

Coup Culture and Security Dynamics in the Sahel: Lessons from Niger, 1974–2010

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Abstract

This study examines the persistence of coups d'état in Niger between 1974 and 2010, situating the phenomenon within the broader security dynamics of the Sahel. Despite repeated democratic experiments, Niger experienced four major coups that entrenched a "coup culture" and reinforced the military's role as arbiter of political order. The research problem centres on the fragility of Niger's institutions and the limited effectiveness of regional and international responses. Guided by the theories of Praetorianism and Interventionism, the study employs a qualitative historical design, drawing on archival records, secondary literature, policy reports, and testimonies from Nigerien diplomats. Findings reveal that Niger's coups were driven by weak governance, corruption, poverty, and elite rivalries, reinforced by regional contagion effects and international rivalries over resources and security partnerships. The implications extend beyond Niger, as repeated interventions weakened democratic consolidation, undermined economic stability, and fuelled insecurity across the Sahel. The study concludes that sustainable stability requires institutional reform, civil–military professionalisation, inclusive governance, economic diversification, and consistent regional and international engagement.

Keywords: coup culture; Niger; Sahel security; ECOWAS; praetorianism; governance

Introduction

The phenomenon of military coups has been a defining feature of postcolonial Africa, shaping political trajectories, governance outcomes, and security landscapes across the continent. Since the early 1960s, Africa has recorded more than 200 coup attempts, with nearly half of them successful (Powell & Thyne, 2011). These military interventions have not been isolated aberrations; rather, they have become recurring disruptions that reflect deeper structural challenges of state fragility, weak institutions, and contested legitimacy. Nowhere has this pattern been more evident than in West Africa, a region often characterised as the epicentre of coups. States such as Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Mali, and Burkina Faso all witnessed repeated military seizures of power in the decades following independence, creating a regional climate in which coups became an accepted, if contested, mode of political change (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2024).

Niger presents a particularly significant case study within this trajectory. Having gained independence from France in 1960, the country has experienced four major coups: in 1974, 1996, 1999, and 2010. Each intervention occurred at a moment of heightened political tension and economic decline, yet all shared underlying drivers: fragile governance, elite rivalries, corruption, economic dependency, and unresolved social cleavages. The 1974 coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché marked a decisive break from Niger's initial experiment with civilian governance under Hamani Diori. Subsequent coups, including the 1996 takeover by General Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara, the 1999 post-assassination intervention, and the 2010 coup that ousted President Mamadou Tandja, confirmed the institutionalisation of a "coup culture" in Niger's political system (McGowan, 2023). Far from being temporary corrections, these repeated military takeovers weakened democratic institutions, entrenched authoritarian practices, and reinforced the military's role as the arbiter of last resort.

Niger's recurring instability persists despite democratic transitions, as fragile party systems, corruption, socio-economic disparities, and security crises undermine legitimacy and enable military intervention under the guise of restoring order. Regionally, coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad reinforced praetorian alternatives. Internationally, Niger's geostrategic position, resource wealth,

terrorism, trafficking, and global rivalries amplified each coup's impact on regional and international security (Oluwole, 2022).

The persistence of coups in Niger therefore raises fundamental questions about the nexus between domestic fragility, regional contagion, and international responses. Regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU) developed anti-coup frameworks and imposed sanctions following unconstitutional changes of government. However, their enforcement has been inconsistent, reactive, and often ineffective (Day, 2024). International actors, notably France, the United States, and the European Union, also sought to influence outcomes through aid conditionalities and security partnerships. However, these often deepened Niger's dependency and fuelled perceptions of external interference. Meanwhile, newer players such as Russia and China began to contest influence in the Sahel, complicating the regional security order (Kone, 2025). Against this backdrop, Niger's coups illustrate how domestic weaknesses interact with regional contagion and international rivalries to create a multidimensional security dilemma.

This study is guided by the theories of Praetorianism and Interventionism, which together provide analytical lenses for understanding Niger's coups. Praetorianism, as articulated by Huntington (1968) and later expanded by Hutchful (2021), explains how militaries in weak states move beyond their defensive role to dominate political life, often presenting themselves as guardians of national stability. Interventionist theory complements this perspective by highlighting how militaries justify their actions as necessary correctives to governance failures (Finer, 1962). Applying these theories to Niger reveals how fragile institutions and persistent governance crises entrenched the military as a political actor, while regional and international dynamics reinforced the permissibility of intervention.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to academic debates on the relationship between coups and security in the Sahel by situating Niger's experience within broader regional and international contexts. Second, it offers insights for policymakers seeking to strengthen democratic resilience and prevent future interventions. By identifying the structural drivers of coups, the study highlights the importance of addressing root causes rather than relying solely on punitive responses. Third, it underscores the security implications of Niger's instability for the broader Sahel, where the expansion of extremist groups, cross-border trafficking, and humanitarian crises intersect with governance failures. Understanding Niger's coup culture is therefore essential not only for domestic stability but also for regional and global security.

Therefore, this paper examines Niger's coups (1974–2010), analysing their causes, consequences, and security implications using qualitative historical methods, highlighting governance weaknesses and external pressures, and offering lessons for institutional resilience and Sahel regional security strategies.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What historical and socio-political factors contributed to the emergence of military coups in Niger between 1974 and 2010?
2. What were the economic and security implications of these coups for Niger and the broader Sahel?
3. How effective were regional and international responses, particularly those of ECOWAS and the AU, in addressing and preventing coups?

4. What lessons can be drawn from Niger's experience for strengthening governance and security in the Sahel?

Theoretical Framework

The study of Niger's coups (1974–2010) draws on the concepts of Praetorianism and Interventionism (see Figure 1). Praetorianism (Huntington, 1968; Hutchful, 2021) highlights weak institutions enabling military dominance, while Interventionism (Finer, 1962) explains rational decisions to intervene during crises. Together, these theories show coups as systemic, entrenched in Niger's political culture, and shaped by regional and international dynamics.

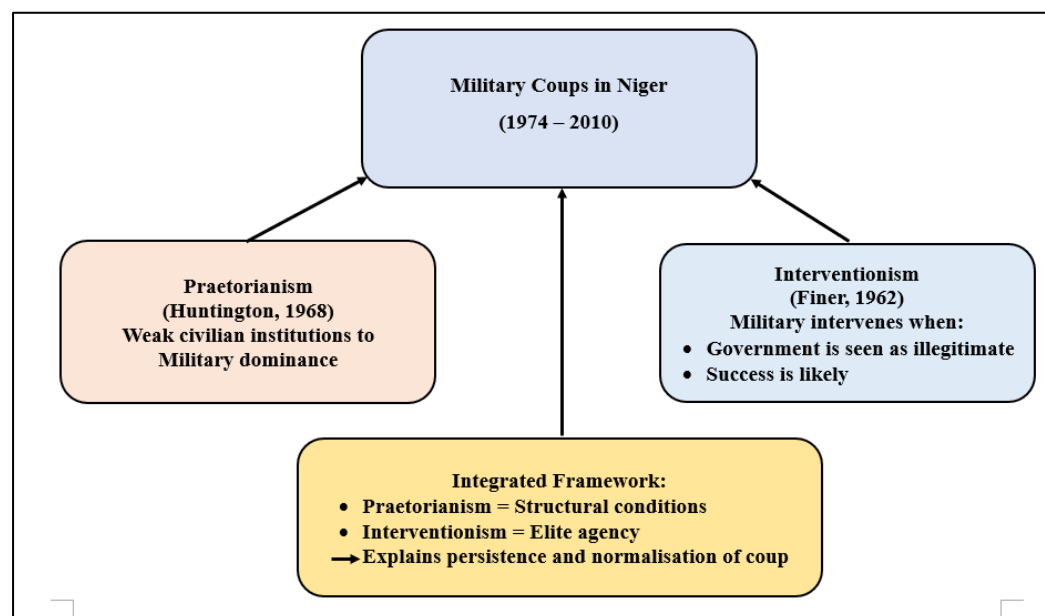


Figure 1: A Theoretical Framework explaining the Military Coups in Niger (1974 – 2010)

Literature Review

Military coups have been a recurrent feature of African politics since independence. Powell and Thyne's (2011) dataset records 457 coup attempts between 1950 and 2010, of which 227 were successful. West Africa has been the most coup-prone region, with Niger among the most affected countries. McGowan (2023) notes that the prevalence of coups in the Sahel reflects structural fragility: weak institutions, economic underdevelopment, and fragmented political systems. Cheeseman and Klaas (2024) further argue that coups exhibit a contagion effect, spreading across borders as officers in one country are emboldened by successful interventions in neighbouring states. This is evident in Niger, where the 1974 coup was influenced by the earlier experiences of Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria, and later coups mirrored similar dynamics in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Several scholars highlight the role of political weakness in enabling coups. Ibrahim (2022) argues that elite rivalries and contested legitimacy were decisive in Niger's 1996 and 1999 coups, when civilian leaders failed to reconcile competing interests within fragile democratic frameworks. Tucker (2023) adds that authoritarian drift, such as Mamadou Tandja's attempt to extend his tenure in 2009, created legitimacy crises that provided a moral pretext for military intervention.

Economic fragility also plays a central role. Barka and Ncube (2012) show that poverty and low growth correlate strongly with coup risk across Africa. In Niger, dependence on uranium exports and vulnerability to price shocks created fiscal instability, which led to delegitimising civilian

governments. Ouedraogo (2024) emphasises that Niger's overreliance on resource rents fuelled perceptions of elite capture and provided populist justification for military seizures of power.

Social pressures, including ethnic divisions and demographic stress, have further reinforced coup dynamics. Ag Ahmed (2023) highlights the role of Tuareg grievances in fuelling instability, while Koulibaly (2025) notes that Niger's rapid population growth placed enormous strain on resources, exacerbating perceptions of exclusion and state failure. These conditions allowed the military to present itself as a unifying force, even as its interventions deepened instability.

The regional context of the Sahel has been equally significant. Matlosa and Zounmenou (2011) argue that militarisation and democratisation have coexisted uneasily in West Africa, with Niger and Guinea serving as case studies of how fragile transitions were repeatedly interrupted by soldiers. Diarra (2023) describes a "coup domino effect" of instability in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, which emboldened Nigerien officers. ECOWAS and the AU attempted to enforce anti-coup norms, but their responses were inconsistent. Democratization (2024) shows that while sanctions demonstrated normative commitment, their effectiveness was undermined by weak enforcement and the risk of exacerbating economic hardship.

International involvement has shaped Niger's coup trajectory in complex ways. France, the United States, and the European Union maintained significant influence through aid, counterterrorism partnerships, and economic agreements. Arnaut and Tchibozo (2024) argue that foreign military bases and donor conditionalities often delegitimise civilian governments, making them appear dependent on external actors. This perception was exploited by coup leaders, who promised to reclaim sovereignty. Mendy (2021) similarly highlights how aid dependency created governance crises by making governments accountable to donors rather than citizens.

Global rivalries further complicated the picture. Kone (2025) shows how Russia's expanding role in West Africa provided alternative alliances for coup leaders seeking to resist Western pressure. Huriye (2023) emphasises how competition over Niger's uranium resources intensified foreign involvement, with Western and non-Western actors alike vying for influence. This internationalisation of Niger's politics reinforced instability, as external interests often clashed with domestic priorities.

Gaps in the Literature

Although extensive scholarship exists on African coups, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature treats coups as episodic rather than systemic, neglecting the concept of a "coup culture" in which intervention becomes normalised. Second, while regional contagion is widely acknowledged, few studies integrate this with international dynamics to provide a multi-scalar analysis. Third, Niger's specific trajectory has often been overshadowed by cases such as those of Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali, leaving its distinctive dynamics underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by situating Niger's coups within both regional and international security contexts, thereby contributing to a more integrated understanding of Sahelian instability.

Methodology

This study adopts a *qualitative historical design* to analyse coups d'état in Niger between 1974 and 2010. Qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring complex political and social dynamics where variables are not easily quantifiable, but patterns and meanings can be discerned from narrative and historical evidence (Mazhar et al., 2021). Historical design enables the systematic examination of events over time, highlighting the causes, contexts, and consequences of recurring political crises. By tracing the sequence of coups in Niger and situating them within broader Sahelian and international contexts, the study identifies recurring drivers and assesses their implications for governance and security. The design is interpretivist, recognising that coups are embedded in socio-political realities shaped by perceptions, legitimacy, and external pressures. It allows integrating

political, economic, and security perspectives into a coherent analysis, consistent with the multidimensional framework developed in the literature (McGowan, 2023; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2024).

The study drew on interviews, scholarly works, policy reports, archival records, and diplomatic testimonies to analyse Niger's coups (1974–2010). Prioritising peer-reviewed and institutional sources, data collection emphasised governance, civil–military relations, resource dependency, regional dynamics, and international interventions, ensuring reliability and complementing academic insights with practitioner perspectives. The study also employed thematic and comparative analysis to examine Niger's coups. Themes of weak institutions, economic fragility, contagion, and external influence (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were identified. Regional comparisons highlighted parallels with Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso (Matlosa & Zounmenou, 2011; Diarra, 2023). Triangulation enhanced validity (Yin, 2018).

Analysis and Discussion

The persistence of coups in Niger between 1974 and 2010 was shaped by political, economic, social, regional, and international factors, each reinforcing a cycle of instability.

Political drivers were central. Weak institutions, elite rivalries, authoritarian drift, and legitimacy crises enabled repeated military interventions (McGowan, 2023; Akinola, 2024; Cheeseman, 2025; Tucker, 2023). A Nigerien attaché stressed that coups were "never about guns alone" but were closely tied to political disputes and electoral manipulation. Public disillusionment, as diplomats recalled, gave soldiers temporary legitimacy as "saviours." In this way, political fragility institutionalised a culture of coups, embedding the military as a key political actor.

Building on these dynamics, economic factors also played a decisive role. Poverty, uranium dependence, corruption, and youth unemployment destabilised successive governments (Barka & Ncube, 2012; Gaye, 2023; Ouedraogo, 2024; Mensah, 2025). A trade attaché noted that unpopular uranium contracts granted soldiers nationalist legitimacy. However, as embassy officials reflected, juntas largely perpetuated mismanagement. Consequently, economic crises acted as catalysts for coups, even though military regimes consistently failed to deliver reforms.

Closely connected were social drivers, which amplified vulnerability. Ethnic cleavages, weak civic institutions, poor education, demographic pressures, and insecurity weakened democratic resilience (Ag Ahmed, 2023; Ibrahim, 2024; Diallo & Sow, 2021; Koulibaly, 2025; Musa, 2023). Diplomats highlighted citizens' silence after coups and the appeal of military claims to unity and protection. These dynamics normalised coups by socialising public tolerance of intervention.

At the regional level, coup contagion from Mali and Burkina Faso (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2024; Diarra, 2023), inconsistent ECOWAS/AU sanctions, and Nigeria's constrained mediation further shaped Niger's instability. Diplomats observed that sanctions often hurt citizens more than juntas. As a result, regional responses lacked consistency, reinforcing permissive conditions for repeated interventions. Expanding outward, international dynamics provided additional momentum. France's dominance, U.S. security priorities, EU conditionalities, and Russian/Chinese alternatives (Arnaut & Tchibozo, 2024; Musa, 2023; Bilquin et al., 2023; Kone, 2025; Huriye, 2023) weakened civilian legitimacy while empowering juntas. International rivalries and inconsistent sanctions therefore diluted deterrence, legitimising interventions under the guise of sovereignty and independence.

Finally, the security implications were profound. Diplomats testified that during coups, "the army focused on Niamey first, not the borders," weakening counterterrorism and enabling trafficking (Aning & Pokoo, 2014; Aubyn et al., 2022). Instability in Niger thus reverberated across the Sahel, entrenching praetorianism and undermining regional security.

Taken together, Niger's coups reflected the convergence of political fragility, economic crises, social vulnerabilities, regional contagion, and international rivalries. These dynamics not only entrenched coup culture domestically but also spilled across borders, weakening Sahelian security. Addressing them requires integrated strategies that strengthen institutions, reduce economic fragility, foster inclusive governance, and balance external partnerships with sovereignty. Without tackling these interlocking drivers, Niger and the broader Sahel remain vulnerable to repeated disruptions of democratic consolidation and regional stability.

Lessons from Niger

The analysis of Niger's coups between 1974 and 2010 provides critical lessons for understanding instability in the Sahel and developing strategies to mitigate coup culture. These lessons extend beyond Niger's borders, offering guidance for domestic reformers, regional organisations, and international partners.

- **Institutional Reforms and Democratic Resilience.** The first lesson is the centrality of strong institutions. Weak parliaments, courts, and electoral systems in Niger collapsed under pressure, enabling the military to step in (Huntington, 1968). A senior diplomat observed, *"Until our courts, parliaments, and political parties are stronger, coups will remain possible."* Strengthening institutions is thus essential for long-term civilian authority.
- **Civil–Military Professionalisation.** A second lesson is redefining civil–military relations. Niger's soldiers often saw intervention as a patriotic duty. As an embassy attaché noted, *"Our soldiers were trained to fight, but also to believe they must save the nation."* Professionalisation, oversight, and depoliticisation are critical for preventing praetorian dominance (Hutchful, 2021).
- **Regional Responses.** Niger's experience also underscores the limitations of reactive sanctions. Diplomats recalled that *"every time sanctions came, people suffered more, but the soldiers stayed."* Preventive diplomacy, early warning, and consistent enforcement of anti-coup norms are necessary to restore regional credibility (Matlosa & Zounmenou, 2011).
- **Economic Diversification.** Dependence on uranium and aid heightened vulnerability. A trade attaché reflected, *"Every crisis was worse because we depended on uranium and foreign aid."* Diversification into agriculture, renewables, and trade is essential for stability (Ouedraogo, 2024).
- **Inclusive Governance and Social Trust.** Exclusion and neglect of marginalised groups fostered acceptance of the coup. A consular officer remarked, *"The people supported soldiers not because they loved them, but because they felt abandoned by politicians."* Equitable distribution, education, and inclusion can build legitimacy.
- **International Engagement.** External support often undermined leaders' credibility by portraying dependency. As one officer stated, *"When politicians looked like they served Paris or Washington more than Niamey, they lost credibility."* Engagement must prioritise local legitimacy over short-term strategic goals.
- **The Sahel-Wide Lesson.** Finally, Niger shows that coup culture itself is a regional threat. A diplomat warned, *"The danger is not just one coup in one country. It is when coups become normal across the region."* Addressing instability thus requires coordinated governance reforms, security sector professionalisation, and inclusive development across the Sahel.

Conclusion

Niger's coups (1974–2010) reveal how political fragility, economic deprivation, social fragmentation, regional contagion, and international dynamics institutionalised praetorianism. Coups became cyclical, exploiting weak institutions and legitimacy deficits. Instability was not purely domestic; regional contagion, inconsistent ECOWAS/AU enforcement, and global rivalries shaped outcomes. Ultimately, coup culture undermined democratic consolidation, governance reforms, and regional security.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- *Strengthen Democratic Institutions:* Consolidate legislatures, independent judiciaries, and credible electoral systems to enhance civilian control and reduce praetorian risks.
- *Reform Civil–Military Relations:* Depoliticise the armed forces through security sector reform, professionalisation, and constitutional safeguards under civilian oversight.
- *Economic Diversification and Poverty Reduction:* Reduce reliance on uranium and aid; diversify into agriculture, renewables, and regional trade; implement youth employment policies.
- *Promote Inclusive Governance:* Address ethnic exclusion, expand education, and empower civil society to build trust and legitimacy.
- *Strengthen Regional Mechanisms:* Shift ECOWAS/AU responses from reactive sanctions to preventive diplomacy, early warning, consistent term-limit enforcement, and mediation.
- *Align International Engagement with Legitimacy:* Recalibrate aid/security cooperation to reinforce domestic legitimacy, avoid over-securitisation, and prioritise governance and institution-building.
- *Treat Coup Culture as a Regional Security Priority:* Integrate coup prevention into Sahel security frameworks alongside counterterrorism and anti-trafficking efforts.

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