



IMPACT OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS ON DEMOCRATISATION PROCESS IN MALI AND SUDAN (2015-2023) AND THE WAY FORWARD

¹Moses Samuel Adigizi and ²Abubakar Musa Agwai II

^{1&2}Department of Political Science, Federal University of Lafia, Nasarawa State.

mosesadigizi413@gmail.com agwai76@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines civil–military relations and democratisation in Mali and Sudan, with a comparative focus on the nature, causes, and implications of military involvement in politics between 2015 and 2023. The study is anchored on Civil–Military Relations Theory. Using a qualitative comparative research design, the study relies on key informant interviews and secondary data sources such as books, journal articles, policy reports, and institutional documents. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Findings reveal that civil–military relations in both countries are characterised by weak civilian control, recurring military intervention, and fragile democratic institutions. In Mali, military involvement is largely crisis-driven, emerging in response to insecurity, insurgency, and governance failure, while in Sudan, military dominance is structurally embedded within political and economic systems. The study further finds that factors such as weak governance, corruption, economic hardship, insecurity, and historical precedent of coups significantly contribute to military intervention in both countries. Additionally, military involvement has had severe consequences for democratisation, including the disruption of constitutional governance, weakening of electoral integrity, restriction of political participation, and erosion of public trust in democratic institutions. The comparative analysis shows that both countries experience weak civilian supremacy, Mali’s democratic instability is cyclical and episodic, whereas Sudan’s is continuous and institutionalised. The study concludes that sustainable democratisation in both contexts remains constrained by weak institutions and persistent military influence in politics. It recommends strengthening civilian institutions, reforming the security sector, improving governance, and enhancing regional enforcement mechanisms to prevent unconstitutional changes of government.

Keywords: Civil-military relations, democratisation, military intervention, democratic consolidation.

1.0 Introduction

Civil–military relations constitute one of the most critical dimensions of political development and democratic governance, particularly in developing societies where the military has historically played a dominant role in politics. The concept of civil–military relations refers to the

interaction between civilian authorities and military institutions within a state, especially regarding the control, influence, and accountability of the armed forces in governance and political processes. In democratic systems, the military is expected to remain subordinate to elected civilian authorities and operate within constitutional



boundaries (Huntington, 1957). However, in many African states, weak democratic institutions, political instability, and governance crises have often enabled military intervention in politics, thereby undermining democratisation processes.

The history of post-colonial Africa is characterised by frequent military coups, authoritarian rule, and interrupted democratic transitions. Although many African countries embraced democratic reforms following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, civil–military relations remain fragile in several states. The persistence of military involvement in governance continues to pose significant challenges to democratic consolidation, constitutional order, and political stability across the continent (Ake, 1996). Recent political developments in Mali and Sudan have further highlighted the complexities of civil–military relations in transitional democracies.

In Mali, democratic governance has been repeatedly disrupted by military coups, particularly in 2012, 2020, and 2021. Despite earlier international recognition as a relatively stable democracy in West Africa, growing insecurity, terrorism, weak governance, and public dissatisfaction with civilian leadership created conditions for military intervention in politics (Wing, 2013). The coups led to the suspension of constitutional rule and strained relations between civilian authorities, regional organisations, and the military establishment. Similarly, Sudan has experienced prolonged military dominance since independence, with the armed forces exerting significant influence over political power. The overthrow of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019 despite his authoritarian tendencies raised hopes for democratic transition; however, subsequent tensions

between civilian and military actors culminated in another military takeover in 2021, thereby disrupting the democratisation process (de Waal, 2022).

The recurring military interventions in Mali and Sudan demonstrate the persistent challenge of establishing effective civilian control over the military in Africa. These developments raise important questions concerning the role of the military in governance, the resilience of democratic institutions, and the prospects for sustainable democratisation. While some scholars argue that military interventions emerge due to failures of civilian governments, others contend that military involvement fundamentally weakens democratic culture and constitutional governance (Finer, 1962). Consequently, understanding the dynamics of civil–military relations in these countries is essential for assessing the broader trajectory of democratisation in Africa.

Despite the growing body of literature on military intervention and democratic transition in Africa, limited comparative studies have systematically examined the experiences of Mali and Sudan within the same analytical framework. Existing studies often focus on either security challenges or democratic instability without sufficiently exploring how civil–military relations shape democratisation outcomes. This study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by comparatively analysing civil–military relations and democratisation in Mali and Sudan.

The main objective of this study is to examine the relationship between civil–military relations and democratisation in Mali and Sudan. Specifically, the study seeks to: (i) examine the nature of civil–military relations in both countries; (ii) analyse civil military relations within both democratic government and military



regimes; (iii) assess the impact of military involvement on democratisation processes; and (iv) compare the experiences of Mali and Sudan in terms of democratic transition and civilian control of the military towards understanding civil-military relations. It is against the foregoing background that this study examines impact of civil-military relations and democratisation in Mali and Sudan and the way forward.

Conceptual Review

Civil-Military Relations

Civil-military relations refer to the pattern of interaction between civilian authorities and the military establishment within a political system, particularly regarding the distribution of power, control, and decision-making responsibilities. The concept primarily concerns the extent to which the military remains subordinate to constitutionally elected civilian leadership in a democratic state. According to Huntington (1985), effective civil-military relations are achieved when there is objective civilian control over the armed forces, allowing the military to maintain professionalism while remaining politically neutral. Civilian supremacy ensures that elected political leaders formulate national policies while the military performs its constitutional responsibility of defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state. Civil-military relations therefore involve balancing military professionalism with democratic accountability.

In democratic societies, the military is expected to protect national sovereignty and maintain territorial integrity without interfering in governance or partisan politics. However, in many African countries, the military has historically assumed political roles through coups d'état, transitional governments, and direct intervention in civilian administration. This

has made civil-military relations a major issue in the study of African politics and democratisation. According to Finer (2002), military intervention often occurs where political institutions are weak, corruption is widespread, civilian governments lose legitimacy, and political elites fail to provide effective governance. Under such circumstances, the armed forces frequently justify intervention by presenting themselves as national saviours capable of restoring political order, stability, and security.

Civil-military relations in Africa have been shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic divisions, weak democratic institutions, persistent insecurity, economic crises, and institutional fragility, all of which have contributed to recurrent military intervention in politics (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016; Williams, 2020). In many African states, the military inherited centralized colonial security structures that were designed to protect state authority rather than democratic institutions. Consequently, fragile political institutions, poor governance, electoral disputes, corruption, and declining public confidence in civilian governments have created opportunities for military establishments to assume political authority, often interrupting democratic transitions.

In countries such as Mali and Sudan, the military has repeatedly intervened in governance, thereby disrupting constitutional rule and democratic consolidation. In Mali, the military coups of 2012, 2020, and 2021 reflected growing tensions between civilian authorities and the armed forces over worsening insecurity, poor governance, and widespread public dissatisfaction with political leadership. Similarly, Sudan has experienced prolonged military dominance since independence, with the armed forces remaining central actors in political transitions and regime



changes. Despite the removal of President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the Sudanese military continued to exercise substantial political and economic influence, culminating in the military takeover of October 2021. This intervention was accompanied by the suspension of constitutional arrangements, dissolution of civilian transitional institutions, restrictions on political party activities, arbitrary detention of civilian leaders, violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations, and widespread human rights violations against protesters (de Waal, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022). These developments significantly weakened Sudan's democratic transition and reinforced military dominance over civilian governance.

Empirically, several studies have examined civil–military relations in Africa. Wing (2013) found that weak civilian institutions and deteriorating security conditions contributed significantly to military intervention in Mali. The study argued that the inability of civilian governments to effectively address insurgency, corruption, and governance failures created conditions that legitimised military involvement in politics. Similarly, de Waal (2022) observed that Sudan's military maintained extensive political and economic influence after the 2019 transition, thereby obstructing democratic reforms through continued interference in civilian governance, suppression of democratic institutions, and restrictions on political freedoms. Likewise, Decalo (1990) argued that the military in Africa frequently evolves into a dominant political actor because of weak political institutions, fragile democratic traditions, and the inability of civilian governments to establish effective mechanisms of civilian oversight. Collectively, these studies

demonstrate that the nature of civil–military relations remains a critical determinant of political stability, democratic consolidation, and constitutional governance across Africa.

Democratisation

Democratisation refers to the process through which a political system transitions from authoritarian or non-democratic rule to democratic governance characterised by popular participation, the rule of law, political accountability, respect for human rights, and competitive elections (Huntington, 1991; Diamond, 1999). Democratisation involves not only the establishment of democratic institutions but also the consolidation of democratic norms, values, and practices that guarantee political inclusion, constitutional governance, and effective civilian oversight of state institutions. According to Diamond (1999), democratisation is a gradual and continuous process that requires institutional development, political tolerance, strong political parties, an independent judiciary, and effective civilian control of coercive institutions, particularly the military, for democracy to become stable and sustainable. The concept of democratisation gained prominence in Africa following the Third Wave of Democratisation that spread across the continent after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s (Huntington, 1991; Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). During this period, many African countries abandoned one-party and military regimes in favour of multiparty constitutional democracies, competitive elections, and political liberalisation under both domestic and international pressure. International financial institutions, donor agencies, and regional organisations increasingly linked development assistance to democratic reforms, while civil society organisations and pro-democracy movements demanded



greater political accountability and constitutional governance. Despite these reforms, democratisation in many African states has remained fragile due to political instability, electoral violence, corruption, weak institutions, constitutional manipulation, and recurring military interventions. According to Ake (1996), democracy in Africa has frequently been undermined by elite domination, weak political institutions, poor governance, and the persistence of authoritarian tendencies inherited from the colonial and post-colonial state.

Democratisation is multidimensional, encompassing political liberalisation, constitutional governance, judicial independence, civil liberties, institutional accountability, electoral integrity, and citizen participation in governance. In the context of Mali and Sudan, democratisation has been characterised by interrupted political transitions, contested constitutional reforms, and persistent tensions between civilian governments and military establishments. While both countries experienced periods of democratic opening, repeated military interventions disrupted constitutional order and weakened democratic institutions. In Sudan, the 2019 popular uprising generated significant prospects for democratic transition following the removal of Omar al-Bashir. However, the military takeover of October 2021 suspended constitutional arrangements, dissolved civilian institutions, curtailed political freedoms, and significantly reversed earlier democratic gains. Similarly, in Mali, democratic governance has repeatedly been interrupted by military coups in 2012, 2020, and 2021, largely justified on the grounds of deteriorating security conditions, poor governance, and

widespread public dissatisfaction with elected governments.

Empirical studies on democratisation in Africa have produced mixed outcomes, reflecting both democratic progress and democratic regression across the continent. While several countries have successfully institutionalised competitive elections, constitutional rule, and peaceful transfers of power, others continue to experience democratic backsliding characterised by military coups, electoral manipulation, constitutional amendments designed to prolong incumbency, weak judicial independence, and restrictions on civil liberties. Bratton and van de Walle (1997) observed that many African democracies experienced political transitions without genuine democratic consolidation, as authoritarian governance structures persisted despite the introduction of democratic institutions, a phenomenon which Bako (1999) described as "garrison democracy," where civilian governments exist formally but remain heavily dominated by military influence and coercive security institutions. Similarly, Diamond (2008) argued that democratic backsliding in Africa is frequently associated with constitutional manipulation, declining political accountability, electoral irregularities, and persistent military interference in governance. In Sudan, Eltigani (2020) maintained that the failure to dismantle the military's political and economic dominance during the transitional period substantially weakened prospects for democratic consolidation and civilian rule. Likewise, Thurston (2020) found that worsening insecurity, state fragility, and ineffective governance in Mali undermined public confidence in democratic institutions and created favourable conditions for repeated military intervention. Collectively, these



empirical studies demonstrate that democratisation in Africa remains highly vulnerable where civilian institutions are weak, constitutional safeguards are fragile, and the military continues to exercise significant political influence.

Military Intervention in Politics

Military intervention in politics refers to the direct or indirect involvement of the armed forces in political governance, decision-making, or regime change. Such intervention may occur through coups d'état, transitional military governments, political intimidation, or influence over civilian administrations. According to Finer (2002), the military intervenes in politics when it perceives civilian governments as ineffective, corrupt, or incapable of maintaining national stability. Military intervention is often justified by claims of restoring order, combating corruption, or protecting national unity, although such actions frequently undermine democratic governance and constitutional rule. For instance, General Abacha took over from interim government in Nigeria he highlighted that corruption, indiscipline and political instability were among the reason that he intervened likewise Col Damimba of Burkina Faso in 2022 he intervened against the democratic government due laxity on security and political instability while Capt Ibrahim Traore took over from him after few month bcos the former military has weak action against insecurity of the country. Meanwhile Gen Assimi of Mali intervene to address the issue of insecurity of azwad terrorist

In Africa, military intervention has been a recurring phenomenon since independence, largely due to fragile political institutions, ethnic divisions, economic crises, governance failures, and persistent insecurity (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016;

Williams, 2020). Coups d'état became widespread during the post-colonial period as armed forces increasingly assumed political authority in many states. In recent years, countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Sudan have experienced renewed military interventions, raising concerns about democratic regression across the continent. In Mali, the military justified its interventions in 2020 and 2021 by citing worsening insecurity, the government's inability to contain jihadist insurgency, widespread corruption, and growing public dissatisfaction with President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's administration (Wing, 2013; Thurston, 2020). Similarly, in Sudan, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, defended the 25 October 2021 military takeover by arguing that the intervention was necessary to prevent political fragmentation, preserve national stability, and safeguard the country's democratic transition. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), Deputy Chairman of the Sovereignty Council, also maintained that the military acted to avert political chaos and protect national security amid escalating disagreements between civilian and military leaders (de Waal, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021). However, these justifications were widely rejected by domestic pro-democracy groups and the international community, which viewed the takeover as a military coup that suspended constitutional governance, undermined civilian rule, and reversed Sudan's democratic transition.

Military intervention has profound implications for democratisation and political stability. While some scholars argue that military regimes may temporarily restore order, most studies contend that prolonged military involvement weakens democratic institutions and limits political



participation. According to Huntington (1957), excessive military influence in politics undermines professionalism within the armed forces and threatens civilian supremacy.

Powell and Thyne (2011), in their global analysis of coups d'état, found that military interventions are more common in states with weak political institutions and low levels of democratic consolidation. Their study concluded that coups significantly disrupt democratic processes and often lead to prolonged instability. In Sudan, Hassan and Kodouda (2019) found that military dominance over political and economic structures weakened civilian authority and obstructed democratic reforms. Similarly, Bah (2021), in a study on Mali, argued that recurring coups reflected both institutional fragility and declining public confidence in democratic governance. These studies demonstrate that military intervention remains a major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Africa.

Theoretical Framework: Civil-Military Relations Theory

This study is anchored on Civil-Military Relations Theory, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between military institutions and civilian political authority within a state. The theory is most prominently associated with Huntington in his book "The Soldier and the State" (1957), although important contributions were also made by scholars such as Janowitz and Finer. Huntington's formulation of the theory remains the most influential in explaining the conditions necessary for stable democratic governance and effective civilian control of the military. The theory emerged primarily to address the challenges associated with balancing military

professionalism and political authority in modern states.

The central idea of Civil-Military Relations Theory is that democratic stability depends largely on the establishment of effective civilian supremacy over the military. Huntington (1957) argues that the military should remain politically neutral and professionally committed to national defence, while civilian leaders retain ultimate authority over political decision-making and governance. According to the theory, a professional military that is institutionally autonomous in operational matters but subordinate to elected civilian leadership is less likely to interfere in politics. Huntington describes this arrangement as "objective civilian control," which ensures both military effectiveness and democratic accountability. Conversely, where civilian institutions are weak and military institutions become politicised, the likelihood of coups, authoritarianism, and democratic instability increases.

The theory is built on several basic assumptions. First, it assumes that the military is a specialised institution with distinct organisational structures, values, and professional responsibilities different from civilian institutions. Second, it assumes that political neutrality and professionalism within the armed forces are essential for democratic governance and national stability. Third, the theory assumes that weak civilian institutions, poor governance, and political instability create opportunities for military intervention in politics. Finally, it presupposes that sustainable democratisation can only occur when constitutional civilian authority effectively controls the military establishment. These assumptions are particularly relevant in many African states where fragile democratic institutions and governance



crises often encourage military interference in political affairs.

Civil–Military Relations Theory remains highly relevant to this study because it provides a useful framework for analysing the interaction between military institutions and democratic governance in Mali and Sudan. The theory helps explain why repeated military interventions have occurred in both countries despite attempts at democratic transition. In Mali, weak civilian governance, insecurity, and declining public confidence in democratic institutions created conditions that enabled military coups in 2012, 2020, and 2021. Similarly, in Sudan, prolonged military dominance and weak civilian institutions undermined democratic transition following the removal of Omar al-Bashir in 2019. The theory therefore provides insight into how institutional weakness and ineffective civilian control contribute to democratic instability.

The application of the theory to this study lies in its ability to explain the relationship between military involvement and democratisation processes in both countries. It enables the study to assess the extent to which civilian institutions in Mali and Sudan have exercised effective control over the military and how failures in civil–military relations have affected democratic consolidation. The theory also assists in understanding how military intervention disrupts constitutional governance, weakens democratic institutions, and limits political participation. Furthermore, it provides a comparative framework for analysing similarities and differences in the experiences of Mali and Sudan regarding military influence in politics and democratic transition. Consequently, Civil–Military Relations Theory offers a strong analytical basis for understanding the broader

implications of military involvement in governance for democratisation in Africa.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interview research to examine civil–military relations and democratisation in Mali and Sudan. The population of the study comprises military personnel, government officials, academics, civil society actors, and political analysts with knowledge of democratic transitions and military involvement in politics in both countries. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select 20 key informants, consisting of 10 informants from Mali and 10 from Sudan. Data are collected through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government documents, policy reports, and publications from international organisations. The data collected are analysed using thematic content analysis to identify patterns, similarities, and differences in civil–military relations and democratisation processes in the two countries.

Data Analysis

Nature of Civil–Military Relations in Mali and Sudan

Civil–military relations in Africa have remained a major determinant of political stability, democratic governance, and state legitimacy. In both Mali and Sudan, the relationship between civilian authorities and the military has historically been characterised by political intervention, institutional imbalance, and persistent struggles over state power (Decalo, 1990; Finer, 2002; Williams, 2020). Rather than operating strictly under democratic civilian control, the military establishments in both countries have frequently emerged as dominant political actors, thereby shaping governance processes and influencing democratic transitions. The nature of civil–



military relations in these countries therefore reflects broader challenges associated with weak institutions, insecurity, political instability, and incomplete democratisation in Africa (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2016; Williams, 2020).

In Mali, civil–military relations have been shaped largely by recurring insecurity, weak governance structures, and the military’s perception of itself as the ultimate guardian of national stability. Following independence from France in 1960, Mali experienced repeated military interventions that interrupted democratic governance and constitutional rule. The first major military coup occurred in 1968 when Lieutenant Moussa Traoré overthrew President Modibo Keita, establishing a long period of military-dominated governance. Although democratic reforms introduced in the 1990s led to the establishment of multiparty democracy, the military continued to retain substantial influence over political affairs (Wing, 2013). A retired senior officer in Mali described civil–military relations as fundamentally shaped by insecurity and institutional frustration within the armed forces. He explained that:

the military’s repeated involvement in politics is not accidental but a response to state weakness: “In Mali, soldiers are forced into politics because the state itself is weak. When insurgents take territory and civilians cannot respond, the military becomes both defender and decision-maker. Over time, this shifts the balance of power away from civilians”. (KII, Mali, 2025)

This perspective is consistent with Wing (2013), who argues that Mali’s civil–military imbalance is rooted in state fragility

and the inability of civilian governments to manage insurgency in the north. It also supports Finer’s (1962) thesis that military intervention becomes more likely when civilian authority is perceived as ineffective or illegitimate.

The democratic transition in Mali initially appeared promising, particularly after the 1991 overthrow of Traoré and the subsequent establishment of civilian rule under Alpha Oumar Konaré. However, despite democratic elections and constitutional reforms, civilian institutions remained weak and heavily dependent on the military for national security management. The inability of civilian governments to effectively address socio-economic problems, corruption, and insurgency in northern Mali gradually weakened public confidence in democratic governance. This institutional weakness created conditions that enabled the military to justify intervention in politics as a means of restoring national stability. A political analyst in Mali emphasised that:

the military has gradually evolved from a constitutional institution into a political actor with autonomous authority: “The army in Mali no longer behaves like a subordinate institution. After each coup, the military gains more confidence in governing, and civilians become weaker. This creates a cycle where military intervention becomes normalised”. (KII, Mali, 2025)

The Tuareg insurgency and the expansion of extremist groups in northern Mali significantly transformed civil–military relations in the country. The deteriorating security situation exposed the weaknesses of civilian leadership and intensified tensions within the armed forces. Many soldiers



accused the government of failing to adequately support the military in combating insurgency and terrorism. These frustrations culminated in the 2012 military coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, which overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré. Although the coup leaders claimed that their intervention was necessary to save the country from collapse, the action disrupted constitutional order and weakened Mali's democratic institutions (Thurston, 2020).

The return to civilian rule after the 2012 coup did not fundamentally resolve tensions between civilian authorities and the military. Persistent insecurity, corruption, and governance failures continued to undermine democratic legitimacy. Consequently, the military again intervened in politics in 2020 and 2021, overthrowing President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and later dissolving transitional civilian arrangements. These repeated coups illustrate the fragile nature of civilian supremacy in Mali and demonstrate how the military has remained deeply embedded in governance processes. According to Bah (2021), the military in Mali increasingly views itself not merely as a security institution but as a political actor responsible for correcting failures of civilian governance.

Another important feature of civil-military relations in Mali is the growing public acceptance of military intervention, especially during periods of insecurity and political dissatisfaction. In many instances, segments of the population welcomed military takeovers due to frustration with corruption, unemployment, and ineffective governance. This development reflects declining trust in civilian institutions and contributes to the normalisation of military involvement in politics. However, while military interventions may temporarily restore order, they often weaken democratic

institutions, restrict political participation, and delay democratic consolidation.

Similarly, civil-military relations in Sudan have historically been dominated by prolonged military influence over political power and state institutions. Since gaining independence from United Kingdom and Egypt in 1956, Sudan has experienced repeated cycles of military rule and fragile civilian administrations. The military has consistently positioned itself as a central political force, frequently intervening in governance during periods of political instability and national crisis. This pattern has made Sudan one of the most militarised political systems in Africa.

The first military coup in Sudan occurred in 1958 when General Ibrahim Abboud seized power, marking the beginning of extensive military involvement in governance. Subsequent decades witnessed alternating periods of civilian and military rule, with the armed forces repeatedly intervening whenever civilian governments were perceived as weak or ineffective. The rise of Omar al-Bashir through a military coup in 1989 further entrenched military dominance within Sudan's political system. Under Bashir's regime, the military became deeply integrated into political administration, economic structures, and security governance (de Waal, 2022).

One defining characteristic of civil-military relations in Sudan is the extensive political and economic power exercised by the military establishment. Unlike in many democracies where the military is confined to defence responsibilities, Sudan's armed forces controlled major sectors of the economy and maintained significant influence over policymaking and state resources. Hassan and Kodouda (2019) argue that this concentration of power weakened civilian institutions and prevented



the emergence of effective democratic governance. The military's control over economic resources also enabled it to maintain political autonomy and resist civilian oversight. A journalist covering political developments in Sudan highlighted the economic dimension of military power that:

The military controls large parts of the economy, including mining and commercial enterprises. This economic power translates directly into political influence, making civilian governments dependent on the army. (KII, Sudan, 2025).

This supports Hassan and Kodouda (2019), who document how Sudan's military economy strengthens its political autonomy. It also aligns with Diamond (1999), who argues that control of economic resources by unelected actors undermines democratic consolidation.

The 2019 popular uprising that led to the removal of Omar al-Bashir represented a significant moment in Sudan's democratisation process. Civil society groups, youth movements, and pro-democracy activists demanded civilian governance and an end to military rule. However, despite the establishment of a transitional power-sharing arrangement between civilian actors and the military, tensions persisted regarding the distribution of authority within the transitional government. The military continued to dominate key security institutions and retained substantial political influence. These tensions eventually culminated in the 2021 military takeover led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which disrupted the democratic transition and reaffirmed the military's dominance in Sudanese politics (de Waal, 2022).

The nature of civil-military relations in Sudan also reflects broader structural challenges, including ethnic divisions, civil conflict, economic crises, and institutional fragility. Prolonged conflicts in regions such as Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile strengthened the military's role as a central security actor while simultaneously weakening civilian political structures. Furthermore, decades of authoritarian rule under military-backed governments prevented the development of strong democratic institutions capable of exercising effective civilian oversight over the armed forces.

Comparatively, both Mali and Sudan demonstrate significant similarities in the nature of civil-military relations. In both countries, weak civilian institutions, insecurity, corruption, and governance failures created opportunities for military intervention in politics. The armed forces in both states justified their interventions as necessary measures to restore stability and national unity. Furthermore, military establishments in both countries have enjoyed varying degrees of public support during periods of political crisis, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with civilian leadership. A regional security expert comparing both countries stated that:

civil-military relations in Mali and Sudan differ mainly in structure rather than substance: In Mali, the military intervenes mainly during crises like terrorism or rebellion. In Sudan, the military is permanently embedded in governance and economy. Both weaken democracy, but in different ways one is episodic, the other institutionalised. (KII, 2025).



However, there are also notable differences between the two countries. In Mali, military intervention has largely been linked to insecurity, terrorism, and state fragility, particularly in the northern regions. The military's political role emerged primarily in response to governance failures associated with national security management. In contrast, Sudan's military involvement is more deeply institutionalised and historically entrenched within the political and economic structure of the state. While Mali experienced intermittent military interventions, Sudan witnessed prolonged periods of direct military dominance over governance.

Civil–Military Relations within Democratic Governments and Military Regimes in Mali and Sudan

Civil–military relations in Mali and Sudan have evolved differently under democratic governments and military regimes, yet in both countries the military has remained a dominant political institution whose influence has frequently extended beyond its constitutional responsibility of national defence. Under democratic governments, the principle of civilian supremacy has often existed more in constitutional provisions than in practice, as weak institutions, fragile governance structures, and persistent security challenges limited the ability of elected governments to exercise effective control over the armed forces. Conversely, under military regimes, civil–military relations became highly centralised, with the armed forces exercising direct political authority while restricting civilian participation in governance. This demonstrates that the character of civil–military relations in both countries has largely depended on the nature of the governing regime rather than established

democratic norms (Huntington, 1991; Williams, 2020).

Under democratic governments in Mali, relations between civilian authorities and the military were characterised by constitutional subordination of the armed forces to elected leaders, although this relationship was frequently undermined by insecurity, inadequate military funding, and declining confidence in civilian leadership. Following Mali's democratic transition in 1992, successive civilian administrations sought to strengthen democratic oversight of the military. However, growing jihadist insurgency, separatist violence, and weak governance increasingly strained civil–military relations. Military officers became dissatisfied with what they perceived as inadequate logistical support, poor strategic leadership, and political interference in military operations. These tensions gradually weakened civilian control and culminated in repeated military interventions. According to Wing (2013), deteriorating security conditions and declining public confidence significantly altered the balance of civil–military relations by increasing military influence within the political system. A retired military officer observed that:

During civilian rule, soldiers respected constitutional authority, but many believed political leaders did not understand the realities of the battlefield. The lack of equipment and delayed decisions created frustration throughout the armed forces. (KII, Mali, 2025).

In Sudan, civil–military relations under democratic transitions were similarly characterised by persistent competition between civilian political leaders and military elites. Although the Constitutional



Declaration of 2019 established a power-sharing arrangement between civilian representatives and the military following the removal of Omar al-Bashir, the armed forces retained substantial influence over national security, strategic decision-making, and important sectors of the economy. Rather than accepting full civilian oversight, military leaders continued to exercise veto power over major political decisions, creating persistent institutional tensions. de Waal (2022) argues that Sudan's democratic transition remained incomplete because civilian authorities never acquired effective control over the security sector. A Sudanese constitutional expert explained:

The civilian government had political authority on paper, but real power remained with the military leadership. Security institutions continued to operate independently of civilian oversight throughout the transition. (KII, Sudan, 2025).

Civil–military relations under military regimes presented a markedly different pattern in both countries. In Mali, the military governments established after the 2020 and 2021 coups concentrated executive authority within military institutions while limiting civilian political participation. Although transitional authorities pledged to restore democratic rule, major policy decisions remained under military control, and civilian institutions functioned largely under military supervision. According to Thurston (2020), the military justified its continued political role by emphasising national security, counterterrorism, and institutional reform, but these justifications simultaneously reduced democratic accountability. A civil society representative noted that “Once the military assumed power, civilian institutions became advisory

rather than decisive. Important national decisions were made primarily by military leaders.” (KII, Mali, 2025).

In Sudan, military rule has historically been characterised by the concentration of political, economic, and security authority within the armed forces. Both during Omar al-Bashir's administration and after the 2021 military takeover led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, military institutions exercised extensive control over governance, public administration, and national economic resources. Civilian political actors, opposition parties, and civil society organisations experienced restrictions on political activities, while security agencies frequently responded to pro-democracy demonstrations with excessive force. Human Rights Watch (2022) and Amnesty International (2022) documented widespread arbitrary arrests, suppression of peaceful protests, and violations of civil liberties following the 2021 coup. A journalist covering Sudan's political transition remarked that “Military governments in Sudan rarely separate security from politics. Political authority, economic resources, and coercive institutions remain concentrated within the military establishment.” (KII, Sudan, 2025). Comparatively, civil–military relations in both countries reveal important similarities and differences. In both Mali and Sudan, democratic governments struggled to establish effective civilian control over the military because of weak institutions, insecurity, and fragile democratic governance. However, while Mali's civil–military tensions were driven primarily by dissatisfaction with security management and counterinsurgency operations, Sudan's military influence reflected decades of institutionalised military dominance over political and economic structures.



Consequently, military regimes in both countries strengthened military authority, but Sudan exhibited a more deeply entrenched pattern of military involvement in governance than Mali. As one regional security analyst explained that:

Mali's military becomes politically dominant mainly during periods of national crisis, whereas Sudan's military has historically remained part of the governing structure irrespective of whether civilian governments exist. (KII, Regional Security Expert, 2025).

In sum, the findings indicate that civil–military relations in both democratic governments and military regimes have significantly shaped the democratisation process in Mali and Sudan. Under democratic governments, weak civilian oversight and institutional fragility limited the consolidation of democratic civil–military relations. Under military regimes, the concentration of political authority within the armed forces weakened constitutional governance, reduced civilian participation, and slowed democratic consolidation. These experiences demonstrate that sustainable democratisation in both countries depends on strengthening democratic institutions, professionalising the armed forces, and ensuring effective civilian oversight consistent with democratic principles.

Impact of Military Involvement on Democratisation Processes in Mali and Sudan

Military involvement in politics has had profound implications for democratisation processes in Mali and Sudan. Democratisation requires constitutional governance, political accountability, civilian supremacy, rule of law, protection of civil liberties, and the institutionalisation of

democratic norms. However, repeated military interventions in both countries have significantly disrupted these processes by weakening democratic institutions, undermining constitutional order, and limiting political participation. Although military actors often justify their interventions as necessary responses to insecurity, corruption, or political instability, the long-term consequences have generally been detrimental to democratic consolidation.

One of the most significant impacts of military involvement on democratisation in both Mali and Sudan is the disruption of constitutional governance and democratic continuity. Military coups typically suspend constitutions, dissolve elected institutions, and replace civilian administrations with military-led transitional governments. In Mali, the coups of 2012, 2020, and 2021 interrupted democratic processes and weakened institutional stability. The overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2012 halted constitutional governance at a critical moment when the country was already facing insurgency and territorial fragmentation in the northern part. Similarly, the removal of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2020 disrupted democratic rule and delayed electoral processes. According to Thurston (2020), repeated military intervention in Mali undermined democratic continuity and created uncertainty regarding constitutional authority and political succession. A former electoral officer in Mali explained that:

The repeated military coups have severely destabilised democratic processes and electoral continuity. Every time there is a coup, elections are suspended, institutions are dissolved, and everything starts again from the



search to the new military order. This makes democratic consolidation impossible because there is no continuity in governance. (KII, Mali, 2025).

In Sudan, military involvement has similarly prevented the consolidation of democratic governance. The overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 initially generated optimism regarding democratic transition; however, continued military dominance over political institutions weakened the transition process. The 2021 military takeover led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan dissolved civilian institutions and reversed many democratic gains achieved during the transitional period. According to de Waal (2022), Sudan's democratic transition failed largely because the military remained unwilling to relinquish political authority and submit to full civilian oversight. A human rights lawyer in Sudan explained that:

military involvement has significantly undermined constitutional governance. After the 2019 uprising, people expected democracy, but the military continued to dominate decision-making. Eventually, they dissolved civilian institutions again in 2021, reversing all progress. (KII, Sudan, 2025).

Military involvement has also weakened democratic institutions and civilian political structures in both countries. Democratic consolidation depends on strong institutions capable of regulating political competition, ensuring accountability, and maintaining constitutional order. However, repeated military interventions undermine institutional development by concentrating power within the armed forces and reducing the authority of civilian institutions such as legislatures, political parties, and the

judiciary. In Mali, military coups weakened public trust in democratic institutions and exposed the inability of civilian governments to effectively manage national crises. Wing (2013) argues that the repeated interruption of democratic rule in Mali prevented the institutionalisation of democratic norms and weakened state legitimacy.

In Sudan, prolonged military rule entrenched authoritarian structures that marginalised civilian political actors and weakened institutional accountability. The military maintained extensive control over security institutions, economic resources, and political decision-making processes, thereby limiting the autonomy of civilian authorities. Hassan and Kodouda (2019) contend that the dominance of military elites in Sudan's political economy significantly constrained democratic reform and prevented meaningful civilian governance. A journalist described how military dominance affects political freedoms and civil liberties:

During military dominance, protests are suppressed, journalists are arrested, and opposition voices are silenced. This creates fear and weakens democratic culture" (KII, Sudan, 2025).

Another major impact of military involvement is the restriction of political participation and civil liberties. Democratisation requires an open political environment where citizens can freely participate in governance through elections, political parties, civil society activities, and public debate. Military regimes, however, often suppress opposition groups, restrict freedom of expression, and limit civic engagement in order to consolidate political control. In Mali, periods of military rule were associated with political uncertainty,



restrictions on democratic activities, and tensions between civilian actors and military authorities. Although transitional governments promised democratic reforms, the military retained substantial influence over political decision-making.

In Sudan, military intervention had even more severe consequences for civil liberties and political participation. During the Bashir era and subsequent military-led transitions, security forces frequently suppressed protests, detained opposition activists, and restricted press freedom. The military's violent response to pro-democracy demonstrations after the 2019 uprising demonstrated the extent to which authoritarian practices remained embedded within Sudan's political system. According to Eltigani (2020), military dominance in Sudan undermined civic freedoms and weakened the development of democratic political culture.

Furthermore, military involvement has contributed to the erosion of public trust in democratic governance. Repeated political instability, corruption, and ineffective civilian leadership created widespread public dissatisfaction in both Mali and Sudan that led military to intervene into political system. In many cases, sections of the population initially supported military intervention because they viewed civilian governments as incapable of addressing insecurity and economic hardship. However, while military takeovers sometimes generated short-term public approval, they often failed to provide sustainable democratic solutions. Instead, prolonged military involvement deepened political instability and weakened confidence in democratic institutions.

In Mali, public frustration with corruption and insecurity contributed to support for the 2020 coup against President Ibrahim

Boubacar Keïta. Nevertheless, continued military dominance and delays in returning to civilian rule raised concerns about democratic regression and authoritarian consolidation. Similarly, in Sudan, many citizens initially welcomed the removal of Omar al-Bashir, but subsequent military interference in the transition process undermined public confidence in the possibility of genuine democratic reform.

Military involvement has also negatively affected electoral processes and democratic legitimacy in both countries. Free, fair, and credible elections are fundamental components of democratisation in which military will erodes and replace with dictatorship and draconian tendencies. However, military interventions often disrupt electoral timetables, weaken electoral institutions, and create uncertainty regarding political transitions. In Mali, transitional military governments repeatedly postponed elections and maintained control over political processes beyond initially agreed timelines. This weakened democratic legitimacy and generated tensions with regional and international organisations such as Economic Community of West African State. This trend has generated momentum towards establishment of Alliance of Sahel States as anathema to ECOWAS or CEDEAO after withdrawal of three (3) states (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger from ECOWAS).

Similarly, in Sudan, military authorities resisted transferring power fully to civilian actors during the transitional period, thereby undermining the credibility of democratic reforms. The military's continued political dominance created fears that elections would not be conducted in a transparent or democratic manner. According to Diamond (2008), democratisation cannot succeed where political institutions remain



subordinate to military authority and constitutional processes are repeatedly interrupted.

Another important impact is the militarisation of politics and governance. In both Mali and Sudan, repeated military intervention normalised the perception that the armed forces are legitimate political actors capable of determining leadership transitions. For example, in Mali, the military removed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020 and subsequently deposed the civilian-led transitional government in May 2021, replacing it with a military-dominated administration under Colonel Assimi Goïta. Similarly, in Sudan, the armed forces removed President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 and later dissolved the civilian–military transitional government through the military takeover of 25 October 2021 led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, thereby reversing the country's democratic transition (de Waal, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2021). These developments weakened democratic norms and reinforced the use of coercive power rather than constitutional processes as the principal mechanism for resolving political crises. According to Huntington (1991), effective democratisation requires a clear separation between military and political authority; however, in both Mali and Sudan this distinction has remained blurred.

Despite these negative consequences, some scholars acknowledge that military intervention occasionally creates opportunities for political reform, particularly where civilian governments have become highly corrupt or ineffective. In Mali and Sudan, military coups were often justified as corrective measures intended to restore national stability and combat corruption. However, empirical

evidence suggests that military rule rarely produces sustainable democratic outcomes. Instead, military governments frequently consolidate power, delay transitions, and reproduce authoritarian practices under new political arrangements.

Comparatively, Mali and Sudan share several similarities regarding the impact of military involvement on democratisation. In both countries, military intervention disrupted constitutional governance, weakened democratic institutions, restricted political freedoms, and undermined civilian supremacy. The military establishments in both states justified their interventions as necessary responses to political crises and governance failures. Furthermore, repeated military involvement in both countries weakened democratic consolidation by institutionalising instability and reducing public confidence in civilian governance. A regional governance expert compared both countries and commented that:

In Mali, military intervention interrupts democracy intermittently, so democracy is unstable but still exists in cycles. In Sudan, military dominance is more continuous, so democracy struggles to emerge at all. (KII, 2026).

In Mali, military involvement has been closely linked to insecurity, terrorism, and state fragility, with the military presenting itself primarily as a stabilising force against insurgency. Consequently, military intervention in Mali often emerged during periods of acute security crisis. In contrast, Sudan's military involvement is more deeply rooted in historical authoritarianism and institutionalised military dominance over political and economic structures. Unlike Mali, where military interventions were relatively intermittent, Sudan



experienced prolonged periods of direct military rule that fundamentally shaped the political system.

Comparative Analysis of Democratic Transition and Civilian Control of the Military in Mali and Sudan

Democratic transition and civilian control of the military remain central indicators for assessing the quality and sustainability of democratisation in Africa. In both Mali and Sudan, efforts towards democratic transition have been repeatedly undermined by military intervention and weak civilian supremacy. Although the two countries share similarities regarding political instability and recurring military involvement in governance, important differences exist in the historical evolution, institutional structure, and intensity of military influence over democratic processes. A comparative analysis of Mali and Sudan therefore provides important insights into the broader challenges of democratic consolidation and civil–military relations in Africa.

One major similarity between Mali and Sudan is the persistence of fragile democratic transitions characterised by recurring military interference. In both countries, democratic reforms and civilian governments emerged during periods of political liberalisation but failed to establish durable democratic institutions capable of exercising effective control over the military. In Mali, democratic transition began following the overthrow of President Moussa Traoré in March 1991 and the subsequent adoption of a new Constitution and multiparty democratic system in 1992 (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Decalo, 1997; Wing, 2013). The country was initially regarded as one of the more stable democracies in West Africa due to regular elections, constitutional governance, and

peaceful transfers of power. However, weak institutions, corruption, insecurity, and socio-economic challenges gradually undermined democratic consolidation and created opportunities for military intervention (Wing, 2013). A constitutional law expert in Mali explained that:

Democratic transition in the country is repeatedly weakened by the inability of civilian authorities to assert constitutional control over the military. In principle, Mali is a democracy with civilian leadership, but in practice, the military remains the ultimate arbiter during crises. Every transition is interrupted by coups, which shows that civilian control is still very weak. (KII, Mali, 2025).

Similarly, Sudan experienced several attempts at democratic transition following periods of authoritarian military rule. The most notable recent transition occurred after the 2019 uprising that removed Omar al-Bashir from power. The transitional arrangement involving civilian and military actors initially generated optimism regarding democratic reform and constitutional governance. However, tensions between civilian authorities and military leaders eventually culminated in the 2021 military takeover, which disrupted the transition process and reaffirmed military dominance (de Waal, 2022). A governance expert in Sudan explained that:

civilian control of the military in Sudan is largely symbolic. Even during the transition period after 2019, civilians did not fully control the military. The army retained veto power over security and political decisions, which



eventually led to the collapse of the transition. (KII, Sudan, 2025).

Another significant similarity lies in the weakness of civilian institutions and limited civilian oversight of the military. Effective democratic governance requires strong institutions such as legislatures, independent judiciaries, political parties, and civil society organisations capable of holding the military accountable. In Mali, civilian governments struggled to exercise effective oversight over the armed forces, particularly during periods of insecurity and insurgency. The military retained significant autonomy in security affairs and increasingly viewed itself as the protector of national stability. According to Thurston (2020), weak civilian governance and poor management of the security crisis in northern Mali undermined democratic legitimacy and facilitated military intervention.

Sudan similarly experienced weak civilian oversight due to the military's entrenched control over political and economic structures. Unlike Mali, however, Sudan's military establishment exercised much broader institutional dominance, including ownership of economic enterprises and influence over major state institutions. Hassan and Kodouda (2019) argue that Sudan's military maintained extensive economic and political interests that made civilian control extremely difficult during the transitional period. Consequently, while civilian actors in both countries struggled to control the military, Sudan's military possessed deeper institutional entrenchment and greater structural power.

The comparative analysis also revealed similarities regarding the role of insecurity and political instability in shaping democratic transitions. In Mali, insecurity linked to terrorism, separatist insurgency, and state fragility significantly weakened

civilian governments and strengthened military influence. The armed forces justified their repeated interventions by arguing that civilian leaders had failed to effectively manage national security challenges. Similarly, Sudan experienced prolonged internal conflicts in regions such as Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan, which reinforced the military's political relevance and enabled security institutions to dominate governance processes. In both countries, persistent instability weakened democratic institutions and legitimised military involvement in politics. A regional governance analyst provided a comparative synthesis: and said that:

Mali and Sudan both struggle with civilian control of the military, but the depth differs. In Mali, civilian authority exists but is weak and easily disrupted. In Sudan, civilian authority is structurally subordinate to the military. (KII, 2025).

Despite these similarities, important differences exist between Mali and Sudan regarding the historical nature of military influence and democratic transition. One major difference is the degree of institutionalisation of military power. In Mali, military intervention has generally occurred intermittently during periods of political crisis and insecurity. Although the military has repeatedly interrupted democratic governance, civilian administrations were able to operate for significant periods between coups. This suggests that Mali's political system retained some degree of civilian political space despite military influence.

In contrast, Sudan's political history has been dominated by prolonged military and authoritarian rule since independence. The military became deeply integrated into



governance structures, economic management, and political administration over several decades. Unlike Mali, where military intervention often emerged as a response to specific crises, Sudan's military developed into a permanent ruling institution with extensive political and economic interests. According to de Waal (2022), Sudan's military establishment became so deeply embedded within the state that democratic transition threatened not only political authority but also military economic privileges and institutional survival.

There are also differences regarding the public perception of the military in both countries. In Mali, sections of the population often supported military interventions due to frustration with insecurity, corruption, and ineffective governance. The military was frequently perceived as a stabilising institution capable of restoring national order. In Sudan, although some citizens initially viewed the military as instrumental in removing Bashir, widespread distrust of military dominance grew rapidly due to the armed forces' continued repression of pro-democratic movements and reluctance to transfer power fully to civilians. Consequently, public resistance to military rule became more pronounced in Sudan than in Mali during recent transitions.

Furthermore, regional and international responses to military involvement differed between the two countries. In Mali, regional organisations such as Economic Community of West African States imposed sanctions and pressured military leaders to restore civilian rule following coups. International actors also linked financial and diplomatic support to democratic transition timelines. In Sudan, international responses focused largely on mediation efforts and support for negotiated transition arrangements, although

geopolitical interests among regional powers sometimes complicated external pressure on military authorities.

The comparative analysis also demonstrated that both countries experienced significant challenges in institutionalising civilian supremacy over the military. In Mali, civilian authorities lacked sufficient institutional strength and security capacity to effectively regulate military influence. In Sudan, the military's entrenched economic and political power prevented meaningful civilian oversight and weakened democratic reform efforts. Consequently, democratic transitions in both states remained vulnerable to reversal due to the absence of effective constitutional control over the armed forces.

Conclusion

The study reveals that civil-military relations in Mali and Sudan are characterised by weak civilian control, recurring military intervention, and fragile democratic institutions. It finds that in both countries, the military has remained a dominant political actor, often justifying intervention on the basis of insecurity, corruption, and governance failure. In Mali, civil-military relations are largely crisis-driven, with repeated coups occurring in response to insurgency and state fragility, while in Sudan, military dominance is more structural and historically embedded within political and economic systems.

The study further finds that military intervention is driven by a combination of weak governance, insecurity, economic hardship, institutional fragility, and historical precedent of coups in both countries. It also establishes that military involvement has significantly undermined democratisation by disrupting constitutional order, weakening electoral processes, limiting political participation, and eroding



public trust in democratic institutions. In addition, the comparative analysis shows that while both countries experience weak civilian supremacy, Mali's democratic instability is cyclical and episodic, whereas Sudan's is continuous and institutionalised. The study also finds that civilian institutions in both states lack the capacity to effectively regulate military power, thereby weakening democratic consolidation and sustaining military influence in governance.

The study concluded that civil–military relations in both Mali and Sudan represent a major obstacle to democratic consolidation in Africa. It demonstrates that the persistence of military intervention is rooted in structural weaknesses within civilian institutions, compounded by insecurity, economic instability, and historical patterns of military dominance. While both countries have attempted democratic transitions, these efforts remain incomplete due to the continued political relevance of the military. Ultimately, the study concludes that sustainable democratisation in both contexts depends on strengthening civilian institutions, improving governance capacity, and ensuring effective constitutional control over the state.

Recommendations

1. Governments in both Mali and Sudan should strengthen civilian institutions by enhancing the capacity of democratic structures to ensure effective oversight and control of the military.
2. There should be comprehensive security sector reforms aimed at professionalising the armed forces and clearly defining their constitutional roles in national defence.
3. Both countries should prioritise good governance and anti-corruption measures to restore public trust in civilian administrations and reduce justification for military intervention.

4. Regional and international organisations should intensify support for democratic consolidation by enforcing constitutional rule and discouraging unconstitutional military takeovers.

5. Both the countries should encourage Civil Society Organizations, Unions and political movements to inculcate into the spirit of democratic culture into the mindset of their citizens for building effective civil-military relations and democratic consolidation in their states.

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