



# Crisis of Trust and Military Takeovers in West Africa: Analyzing Factors and Citizen Reactions in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger

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## Abstract

The recurrent military coups in West Africa, with the most recent cases in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, point to an increasing crisis of trust between citizens and their governments. According to the Colpus 2023 report, military coups have increased significantly across the African continent since 2020, indicating the deterioration of democratic systems due to diverse political, social, and economic causes. Although each country has a distinct context, a variety of interacting factors encouraged military takeover resulting in a worrying pattern spanning history, politics, and geopolitics. Drawing from secondary data including media reports, peer reviewed research, reports from international organizations, and grey literature, this paper offers conceptual, and comparative account of this development. The paper highlights how governance failures, rampant corruption, insecurity from violent extremist groups, and socioeconomic inequalities contribute to eroding public trust. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both scholarship and policy by providing insights into interplay between governance, security, and societal trust and advances theoretical debates on democratic resilience and coup prevention for the future of the region.

**Keywords:** Crisis of trusty, military takeovers, citizen reactions, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger

## Introduction

Since early 2020, West Africa has witnessed several military coups, both successful and failed attempted coups. This has further been fueled in part by the political and economic climates present in the various African nations as well as by external factors. According to the Colpus 2023 report, military coups have increased significantly across the African continent since 2020, pointing to the deterioration of democratic systems due to diverse reasons ranging from political, social, and economic causes. Six successful military takeovers and three unsuccessful, including two instances of 'coups inside coups,' were documented between 2020 to 2023. Further, these statistics show a 229% increase in military takeovers in the last 20 years (Chin, Wright and Carter 2022). The most recent military coups in Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), Mali (2020 and 2021), and Niger (2023) have marked significant political changes in regional governance systems (Africa News 2023). Many countries in Africa face difficult economic conditions, the abrupt military coups often serve as a precursor to further military coups (Mwai 2022). These have sparked regional concerns, drawing scholars, journalists, and international communities to examine the fundamental causes of the abrupt shifts in governance structure.

Although each country has a distinct context, a variety of interacting factors encouraged military takeover resulting in a worrying pattern spanning history, politics, and geopolitics. By contrast these domestic drivers of coups, the African Union's position against unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) is primarily guided by three continental instruments: the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, the Constitutive Act, and the Lomé Declaration of July 2000 (Souare 2009). While both the Lomé Declaration and the Addis Charter condemn military coups, their response to other critical issues, such as election rigging, human rights violations, manipulation of presidential term limits, corruption within political circles, and the capture of state institutions, has been relatively muted (Kipo-Sunyehzi and Lambon 2025).

One illustrative example was Niger in 2009. President Mamadou Tandja dissolved the Constitutional Court and the National Assembly,

followed by a referendum to change the constitution that extended his presidential mandate – a constitutional coup – and where the African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) opted not to take decisive action back then, in a failure to enforce constitutional principles, did not react until there was a military coup in 2010 (Wings 2023). Frontier analysis indicates that the AU's inaction during constitutional manipulation period demonstrates failure to address broader governance challenges raises concerns about the effectiveness and consistency of AU oversight mechanisms exacerbating erosion of trust in continental instruments and democratic institutions (Mavedzenge, 2025; Taruvinga 2023).

The persistent jihadist insurgencies and failures to provide security in Mali led to a deep erosion of trust in civilian leaders which helped pave the way for military action (Thurston 2024). In Burkina Faso, mounting frustration with ineffective governance, elite corruption, and increasing insecurity in rural areas resulted in two coups, first in January 2022, and then in September 2022, both claiming to act against these failures (Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023). In Niger, a coup in July 2023 occurred even though President Bazoum had demonstrated substantial progress towards democracy, resulting in a much more ambivalent reaction: on the one hand some citizens viewed the military takeover as a necessary correction to political capture, while others feared that it would lead to a reversal of the democratic gains (Sowale 2024).

Within this context, understanding the factors that underlie the crisis of trust and catalyze military coups is of paramount importance. The study centers on Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, three countries that have experienced military coups during the period of heightened volatility from 2020 to 2023. This study aimed to explore the context in which these military coups occurred and the factors that have undermined trust in present political democracy. Moreover, the study aimed to discern the nuanced reactions of citizens in these countries exploring their support for or opposition to military coups, as well as their trust in the military institutions at the heart of these upheavals.

## Current history of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, 2020-2023

The concept of a military coup and the designation of an event as a coup may differ based on the context, legal framework, and perspectives of different countries, each bearing a distinct set of de facto and de jure implications (Thompson 1973). Coups, according to Powell and Thyme, are overt attempts by the armed forces or other powerful members of the government to unseat the current head of state using unlawful means.

Mali experienced a political crisis that led to a coup within a coup. In August 2020, Mali's military took power in response to peaceful mass demonstrations demanding the resignation of then-President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. For many Malians, Keita epitomized multiple failures of the Mali government, from insecurity to corruption (USIP 2021). Following Keita's deposition, Colonel Assimi Goita was instantly appointed vice president and Bah N'daw was appointed president pro tempore by a group of 17 electors. Moreover, Goita and Colonel Major Ismael Wagué formed the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) and promised to hold elections soon. On September 12, 2020, the CNSP pledged an 18-month political transition to civilian governance (Adetuyi 2021). However, tensions emerged between the civilian transitional administration and the military after N'daw reshuffled the cabinet without consulting Goita and his allies. As a result, N'daw and Ouane were dismissed in May 2021 for attempting to "sabotage" the administration, according to a statement released by Goita for public television (Al Jazeera 2021). In response, Goita seized power once again, ousted the president and prime minister, and dissolved what appeared to be a civilian-led government.

The military takeover in Burkina Faso in 2022 deepened months of deteriorating relations between former president Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and his army, in a nation where the populace and the military ineffectiveness of the state responses to deadly jihadist attacks. In January 2022, President Kabore of Burkina Faso was deposed by the military, who accused him of failing to stop the bloodshed of Islamist terrorists (Eizenga 2021). Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, the leader of the coup, promised to

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reestablish security, but as attacks increased and military morale deteriorated, a second coup—led by the current junta's head Captain Ibrahim Traore—took place eight months later, in September after mutiny (African News 2022). Captain Traore suspended the constitution, toppled Damiba's transitional government, and vested authority in the military junta he had organized and headed. A national conference was held by the Traoré junta less than two weeks later, in October, and it was at this forum that Traoré officially took office as president (Wiking 2024).

Niger has become more unstable in the last three years because of a series of coups and attempted coups. In March 2021, a segment of the military conducted a coup attempt, which was attributed to an Air Force unit stationed near Niamey Airport. Captain Sani Saley Gourouza, who oversaw security at the unit's base, is said to have orchestrated the plot. Following the failure of the coup attempt, the perpetrators were apprehended (Oduoye et.al 2024). Early on July 26, 2023, the presidential guard barricaded the presidential palace in Niamey and captured Niger's President Mohamed Bazoum who had been legitimately elected. After several hours of tense discussions behind closed doors, the situation became clear when a group of army commanders announced the military coup on national television (Sowale 2024). They proclaimed the suspension of all institutions, the imposition of a curfew, and the closure of the nation's land and air borders, in addition to the overthrow of Bazoum's government. The new regime promised to safeguard Niger's global obligations but asked

international powers not to interfere (Zambakari 2023). On July 28, General Tiani appeared on national television to announce that he had taken control of the CNSP and had carried out the coup, making him the de facto new leader of the state. According to experts, President Bazoum's plan to remove the head of the presidential guard, General Omar Tiani, from his position, which he claims is prompted by "the continuing deterioration of the security situation" and "poor economic and social governance," is what triggered the coup (Demuyck and Böhm 2023).

### Citizen Reactions and Broader Implications

Military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger elicited varied public reactions. In all three cases, people's dissatisfactions with their governments stemmed from deteriorating security, humanitarian crisis, and a limited economic opportunity (Eko 2025). Many citizens were skeptical that waiting for the next elections would bring change to their situations, as they felt the electoral processes perceived compromised and opposition parties as weak or ineffective (Kelly 2025). Against this backdrop, military takeovers were often interpreted not as a rejection of democracy in principle, but rather a pragmatic response to failing institutions (Mahmoud and Taifouri 2023). Many civilians publicly expressed support for military leaders who toppled what they considered corrupt or incompetent leaders, or who had simply failed to address critical challenges with post-coup governance and security (Taruvinga 2023).

Evidence indicates that citizens in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger see the military as a legitimate means of ridding themselves of corrupt or incapable leaders. For example, polls conducted by Afrobarometer (2024) revealed that approximately two-thirds of Burkinabè citizens believe that coups are justified in instances where leaders abuse power, while approximately seventy percent of participants in Niger said the same regarding leadership corruption (Silas, Ayeni and Shuaibu 2025). Similarly, parallel polls of ORB International found approximately two-thirds of Malians, Burkinabè, and Nigeriens supported military rule over civilian government before the recent coups (ORB International 2025). While military rule seems a popular form of state governance among citizens in all three countries, there were variations

in responses. For example, while Nigeriens had optimistic prospects for the future of their country in the lead up to the 2023 coup, citizens of Mali and Burkina Faso exhibited mixed reactions with some welcoming the military as a corrective to weak civilian rule, while others voiced concern about democratic backsliding (The Star 2023).

### Underlying Factors

The military coup d'états in West Africa have been catalyzed by a combination of internal vulnerabilities and external pressures. Although Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger all had nominal democratic structures (i.e. elections, multiparty politics, constitutions), they were usually shallow democracies, had weak independence of the judiciary, inconsistent application of the rule of law, and unreliable civil liberties (Obinna and Semudara 2024). There was state legitimacy undermined for several reasons, including the lack of security from jihadist insurgencies, rampant corruption, socio-economic poverty, and declining public support for civilian governments. The conditions were conducive to military interventions (Levine 2025).

However, the underlying drivers varied across the three cases. In Mali, jihadist violence and the

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continuous failure of successive governments to stabilize Mali reduced support for civilian rule and enabled the military to position itself as a legitimate alternative and thus effect a military coup (Thurston 2024). The situation in Burkina Faso was different in that it arose in part from public intolerance of the elite corruption and associated poor governance, which led to more public support for the coups in 2022 (Fain, Issaev and Korotayev 2024), in the 2023 coup in Niger, while certainly perplexing, occurred despite some democratization under President Bazoum (although the timing of that democratization, if it indeed exists, is ambiguous, not to mention the military infighting after the coup and continued governance problems generally made it difficult to assess a public response to the coup (Mavedzenge 2025).

### Security issues

The failure of the governments of these three countries to sufficiently protect their citizens from extremist groups operating within their borders has led to the public believing that the military is the only salvation. The coup in Burkina Faso was prompted by the Burkinabe government's failure to put an end to the Islamist insurgency (UNDP 2023). The growing threat of extremist organizations such as Ansarul Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), particularly in rural areas with little government support and a lack of security and basic services fueled discontent. The military was unsatisfied with how the civilian government addressed the security issues, citing insufficient funding and a lack of a coherent strategy. Some military factions and civilians believed that a coup would be a good solution to solve these problems and restore stability (Lefdal 2024).

Despite this framing of insecurity as central, it must also be viewed with greater skepticism, both as an original grievance, and a legitimating narrative. Empirical work suggests popular support for coups is built on frustrations over governance failures, such as corruption, and weak institutions (Ziso and Hamandishe 2024). Leaders of coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger persistently portrayed their actions as a quick reaction to terrorism, thereby tapping into citizens' immediate anxiety. However, analysts assert that the accounts tend to oversell militaries' abilities

to provide stability. Armed takeovers often only signify failure to tackle the causes of insurgency and can also undermine democratic control of security (Mavedzenge 2025; Thurston 2024).

In Mali, intercommunal conflicts, ethnic violence, and Islamist insurgency have all played a key role in the country's ongoing security problems. The failure of the Malian government to respond adequately to these threats, coupled with complaints of human rights abuses by government security forces, created dissatisfaction among civilians and parts of the military (Wing 2023). The main armed actors include Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM)—a coalition formed in 2017 that incorporates Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), both of which remain active across Mali's northern and central regions (International Crisis Group 2025; Thurston 2024). In addition, Boko Haram factions operating in the wider Lake Chad Basin are linked to global jihadist networks, most notably through the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) (Zenn 2020).

While frustration with insecurity has been a recurring theme in popular and military discourse surrounding Mali's coups, empirical evidence shows a more complex picture. Afrobarometer surveys indicate that although certain segments of the population have indicated qualified support for military intervention where there is catastrophic government failure, their support is not uniform and non-judgmental (Yusuf 2025). The coup leaders have, however, rationalized their actions as necessitating the re-establishment of security by highlighting the distinction between popular hope and the actual capacity of the military to deliver stability (Thurston 2024).

The Niger coup was an expression of a long history of social and political dissatisfaction with security challenges. Elections—especially regarding the credibility of free and fair elections—have historically generated volatility in Niger's political system. Although the elections in December 2020–February 2021 marked Niger's first democratic transfer of power, it was contested. International observers, including the EU, described the elections as broadly credible, but opposition parties alleged widespread irregularities. These claims caused February 2021 protests that were met with a 10-day

internet blackout, mass arrests, and clashes with security forces (ICCT 2023). Evidence suggests that this trend of contested elections with the coercive repression of the state undermined democratic legitimacy and solidified mistrust among citizens and ruling elites. The military, in this regard, legitimized its 2023 coup as a corrective process to restore order and address elite failures, although studies suggest that such rhetoric is more politically constructed than pragmatic responses to governance problems (Mavedzenge 2025).

### Contested elections

In Burkina Faso, contested elections have repeatedly been an issue in their political landscape. One notable example is the presidential election held in November 2020. Incumbent President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré won re-election in the first round with around 57% of the vote (Widhalm 2024). However, the opposition contested the results, alleging irregularities and fraud. The 2015 presidential election in Burkina Faso also witnessed contested results and a turbulent political environment. This election marked a significant moment in Burkina Faso's history, following the ousting of long-time President Compaoré in 2014 after mass protests (Ajala 2023). Election results and allegations of electoral fraud in the nation have weakened the public's trust in the administration and widened political rifts. Many people have opposed attempts by leaders to extend their tenure or change the constitution to cement their authority, as was the case with former President Blaise Compaoré in 2014. Different sections of both the civilian population and soldiers in Burkina Faso are beginning to see military coups as a mechanism of political change in conditions of ongoing political instability, economic despair, and endemic corruption. Officer and elite perceptions of coups as a tool of authoritarian state-building were reinforced by the deepening state failures to curb rising insecurity associated with jihadist insurgencies, and the public's waning confidence in civilian institutions (Levine 2025). Afrobarometer survey data, show that whereas 75 percent of Burkinabé citizens believed in democracy in principle, only 42 percent were satisfied with it in practice, and a sizeable minority expressed a willingness to tolerate military intervention in conditions of insecurity and

state failure (Afrobarometer 2023). Furthermore, qualitative fieldwork by Wolfel et.al (2024) showed that frustration with ruling parties and opposition parties produced pragmatic, albeit contested, civilian support for the 2022 coups. This increasing agency in conceding to military coups would place Burkina Faso in a particularly vulnerable position for armed forces that instigated successive military coups in 2022 in which deepening security crises interacted with political tensions to undermine the prospects of democratic resilience.

Mali has gone through a series of violent political shifts marked by contested elections, corruption scandals, and allegations of electoral fraud. The 2018 presidential election in Mali was hotly contested, resulting in simmering political tensions when President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was re-elected in a ballot that opposition parties claimed was plagued by irregularities. Earlier in 2018, tens of thousands took to the streets to demand Keita's resignation due to a disagreement over the results of a legislative election (Reuters 2023). In light of these issues, public trust in political leaders and democratic institutions has dwindled, resulting in large demonstrations and calls for political reform. Furthermore, the military has been actively involved in Malian politics through a history of coups and coups since the country's independence in 1960. Coup attempts are becoming more likely as the political and military sectors become increasingly entwined. Given this, certain members of the armed services have considered coups to effect change, address governance difficulties, and restore democratic order (Al Jazeera News 2023).

In Niger, the recent military takeover has been influenced by a long-ignored variety of political and security factors. Conflict over electoral processes related to the staging of free and fair elections has long been a feature of Niger's political scene. Election results, allegations of fraud, and questions about the legitimacy of elected individuals have all contributed significantly to political upheaval (The Star 2023). Niger held a general election in December 2020, resulting in the country's first-ever democratic transfer of power. Although numerous international observers praised the conduct of these elections, allegations of irregularities sparked massive protests and heavy government repression, including a 10-day internet shutdown. Hundreds of people were arrested in addition

to battles between police and demonstrators in other locations. The military considered coups as a method to influence the political class and solve political problems (USIP 2021).

### **Failure by the governments to provide public goods**

Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are among the richest countries in natural resources the world, having abundant energy and natural resources such as oil, gold, and uranium yet their citizens live in abject poverty. Burkina Faso ranks 184th among 191 nations Mali 186th and Niger 189th out of 191 nations in the 2022 UN Human Development Index (UNDP 2023). The government's failure to address economic issues in these countries due to bad governance and resource exploitation by former colonial powers resulted in widespread poverty among their citizens. France has been accused of exploiting natural resources in its former West African colonies at extremely low prices with benefits accruing largely to French interests and allied local elites. This dynamic often described as neocolonial is seen as contributing to widespread poverty despite the countries' wealth (Isilow & Basaran 2023). The failure to provide adequate infrastructure, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities has left many citizens living in dire conditions. Moreover, reports of corruption and exploitation by leaders have further eroded trust in democratic institutions. Citizens, disillusioned by the unfulfilled promises of elected leaders, have increasingly turned to the military as a perceived solution to their grievances (Reuters 2023).

### **Growing Resistance to Neo-colonial Influence**

France's continued ties with Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have had a profound impact on its sociopolitical and economic dynamics. These long-term relationships take various shapes, including financial alliances, military cooperation, and cultural influence (Kaledzi 2023). While such ties may give certain benefits, such as development assistance and security cooperation, they can also perpetuate a dependency relationship and limit the region's decision-making autonomy (France24 2023). Moreover, the legacy of French colonization in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, is marked by brutal military operations, forced labor, pervasive

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repression, cultural erasure, racial segregation, and forced relocation, which continues to have a profound impact on these countries. The close ties that exist between France, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have not resulted in notable improvements in security, governance, or economic growth (Espelund, 2022). Most notably, through the operation Serval (2013-2014) in Mali and Barkhane (2014-2022) in the Sahel. The peak of Barkhane, France had over 5,000 troops deployed to the Sahel and was spending an estimated €1 billion annually. Yet violence from jihadist groups has extended from northern Mali to central Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger (Charbonneau 2021). Between 2016 and 2021, non-combatant deaths attributed to militant violence in the central Sahel increased more than fivefold, with Burkina Faso recording the most growth (ACLED 2022). This has helped fuel growing doubts over the French presence attributed to views of political meddling and unequal economic deals. Consequently, the citizens of most of these countries now view France no longer as an ally of stability but as one of the challenges to their stability and enablers of dependency (Ajala 2023; Wing 2023).

### **Loss of trust in regional organizations**

With a succession of military coups across the larger Sahel region, the Economic Community

of West African States (ECOWAS) in partnership with the United Nations stepped up to prevent the increasing militarization of the region (AP 2024). However, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger's junta voiced their dissatisfaction, alleging that the ECOWAS organization had strayed from the ideals of Pan-Africanism and its founding fathers. ECOWAS was originally intended to be an intergovernmental economic union. Nonetheless, as the Sahel region grappled with destabilizing civil wars and military coups that jeopardized democratic progress in the 1990s, its member nations transformed their community into a protection of democratic principles. The approval of a forward-looking democracy protocol in 2001 was a watershed moment in this process, inspiring the pan-African governance charter and paving the way for the organization to have a role in regional governance affairs (Ronceray 2023). Following the coups in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, ECOWAS not only reacted quickly but also established the precedent for further regional responses, such as the imposition of sanctions (Crisis Group 2024).

Despite ECOWAS sanctions and diplomatic pressure, the junta governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger drew closer to one another, resulting in the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in September 2023. The alliance was sealed by a Bamako charter that establishes a mutual defense pact that binds each state to assist other states militarily in the event of foreign aggression (EKO 2025). Apart from security, AES is also a political exercise of resisting foreign pressure, notably from ECOWAS and France, and asserting greater sovereignty in regional affairs (Bagayoko 2024). The partnership also reflects shared grievances: indiscriminate jihadist attacks, bad relations with Western allies, and growing popular hostility towards alleged neocolonial interference. By joining forces, the juntas seek to stabilize their regimes domestically and counterbalance foreign influence.

Moreover, the juntas of the three nations accused ECOWAS of selectively upholding democratic norms, focusing particularly on attempting to safeguard elected heads of state from coups. They contend that important problems like corruption, terrorism, and insecurity within each member nation have not received enough attention from ECOWAS (Ronceray 2023). In addition, ECOWAS

has come under fire for failing to address issues with tainted elections, claims of corruption, and presidential term limits. The prospect of ECOWAS-led coup seems possible considering these perceived deficiencies, which are seen as a reflection of double standards and an inability to effectively prevent coups (AP 2024).

## Recommendations

To reverse the coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger requires a multi-dimensional approach to the specific political and security conditions in each country, to include progress on restoring electoral legitimacy, security sector reform, governance and corruption issues, and redefining engagement regionally and internationally, all at the same time.

While a military coup is, and ought to be, viewed as illegitimate and dictatorially incompatible with democracy, citizens do not perceive it as necessarily more corrupt than the governments they revolted against. As an example, research done in Burkina Faso, and more recently in Mali, alleges that some segments of the population in both encountered juntas as less self-interested governance than the civilian politicians they displaced. However, tangible reforms are needed to re-establish faith in democratic governance through meaningful measures to combat corruption and elite capture (Wing 2023).

The international support should also be channeled differently. Since the juntas have themselves made efforts to distance themselves from classic Western allies and get closer to Russia and other non-Western nations, an exclusive focus on Western conditional aid will also not be likely to work. Instead, aid can come from regional mediation, African multilateral bodies, and neutral actors such as the UN, aimed at humanitarian relief, technical electoral assistance, and incentives for gradual democratic opening (Bagayoko 2024).

The position of the AU and ECOWAS must be reviewed, with the three nations withdrawing from ECOWAS in 2024 and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Regional organizations, including the AU and ECOWAS, may have to begin to find flexible engagement approaches that stress a balance between pressure and engagement, rather than sanctions that have largely failed, such as restoring access to regional platforms, when there are observable reforms underway.

Lastly, facilitation of national dialogues remains necessary but impossible to expect from governing juntas voluntarily while democratic elections remain a threat to their tenure. With respect to this, civil society groups, religious authorities, and community-based organizations can exert bottom-up pressure on elites to open political space. Regional and international actors can add these by linking aid and recognition to inclusive dialogue frameworks.

## Conclusion

Looking ahead, meaning progress will require political courage from leaders at all levels. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger may distinct historical experiences and journeys towards sustainable governance and durable peace. Military takeovers in these countries highlight even deeper structural vulnerabilities and people's distrust in democratic institutions. Reversing these trends will require context-specific reforms to enhance election processes, security governance, anti-corruption efforts, and the inclusion of civil society.

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