concern, therefore, is not heterogeneity as such, but the political management of diversity in a security-fractured state. Without a longitudinal

understanding of this relationship, explanations of coups in Mali are characterized by being broad, descriptive, and not attentive enough to the social foundations of a breakdown of the state.

Another problem requiring consideration is the paucity of current scholarship on Mali and West Africa. Many recent works document coup events, insurgency, public disaffection, and external influence, but they stop short of isolating the interaction of ethnic diversity and military opportunism in patterned ways. Some interpret coups as the result of democratic backsliding and elite failure; others emphasize insecurity, foreign interference, or civil-military imbalance [6], [7], [5]. These explanations are valuable but may risk leveling out the social complexity of Mali by underestimating the importance of exclusion among Tuareg, Fulani, Arab, Dogon, and other groups, as it reshapes trust in the state and the armed forces.

Studies on governance failures in Burkina Faso and Mali focus similarly on the importance of displacement, insecurity, and poor leadership, but do not adequately link these pressures to the management of diversity as a coups-enabling condition [8]. If the state is perceived by communities as selective, predatory, or absent, why would constitutional loyalty be strong in times of crisis? And if soldiers present themselves as unpartisan saviors in an ethnically fractured polity, who questions whether they solve exclusion or only reciprocate it? These unanswered questions reveal a gap, making inquiry into Mali timely and crucial for scholarship and policy in the subregion today.

The problem, then, is that the experience of the coup in Mali is often discussed as a failure of security and/or a reversal of democracy, with the role of ethnic diversity under-theorized and confused. Yet research has shown that ethnic inequality is a factor that can lead to conflict and undermine participation, which undermines the legitimacy upon which civilian governments rely [1]. When such inequality is combined with battlefield losses, corruption, and a military that self-identifies as the nation's guardian, it increases the threat of a takeover. In Mali, this dynamic is particularly disturbing, as every coup promises rescue but leaves unsolved fractures of belonging, representation, and trust. The persisting puzzle is whether military seizures of power are purely symptoms of institutional collapse, or whether they also feed on patterns of ethnic exclusion that make sections of society susceptible to extra-constitutional change.

Existing studies do not adequately settle this question, particularly at the intersection of ethnicity, insecurity, and civil-military politics in West Africa [5], [8]. A study is necessary to move beyond explanations of instability and clarify why Mali has become a theater of coup politics. It is against this backdrop that this study was undertaken to examine ethnic diversity and the likelihood of military coups: The Malian experience. Specifically, the study has the following objectives:

- 1) to investigate the influence of ethnic diversity on the occurrence of military coups in Mali.
- 2) to determine how ethnic marginalization and uneven distribution of state resources affect the propensity for military coups in Mali.
- 3) to examine the interplay between ethnic diversity, insecurity, and civil-military relations in explaining coup recurrence in Mali.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study is anchored on the Relative Deprivation Theory that was propounded by Ted Robert Gurr in 1970. The theory explains political violence as a response to some perceived difference between what people think they deserve and what they actually get from

the state. In Gurr's formulation, frustration increases where expectations of inclusion, protection, recognition, or development are repeatedly denied, and this frustration may spill over toward unrest, rebellion, or support for unconstitutional forms of political change [9]. Its core assumptions are that grievances are social constructs, that the perception of injustice is as important as material poverty, and that continued exclusion undermines loyalty to political institutions [10]. Applied to West Africa, and Mali in particular, the theory is useful because ethnic diversity in itself does not produce coups, but it becomes more likely when uneven access to state power, public goods, and security exists between ethnic groups. Recent scholarship reinforces this logic by showing that ethnic inequality is associated with conflict and weaker civic participation in African settings, thereby eroding the legitimacy of civilian rule [1]. In the case of Mali, where northern and central communities have frequently viewed the state as remote, selective, or coercive, Relative Deprivation Theory provides a persuasive lens through which we can understand how diversity, if badly governed, can harden grievance and unseat constitutional order.

The applicability of Relative Deprivation Theory to this study lies in the fact that the theory links ethnic diversity, state exclusion, and military coups in a single explanatory frame. Mali's frequent failures at constitutional governance have been played out within a context of insurgency and distrust between the center and periphery, disputed citizenship, and general public disaffection with civilian governments. Recent analyses of Africa's coup resurgence emphasize poor governance, insecurity, democratic frailty, and weak institutions, but also suggest that where populations feel abandoned or unfairly treated, it is easier for the military to cast itself as a corrective force [5], [6]. This is where the theory is of special interest for the present study. It helps us understand why parts of a diverse population can lose faith in the elected authority and be less resistant to military intervention when the state fails to manage difference in a fair manner. It also helps explain the need to not see coups in Mali only as elite power struggles, but as events incubated by deeper social grievances and imbalanced national integration. Thus, Relative Deprivation Theory adds the necessary conceptual depth and contextual relevance to explain the second issue which is possible military coups in Mali due to ethnic diversity mediated by exclusion and grievance.

Research Method

The research used qualitative approach to facilitate deep understanding of military coups and ethnic diversity interaction in Mali. Data from secondary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, newspapers and official reports added rich contextual information on patterns of exclusion, governance failure and military intervention. Content analysis was used to interpret the themes related to ethnic marginalisation and political instability in a systematic way. The reason behind this method is its appropriateness for studying complex socio-political relationships, capturing historical dynamics, and explaining underlying meaning, something which is overlooked with quantitative methods in coup related studies.

Results and Discussion

The influence of ethnic diversity on the occurrence of military coups in Mali

Ethnic diversity in Mali can be said to be best understood not as an uncomplicated demographic datum but instead as a politically mediated social condition whose impact depends on the way in which the state apportions authority, security, and recognition. Mali is home to two significant ethnic collectives, the Bambara and Fulani, along with the Songhai,

Tuareg, Arab, Dogon, Bozo and a number of others; the diversity of this population has always been able to maintain coexistence and equal tension. Accordingly, the key question is not whether diversity exists, but whether it is governed by public institutions in an equitable fashion. When diversity is handled by unequal incorporation, selective protection and unequal access to resources it becomes bound up with distrust, insecurity and regime fragility.

In the case of Mali, though, talks of coups often dwindled down to corruption, insurgency, inadequate leadership and military discontent - and those are factors that play a role - the explanation remains incomplete, which is simply that ethnicised grievances play an important role in the legitimacy of civilian rule, as well as the role of segments of society in tolerating, welcoming, or surrendering to military intervention. Recent scholarship on African coups shows that coups are more likely where governments lose power and fail to provide order and a detached connection with citizens' quotidian insecurity [5], [3]. In the Malian case, the role of ethnic diversity is made relevant by the fact that political exclusion has recurrently followed ethnic and regional lines, especially those between Bamako and the north and center of the interior. Thus, the role of ethnic diversity in coups is indirect but powerful: diversity by itself does not lead to any coup, but when mediated by exclusionary governance and lack of state legitimacy, it may increase the cracks into which military actors can return to politics [1], [7].

One major way that ethnic diversity has influenced the incidence of military coups in Mali appears to have been through the historical development of center-periphery inequality. Ever since independence, successive governments have struggled to create an inclusive national compact that integrates northern populations—particularly the Tuareg and Arab communities—into the state on terms considered fair and credible. Periodic rebellions in the north were not due to ethnicity alone but to the conjoining of ethnic identity with resentments over neglect, under-development, insecurity, and unequal access to state authority. As grievances mounted, the Malian state's image as a national institution declined, especially in places where the state seemed absent in welfare provision and present only in coercion. This jeopardizes legitimacy: a government seen as failing to unite the elements of a diverse society loses both symbolic and practical authority, allowing military officers to portray themselves as defenders of national unity against an ineffective or indifferent civilian class.

Whitehouse [7] argues that the 2012 coup cannot be separated from a wider crisis of political confidence, but later studies of the post-coup state of Mali suggest that unresolved northern fractures continued to be at the heart of state instability [7], [3]. In this sense, ethnic diversity influenced the occurrence of coups not through mechanical incitement of insubordination but by revealing the failure of state-building in a plural society. When the failure of the civilian government in the north was seen by the armed forces as a sign of national decay, military intervention took on a language of rescue. That rescue narrative took hold in no small part because the state had not convinced all communities of a sense of equal belonging.

A second mechanism is the ethnicization of insecurity in central and northern Mali, where local violence is increasingly understood along communal lines of identity. Benjaminsen and Ba [11] show that conflict cannot be reduced to timeless ethnic hatreds in Mali but is influenced by pressures on land, state behavior, militia formation, and the political utilization of identity labels. Their study of Fulani involvement in jihadist movements and Fulani-Dogon violence shows how state weakness and allied discriminatory policies reinforce communal boundaries and turn local conflicts into broader struggles over authority. This

dynamic directly contributes to conditions under which military coups become more likely. When citizens see elected governments as unable to control violence or implicated in favoritism and proxy security, public faith in constitutional institutions declines, giving the armed forces a comparative advantage in public discourse by claiming to transcend partisan and communal interests, even if questionable in practice.

Piombo et al. [12] extend this argument, demonstrating that grievances are more likely to arise among historically excluded groups in the Sahel, and that states too often fail to respond to insecurity by restoring inclusive authority, instead delegating force to non-state actors. In Mali, such patterns have undermined civilian credibility and fed the belief that normal politics cannot protect the country. Under such conditions, coups are easier to justify rhetorically. Ethnic diversity thus affects coups by becoming securitized: once diversity is framed as a space of menace, distrust, and withdrawal, soldiers emerge as alleged arbiters of unity, taking advantage of civilian conflict management failures [11], [12].

Even so, it is analytically careless to argue that ethnic diversity is the key to military coups in Mali. A more nuanced interpretation is that diversity matters politically when it intersects with democratic frailty, bad governance, battlefield humiliation, and elite discredit. Chin and Kirkpatrick [5] demonstrate that recent African coups have arisen in settings where governments were already crippled by legitimacy deficits and mismanagement. Mali fits that profile but with an added dimension: the state cannot rule a diverse polity evenly, accentuating deficits. Ackermann et al. [1] similarly argue that ethnic inequality in Africa goes hand in hand with conflict and lower civic participation, which is important because lower levels of trust and weaker participation can undermine the social means needed to oppose unconstitutional change.

In Mali, this means that ethnic diversity does not act as an isolated independent force but operates through unequal citizenship, skewed security provision, and diminished faith in representative government. This helps explain why some Malians greeted coups not with mere fear but with the hope that the military would correct what civilian authorities had not addressed. Elischer and Lawrance [3] note that the post-coup milieu in Africa is intertwined with public disenchantment, and Mali became one of the clearest examples of this mood. The problem, however, is that coups do not solve the underlying issue of belonging in a diverse state. Authority may be momentarily repackaged by them, but the broken ties between communities and governing institutions are rarely reconstructed. Ethnic diversity therefore has a less direct impact on triggering coups and a greater impact as a fault line that amplifies state failure and public receptivity to military power [1], [5].

Taken together, the case of Mali shows that ethnic diversity affects the incidence of military coups when politicized through exclusion, insecurity, and uneven state presence. Mali's coups should not be interpreted as inevitable outcomes of pluralism; coups become more thinkable where diverse communities encounter the state unevenly, see themselves as permanent outsiders, and experience civilian governments failing to create a credible national center.

In such a setting, the military enjoys a narrative vacuum, portraying itself as disciplined, unifying, and patriotic precisely because civilian politics appears fragmented and compromised. Yet scholarship cautions against taking that story at face value. Benjaminsen and Ba [11] demonstrate the layering of conflict in Mali and its creation by policy choice, and Whitehouse [7] reminds us that public mobilization following the 1993 coup showed people's anger at civilian rule but also their uncertainty over military alternatives. The best-defensible

conclusion is that ethnic diversity is important because it determines the terrain on which legitimacy is contested. Where the state is poor at managing diversity, there is greater freedom for armed intervention. Where diversity is accommodated through fairness, representation, and trusted institutions, coups lose much of their social support. For studying Mali, ethnic diversity is thus not a myth or a master cause but an important conditioning factor that helps explain why constitutional order remains fragile and why military coups recur as a plausible, if deeply problematic, response to national crisis [7], [12], [3]

Ethnic marginalization and uneven distribution of state resources affect the propensity for military coups in Mali.

Understanding the role ethnic marginalisation and uneven distribution of state resources plays in the propensity for military coups in Mali is fundamental because coups are not typically the result of discontent in barracks but are more likely to be incubated in deeper crises of legitimacy, belonging, and state failure. In Mali, the central problem has not been ethnic diversity per se, but the longstanding perception among a number of communities that the state distributes protection, representation and development as and when it chooses, that is, in a selective manner. This is important because a government that is perceived to be remote, biased, or weak loses its moral authority, and once that is undermined, the military can more readily justify its intervention as a national rescue mission. Scholarship on Mali invariably indicates that northern and central grievances have been linked to how power and resources are concentrated around Bamako and affect peripheral populations, who often experience the state's "dirty hands" as intermittent, coercive, or absent [7], [13]. These patterns do not result in coups mechanically but foster political conditions in which civilian governments seem unable to manage fairly.

In such circumstances, military actors can portray themselves as protectors of national unity, albeit one they inherit and over which they perpetuate the same structural problems they supposedly solve. The problem is not poverty or insecurity per se but unequal citizenship. Whereas state resources flow through patronage, ethnic hierarchy, or regional privilege, constitutional loyalty is fragile. Mali's repeated political ruptures must be read in the context of uneven state-building, in which ethnic marginalization and biased public distribution have undermined the social compact that should protect civilian rule. In this sense, the propensity for coups is related not only to the ambitions of soldiers but also to a fractured political community in which many citizens no longer have faith that the state will act impartially [12], [3].

One significant way in which ethnic marginalization impinges on the propensity for coups in Mali relates to historical marginalization and isolation of northern communities from credible political incorporation. Tuareg and Arab populations, in particular, have often felt that the postcolonial Malian state was not a republic of Malian citizens but a southern-dominated project, not collectively owned in all parts of the country. This perception did not arise overnight, nor is it simply cultural. It emerged from decades of low infrastructure, minimal administrative presence, inadequately delivered services, and negotiation patterns with rebels that frequently benefited narrow elites without changing ordinary people's everyday lives. Kone [14] argues that understanding northern rebellions requires attention to unequal state formation and competing visions of national belonging.

Whitehouse [7] similarly shows that the 2012 coup occurred against a backdrop of an overall crisis of public confidence in the political class, in which state failure in the north became iconic of generalized national decay. These insights explain how uneven resource

distribution undermines the state in two ways. First, it alienates communities already marginal to the political center. Second, it discredits elected governments in the eyes of the wider population, who perceive state weakness in peripheral regions as evidence of national incompetence. Once this occurs, military intervention can be framed as a remedy for civilian inattention.

In Mali, the inability to provide roads, schools, health facilities, meaningful representation, and impartial security throughout ethnically disparate areas did more than drive home local grievances; it challenged the legitimacy of the constitutional order itself. Coups flourish where governments are structurally unable to hold the nation together. Thus, ethnic marginalization increases the likelihood of coups by nationalizing the political crisis of territorial inequality into a national political crisis, which soldiers can exploit in the name of unity, order, and restoration [14], [7].

A second dimension involves how uneven resource distribution in central Mali exacerbates communal mistrust and undermines civilian authority. In recent years, Mopti and Ségou areas have been scenes of increasing violence among Fulani, Dogon, and other populations. Leading scholarship cautions against interpreting this violence as ethnic hatred from a bygone age; conflicts are instead rooted in political ecology, contested access to land, selective state intervention, and community responses to perceived unfair distribution of security and justice [11]. Their analysis of why some pastoralists joined jihadist groups is especially relevant: support for armed actors was often related to grievances over corruption, abuse by state officials, and exclusion from fair access to resources and dispute resolution [10], [11]. When a state seems to favor some communities over others or leave coercion to local militias, it is no longer an impartial arbiter. That failure directly impacts coup propensity. A civilian government incapable of maintaining equitable security loses credibility, while soldiers are afforded political space to claim exceptional intervention is needed.

Benjaminsen and Ba [11] show how violence in central Mali was fueled, sponsored, or tolerated by a state that deepened, rather than reduced, ethnic polarization through state-sponsored or tolerated communal militias. This is significant because coups are more likely where civilian leaders are blamed not only for insecurity but also for presiding over a state perceived as partisan and unjust. In Mali, unequal access to protection, justice, and livelihoods transforms localized grievances into broader distrust of political order. The result is a public arena in which the constitutional regime is apparently unable to mediate conflict fairly. Under such conditions, military intervention could be reimagined as a response to national disintegration, despite stemming from institutional failures the military was supposed to remedy [10], [11].

The Sahel-wide literature contributes to reinforcing such interpretation by finding that historically excluded groups are already more likely to form long-term grievances, and states often respond asymmetrically to insecurity depending on whom it affects and where violence takes place. According to Piombo et al. [12], subnational groups have a different relationship with the state, and historically marginalized populations are more likely to support or tolerate non-state armed actors in response to government neglect and lack of trust. They further state that in such regions the state is less likely to mount a strong, direct, and inclusive response and more likely to delegate force to irregular actors or adopt fragmented security arrangements [12]. This pattern is highly evident in Mali. Where public goods and security are unevenly distributed, ethnicity is politically salient to the extent that people start to interpret state behavior through the prism of favoritism and abandonment. Such perceptions

cause deep destabilization: they not only generate local unrest but also undermine the authority of civilian government at the national scale.

Elischer and Lawrance [3], writing on Africa's new post-coup landscape, point out that recent coups have thrived where democratically elected regimes seemed incapable of effective governance and command of public trust. Mali exemplifies this logic. Once peripheral communities begin to feel excluded and central communities see the state's capacity to maintain order breaking down, the military can present itself as the last institution capable of saving the republic. That narrative is often deceptive but resonates because uneven state distribution has already hollowed out the legitimacy of elected rule. Thus, ethnic marginalization and unequal distribution of resources do not create grievances only at the margins; they change the national imagination of statehood. The more the state is perceived to be owned by some regions or networks more than others, the easier it is for military officers to portray a coup as an act of patriotic correction rather than a breach of constitutional rule [12], [3].

Ultimately, the tendency for military coups in Mali can be explained by the way ethnic marginalization and uneven state distribution undermine civic trust and national cohesion. This conclusion is important, as it avoids two analytical errors: blaming ethnic diversity itself, and reducing coups to elite or military conspiracies detached from society. Mali's experience indicates that the real threat lies in how diversity is managed. When some communities face repeated neglect or inferior access to resources, they may withdraw confidence in civilian institutions. Simultaneously, communities closer to the center may perceive peripheral weakness as evidence of political failure. Whitehouse [7] reinforces the importance of public mobilization following the 2012 coup in expressing frustration with the discredited political order, while Kone [14] and Moseley and Hoffman [13] place Mali's instability within a longer history of uneven integration and unsettled tensions between the center and north. The implication is that coups are more likely not merely because soldiers are willing to seize power but because the state has already lost some claim to represent the whole nation.

In Mali, the unequal distribution of roads, schools, development funds, administrative access, and, in particular, security has resulted in ethnic and regional grievances, raising questions of state legitimacy. Once legitimacy decays, constitutional barriers to coups weaken. The military then exploits a crisis it did not create but which was made possible by civilian failures to govern diversity justly. In this sense, ethnic marginalization and unequal resource distribution are not side issues; they are central factors in establishing conditions under which coups become "thinkable," "supportable," and recurrent within Mali's fragile political order [7], [14], [12].

The interplay between ethnic diversity, insecurity, and civil-military relations in explaining coup recurrence in Mali.

Progressive recurrence of coups in Mali is best understood not in terms of a single variable, but in terms of interacting themes of ethnic diversity, chronic insecurity, and fraught civil-military relations that have built up cumulatively. In other words, the multiple military takeovers of Mali have been an outgrowth of a political situation in which social divide, armed violence, and reduced civilian power reinforce each other endlessly. Ethnic diversity in Mali has not been, per se, the cause of the recurrent coups, but rather that the problem has arisen due to the way in which diversity has been politically managed in an already fragile state. Mali has a complex mosaic of communities, namely the Tuareg, Arabic, Fulani, Songhai,

Dogon, Bambara and others, but the issue of pluralism became destabilising when the state failed to unite those groups by equitable governance, credible representation, and providing security impartially.

Recent studies on northern Mali demonstrate that instability in the Sahel is closely linked with hybrid political orders, informal power networks, and unresolved center-periphery issues, particularly where local communities do not perceive the state as a neutral national authority [15]. This is critical for understanding coup recurrence because when parts of the population believe the state is selective, distanced, or predatory, civilian governments lose legitimacy well beyond the affected areas. The crisis loses its local character and becomes national.

Bester makes a similar argument regarding the 2020 Malian coup: predatory rule, popular frustration, and governance failure laid the groundwork for military intervention, implying that coups become more thinkable when public trust in civilian authority has already eroded. In Mali, ethnic diversity overlaps with political exclusion: grievances in the north and center undermine trust in the state, while the state's failure to address grievances convinces soldiers that civilian elites cannot maintain national cohesion. This does not imply that ethnicity directly causes coups; rather, a poorly governed diverse society is more susceptible to military intervention, particularly when state fragility transforms identity-based frustrations into wider crises of authority and national belonging. In this sense, diversity provides the context in which insecurity thrives and civil-military tensions are politicized [15].

Insecurity is the second pillar of this interaction, and in Mali it has had a tremendous impact on the conditions under which coups become recurrent. Since 2012, Mali has faced overlapping rebellions, jihadist insurgency, inter-communal violence, and porous borders, particularly in the north and center. What is important for this study is not insecurity as an abstract concept but insecurity as a lived and uneven reality, which reshapes state legitimacy. Cheque and Diarra note that insecurity in Mali is driven by ungoverned spaces, porous borders, non-state armed actors, and longstanding postcolonial government failures to address Tuareg grievances and social disaffection more broadly.

Recent work on central Mali highlights that armed community mobilization thrives where the state is weak and vulnerable communities rely on non-state security mechanisms in response to violence, exclusionary resource management, and contested local authority. These dynamics are important for understanding coup recurrence: a government that cannot defend citizens, monopolize force, and manage local conflicts loses significant practical and symbolic legitimacy. Under such circumstances, the military can argue that civilian leaders have failed in their most fundamental task—defending the republic.

In Mali, many coups have capitalized on this crisis psychology. The deteriorating security situation leads to frustration among soldiers on the ground, anger among the public toward politicians in Bamako, and permissive circumstances in which military actors portray themselves as national saviors. Insecurity thus does not merely accompany coups; it actively deepens the fractures through which the military re-enters politics. The more insecurity persists, the more civilian rule is perceived as vulnerable, provisional, and disposable.

Civil-military relations constitute the third, and perhaps most immediate, dimension of the explanation. Coups recur when the armed forces stop seeing themselves as subordinate instruments of civilian rule and begin considering themselves ultimate arbiters of national destiny. Mali's post-2013 trajectory is telling in this respect. Gazeley notes that French post-2013 state-building efforts strengthened the military institution without addressing the army's

political location within the state, inadvertently producing conditions for the 2020 coup. This implies that military empowerment in a fragile polity may not lead to stability when civilian oversight is weak and the armed forces retain a corporate sense of guardianship. Elischer and Lawrance [3] similarly argue that Africa's recent post-coup landscape demonstrates not a disappearance of coups but an increased ability of militaries to challenge civilian rulers where power is perceived to be up for grabs.

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instruments of civilian rule and begin considering themselves ultimate arbiters of national destiny. Mali's post-2013 trajectory is telling in this respect. Gazeley notes that French post-2013 state-building efforts strengthened the military institution without addressing the army's political location within the state, inadvertently producing conditions for the 2020 coup. This implies that military empowerment in a fragile polity may not lead to stability when civilian oversight is weak and the armed forces retain a corporate sense of guardianship. Elischer and Lawrance [3] similarly argue that Africa's recent post-coup landscape demonstrates not a disappearance of coups but an increased ability of militaries to challenge civilian rulers where power is perceived to be up for grabs.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the study found that the recurrence of military coups in Mali was not due to ethnic diversity as such, but the way diversity was mediated through exclusion, insecurity, and fragile civil-military relations. The findings showed that ethnic marginalisation and disproportionate distribution of state resources had eroded national cohesion and destroyed trust in civilian authority, especially in regions where communities felt that the state was simply too remote, selective or coercive. The study also observed that long periods of insecurity in northern and central Mali had led to an increase in people's frustration, an exposure of the failure of civilian government to honour its responsibility to provide protection, and created an environment in which military intervention was more easily rationalised as a corrective response to a state breaking down. It was also established that relations between the civil and the military had been strained civil-military relations with weak civilian oversight and self-perception of the military as guardians of the state had increased the likelihood of re-intervention in politics.

These results were consistent with the Relative Deprivation Theory adopted for the study. The theory had explained how political instability was created when groups felt that there was a difference between what they expected from the state and what they actually got. In the Malian case, many communities were subjected to deprivation not only in material senses, but also in terms of recognition, representation and security. This sense of deprivation has contributed to grievances and lack of loyalty to constitutional rule, and seeing extra-constitutional alternatives as more acceptable in times of crisis. The study thus concluded that the recurrence of coup in Mali had been sealed in the combination of perceived ethnic exclusion, ongoing insecurity and militarised political agency which had mixed to undermine democratic stability.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the following recommendations were stated:

1. The Malian state should institutionalise accessible and inclusive management through ensuring fair ethnic representation in political appointments, local administration and national decision-making. Equitable distribution of development projects; public services; state resources among regions should be of priority to minimise the perception of marginalisation and foster national cohesion to restore the confidence of citizens in the civilian authority and constitutional governance.
2. Government should adopt a people - centred security strategy, which involves a mix of military action and dialogue, community protection and socio - economic development of conflict affected areas. Addressing the problems of insecurity (by

impartial policing, justice delivery, and local mechanisms of peacebuilding) would help alleviate public frustrations, undermine support for extra-constitutional alternatives, and strengthen the legitimacy of the civilian state in Mali.

3. Civil - military relations should be recast in terms of a greater civilian oversight, professional military training and clear constitutional delimitation of political power of armed forces. The military should be re orientated towards national defence under democratic control and the means of accountability strengthened to discourage intervention on governance and to avoid the recurrence of military coups in Mali.

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