Democracy and Insecurity in the Sahel: An Impossible Cohabitation?

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Abstract

This article analyzes the effects of insecurity on the democratic agenda in the Sahel. It aims to elucidate the resilience potential of democracy in the face of insecurity. The results show a contrasted situation, with some regimes that are adapting to insecurity and others that are succumbing to it. Up to a certain level of intensity, democracy manages to control insecurity thanks to its electoral, deliberative and participatory dimensions. However, in cases of high-intensity insecurity, the democratic agenda becomes difficult to preserve, because of the impossibility to organize credible elections and keep the army out of the political lane. Clearly, while there is no absolute incompatibility between democracy and insecurity, the cohabitation between the two remains no less tumultuous.

Keywords

Democracy, security, insecurity, war, Sahel

Introduction

"Free Kossyam[1]!", "Roch out!", "Enough is enough!". These were the main slogans chanted by demonstrators on November 27, 2021 in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. Later, on January 21, 2022, Yéli Monique Kam, president of an opposition party, urged on the army to "take its responsibility" when it came to the security crisis[2]. These people were more or less covertly inviting the army to take power. Yet Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré had just been re-elected in the first round of the November 22, 2020 presidential election (Saidou & Bertrand, 2022).

He would later be overthrown on January 24, 2022 by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. The latter was in turn overthrown on September 30, 2022 by Captain Ibrahim Traoré[3]. Mali, another Sahelian country in crisis, also witnessed a coup on August 18, 2020 against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who had been re-elected in 2018 for a second term. More recently, on July 26, 2023 in Niger, General Abdourahamane Tiani overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum, who had been elected for a first term in April 2021.[4]

What these coups have in common is that they all took place in a context of insecurity[5] and "entangled crises" (Olivier De Sardan, 2023; Bagayoko, 2021; Englebert & Lyammouri, 2022). These interruptions in the democratic order raise the question of the ability of democracy to manage the security crisis. Can this be interpreted as an impossible cohabitation between democracy and insecurity? In other words, is democracy incapable of regulating insecurity?

In political science, the concept of democracy was for a long time approached from a minimalist perspective (Schumpeter, 1972; Mair, 2011). A maximalist current has developed, highlighting aspects such as equality and participation (Mayer, 2010). More recent work focus on the quality of democracy in terms of procedures, content and outcome (Diamond & Morlino, 2004). The theoretical approach of this article is to apprehend democracy from all its angles , be it its electoral, participatory, consensual, deliberative or liberal dimensions (Pilet & Tomini, 2018, p. 171).

The democratic order refers to the existence of political institutions established in accordance with the Constitution and the principles of constitutional convergence laid down by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)[6]. The stability of this democratic framework in the face of insecurity is measured by the continuation or not of these institutions: the government, the parliament and the judicial power. A breakdown in the democratic order occurs when elected leaders (President of the Republic, Members of Parliament) are removed from office and replaced by non-elected leaders, whether civilian or military. The concept of insecurity is approached here through the lens of terrorism, which is defined as the use of violence by irregular armed force to achieve political goals (Collins, 2016; Hampson, 2008). This political violence pertains to the "new wars" (Kaldor, 2006) due to its asymmetrical and transnational nature (B. Lutz & J. Lutz, 2016, p. 313).

Terrorism represents a new challenge for regimes emerging from the "third wave of democratization[7]" in Africa (Villalon & Idrissa, 2020; Loada & Weathly, 2014; Bratton & Van de Walle, 2002). Previously, these democratization trends began to ebb towards the end of the 1990s with the

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1   Kossyam is the name given to the presidential palace in Burkina Faso.
2   https://infowakat.net/gouvernance-politique-monique-kam-appel-larmee-a-prendre-ses-responsabilites/
3   https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1381940/politique/burkina-faso-qui-est-ibrahim-traore-le-capitaine-qui-a-fait-tomber-damiba/
4   Before 2023, two attempted coups had taken place, one in December 2015 and the other in March 2021.
5   According to the 2022 Global Terrorism Index, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger rank second, fourth and tenth respectively among countries affected by terrorism. Cf. Institute for Economics and Peace (2023). https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-09062022.pdf
6   These principles are contained in the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted in 2001 (Fall, 2014).
7   On the waves of democratization, see Huntington (1991).

emergence of "hybrid regimes" (Coman, 2018; Diamond & Plattner, 2010; Diamond, 2002), paving the way for the "third wave of autocrats" (Alizada et al., 2021; V-Dem Institute, 2023). In the Sahel, this decline in democracy has been accentuated by terrorism over the past decade and more recently by the Covid-19 crisis[8] (Landman & Di Gennaro Splendore, 2020; Rapeli & Saikkonen, 2020; Maltosa, 2021). The literature that deals with the links between democracy and security has been dominated by the liberal thesis according to which "democracies do not wage war against each other" (Cornelia, 2008). Several works have discussed this thesis, sometimes corroborating it, sometimes nuancing it, or even calling it into question (Doyle, 1986; Paris, 2009, pp. 40-51). According to Rummel (1997), democracies are less prone to internal violent conflicts.[9] For Piccone (2017a), fragile democracies tend to record more crime than consolidated democracies and autocracies.

While in consolidated states and democracies such as the USA and Canada, terrorism has led to the restriction of democratic freedoms (Daniels et al., 2001), in Sahelian states, it is the very democratic order that is threatened by this security threat. While terrorism in the Sahel has been analyzed from various perspectives (Bagayoko, 2021; Bukarti, 2023; Idam & Emeh, 2022), its implications for democratization remain insufficiently explored from a comparative perspective. This article aims to help fill this gap by analyzing the cases of Niger, Nigeria, Mali and Burkina Faso over the period of 2010-2023. These cases present similarities and contrasts. For the past ten years or so, democracy in Nigeria and Niger had been coping with insecurity, before the latter contry entered a military transition in 2023. In Mali, on the other hand, insecurity has already led to three coups since 2012, while Burkina Faso recorded two in just one year alone –the year 2022[10].

This article is based on data from a literature review and a series of scientific meetings. On the first point, the literature analyzed concerns democratization and the links between democracy and insecurity and terrorism in the Sahel. The second is a personal summary of the debates which took place during four scientific meetings at which we presented papers on democracy and insecurity. The first was the colloquium on transitional regimes organized on February 5, 2022 in Ouagadougou by a consortium of civil society organizations[11]. The second meeting was the Interdisciplinary Congress on African Studies (COAFRO) organized from May 26

to 27, 2022 in Cluj-Napoca, Romania[12]. The third meeting was the sub-regional seminar on elections in times of crisis, organized from December 7 to 9, 2022 in Ouagadougou by the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). The fourth meeting was the regional symposium organized by the Institute for Governance and Development (IGD) in Ouagadougou from December 13 to 15, 2022. Discussions with social and legal scientists, security experts and political and electoral practitioners helped refine the analysis.

The central argument of this article is that there is no irresolvable antagonism between insecurity and democracy. Democracy copes with insecurity on the one hand, because actors develop coping strategies, and on the other, because democracy itself helps to regulate the crisis. However, the intensity of insecurity puts democracy to a considerable test when it diminishes the capacity of states to organize credible elections and keep the army out of the political arena. Clearly, the cohabitation of democracy and insecurity, while possible, remains tumultuous.

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8   On this subject, see issue 2 (2022) of *Global Africa*, entitled " Africa and the World in Viral Time".
     www.globalafricasciences.org
9   About the link between democracy and terrorism one can also, check the work of Piccone (2017b).
10   This indicates a correlation between the intensity of insecurity and the disruptions to the democratic order. Indeed, in 2022 Mali and Burkina Faso recorded 73% of terrorism-related deaths in the Sahel and 53% of deaths in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023, p. 4).
11   They are the Centre for Democratic Governance (Centre pour la gouvernance démocratique (CGD)), the NGO Diakonia and the Community of Teacher-Scholars and Researchers in Legal and Political Sciences of Burkina Faso (Communauté des enseignants-chercheurs et chercheurs en sciences juridiques et politiques du Burkina Faso (CEJP))
12   It was organized by the Center for African Studies and the Faculty of European Studies at Babeș-Bolyai University, in partnership with the Institute for African Studies and the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Bucharest, the Ubuntu Center at the West University of Timișoara, Cevipol at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and CESPO at the University of Abomey-Calavi. https://euro.ubbcluj.ro/congres-interdisciplinaire-detudes-africaines-coafro/

A Possible Cohabitation

It can be argued that democracy and insecurity can coexist under certain conditions. The two are not incompatible, even if over time it is not easy for democracy to consolidate in a context of high-intensity insecurity. Several examples illustrate democracy's ability to cope with insecurity. Democracy is maintained on the one hand because it manages to control security crises, and on the other because its mechanisms help to regulate them.

Domesticating Insecurity

The experience of certain Sahelian states shows that democracy and insecurity can coexist. Democratic regimes are capable of domesticating insecurity. However, their resilience in the face of insecurity depends on the ability of those involved in the electoral process not only to adjust their practices, but also to reform the rules of the political game.

Adapting Electoral Strategies

In contexts of insecurity, election stakeholders develop new strategies to adapt. These strategies make it possible to contain insecurity and preserve the democratic order. The case of the insecurity triggered by the Boko Haram group in the Lake Chad basin illustrates this perfectly (Cold-Ravnkilde & Plambech, 2015). Nigeria, where the insurgency originated, was able to hold federal elections in 2015, 2019 and 2023 despite the security chaos. For the 2023 elections, the electoral commission created special voting centers (IDP voting centers) to enable internally displaced persons, whose numbers have been growing steadily since 2017, to vote (Bukarti, 2023, p. 9). In the Federal State of Borno, in 19 of the 26 communes, voters cast their ballots in Super Camps, highly secure military enclaves[13]. According to Dongmo and Gazibo (2023, p. 8), while Nigeria's 2023 presidential election indicates a

"routinization of violent political participation", it also revealed a decline in election-related violence. Niger, affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, was similarly resilient. Indeed, this country was able to preserve its democratic order from 2011 to 2023 despite the intensity of the security challenges it faced (Olivier De Sardan, 2023; Tidjani Alou, 2020).

In 2021, in the midst of a crisis, this country experienced the first alternating democracy in its history, with the election of Mohamed Bazoum as president. These examples of elections in times of crisis demonstrate the gradual development of an engineering approach to reconciling elections and insecurity. The use of communication technologies and the creation of an election security mechanism are two recipes that have proved their worth in Niger for the 2020-2021 general elections[14].

Halide Ahmed Ousmane, a candidate in the 2020 parliamentary elections in conflict-torn western Niger, confirms that electoral campaigning in times of conflict is indeed possible[15]. However, candidates must take precautions to ensure their safety. In his view, it takes a combination of cunning and tenacity to campaign successfully in this conflict context. For example, candidates must avoid any provocative attitude towards armed groups[16]. In this way, we can see how insecurity leads political players to invent "good practices" for electoral campaigns. For the 2018 presidential election in Mali, the security situation also influenced candidates' strategies. Indeed, "candidate tours were mostly concentrated in the southern regions, the main reserves of votes (European Union, 2018, p. 19). For the central and northern regions, they had limited their activities to urban centers only.

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13 https://africanarguments.org/2023/04/how-nigeria-avoided-organized-violence-during-the-2023-elections/
14 This is the argument put forward by Issaka Souna, Chairman of Niger's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI). He was speaking at a symposium organized by Burkina Faso's CENI in Ouagadougou on December 7, 2022.
15 He was speaking on December 14, 2022 at the regional colloquium on elections organized in Ouagadougou by the IGD and the CIS.
16 According to Halide Ahmed Ousmane, it is not advisable, for example, to be escorted by security forces.

In addition, election observers are developing new expertise in monitoring elections in times of crisis. Civil society, which specializes in election observation, contributes to this through the Situation Room mechanism, which collects information in real time on incidents at polling stations. This mechanism was used in Burkina Faso in 2015 and 2020 and in Nigeria in 2015, 2019 and 2023 (Bukarti, 2023, p. 25). For the Nigerian elections in 2023, ACLED[17] and the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) have set up the Nigeria Election Violence Tracker to monitor political violence[18]. This ability to adapt to the context of insecurity can also be seen in the securing of elections[19].

For the 2020 elections in Burkina Faso, security for electoral operations was supervised for the first time by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces. In Nigeria, since 2011, this mission has been the responsibility of a body called the Inter-Agency Consultative Committee on Election Security (ICCES), co-chaired by the Chairman of the Electoral Commission and the National Security Adviser, and made up of representatives of all components of the security forces[20]. We can thus observe that insecurity leads political and institutional players to invent new knowledge and know-how in electoral matters. This harnessing of insecurity also involves adapting electoral legislation.

Adjusting the Normative Framework for Elections

The domestication of insecurity manifests itself in changes to the legal framework for elections. In Burkina Faso, for example, the Electoral Code was revised in 2020[21] to allow elections to be validated even in cases of low voter turnout caused by insecurity. By integrating the notions of a "force majeure" and an "exceptional circumstance", this normative reform, which also gave rise to controversy, aimed to prevent insecurity from jeopardizing the election and leading to an institutional and political crisis. This normative reform made it possible to organize and validate the coupled presidential and legislative elections of November 2020. Keeping insecurity in check also involves adjusting the electoral calendar. The 2015 Nigerian elections were postponed by six weeks due to threats from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau (Bukarti, 2023, p. 11). For the 2018 presidential election in Mali, the electoral law stipulated that, in the event of force majeure, voting could be postponed to the following day in centers where it could not be held according to the electoral calendar (European Union, 2018, p. 11).

States have thus adapted by resorting to the exceptional provisions of their constitutions to deal with crises. This has led to the adoption of exceptional measures such as the state of emergency and the state of siege, as illustrated by the cases of Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Under this legal crisis regime, the powers of the armed forces are extended, while certain individual and collective freedoms are curtailed for a limited period. This is the context, for example, for the curfew measures decreed in certain regions of states facing terrorism. While it's true that these measures restricting freedom fuel frustration, they do help to reconcile democratic order with the fight against insecurity.

Beyond these official policies, unofficial strategies are used to intimidate and silence journalists and opponents. The ban on demonstrations in Niger under the Issoufou and Bazoum regimes (2011-2023) is a case in point. Indeed, strategies to control insecurity can fuel the subtle dismantling of democratic gains, even under constitutional regimes. Insecurity can be used as a pretext to lock down the political system. These authoritarian uses of the security context do not negate the validity of the argument that the democratic order can be preserved in times of insecurity. The ability of states to achieve this lies in the contextualization of the rules of the political game. The legal flexibility of the democratic regime enables it to accommodate insecurity. In addition to taming insecurity, democracy offers, in some of its dimensions, opportunities for regulating insecurity.

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17   Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
18   https://acleddata.com/2022/10/26/introducing-the-nigeria-election-violence-tracker/
19   Experiences in this field were shared at a seminar organized by the Burkina Faso Electoral Commission in Ouagadougou in December 2022.
20   https://situationroomng.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/situationroom-vol-3-no-2.pdf
21   According to this reform, when elections cannot be held on a part of the territory due to force majeure or exceptional circumstances, the election is validated on the basis of the results obtained where the election could be held. See articles 148 paragraph 2 and 155 paragraph 2 of the Electoral Code.

The Regulatory Potential of Democracy

Democracy is in itself a mechanism for regulating security crises. It contributes to the construction of political responses to insecurity. Indeed, on the one hand, public debate channels government strategies on insecurity, and on the other hand, the electoral moment encourages programmatic thinking on ways out of the crisis.

The Pacifying Virtues of Public Debate

In its liberal dimension, democracy offers a way out of crises by guaranteeing political rights such as freedom of the press and expression. In this way, policies to combat insecurity are discussed in the public arena. This citizen watch helps to influence the quality of government responses to insecurity. These citizens' voices in the security debate are forcing governments to adjust or even change their strategies. The crisis latently reinforces the deliberative dimension of democracy (Habermas, 2023), as the authorities are obliged to publicly justify their political choices. Security alerts issued by journalists, civil society players and ordinary citizens lead the authorities to be more reactive. In response to public pressure, the Sahelian armies have developed a communications strategy aimed at making their actions in the field more transparent. The regular information bulletins published by the armies of Niger and Burkina Faso are a case in point. This argument can be extended to measures adopted to promote respect for human rights by armed forces in the battleground[22].

The public conference on security on March 21, 2023, organized by the Nigerian army at the Abdou-Moumouni University in Niamey, illustrates efforts to achieve transparency in security management. In Nigeria, since the start of the Boko Haram attacks, the authorities have been under pressure from citizens. As shown by the case of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign for the release of young girls abducted by Boko Haram in April 2014 (Bukarti, 2023; Olutokunbo et al., 2015), democratic space has made it possible to exert pressure on public security action. Finally, in its participatory dimension, democratic practice leads to the inclusion of civil society in the making of security policies. A process of de-monopolization of security has begun, with governments involving civil society in the search for solutions to insecurity. The case of the "security forums" organized in 2017 in Niger and Burkina Faso is a case in point (Saidou, 2020). This trend towards the co-production of security is in line with the paradigms of "good governance" and "security sector reform" (Saidou, 2019).

These concepts have influenced the reform of security policies in Mali as part of the implementation of the Algiers Agreements signed in 2015 between the state and Tuareg separatist groups (Boisvert, 2021; ARGA-Mali, 2017). The inclusion of extra-state actors, sometimes including "people from below", has the main effect of increasing the legitimacy of the resulting security policies. With the return of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, public debate has become increasingly restricted by the repression of critical currents in society. The war on terrorism has become a pretext for restricting individual and collective freedoms (Bocandé et al., 2023). In Burkina Faso, society has tended to polarize, with the emergence of hateful rhetoric against intellectuals described as "stateless" (Mbembé, 2023). The army's power of requisition is used by the regime to punish freedom of expression[23].Thus, the return of the military to power has drastically reduced the vitality of public debate on security. In democratic regimes, the crisis has led to an upsurge in programmatic thinking on security, while African elections are often portrayed as moments when nothing is at stake.

The Tacit Valorization of the Programmatic Role

Democracy withstands insecurity thanks to its electoral dimension. Literature on elections in Africa often emphasizes the clientelist dimension of voting and the lack of programmatic debate (Bleck & Van de Walle, 2018; Quantin, 2004).

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22 On February 16, 2023, Burkina Faso's parliament adopted a reform of the Code of Military Justice, creating a corps of provost marshals (gendarmes) whose mission is to prevent and punish offenses committed by elements of the armed forces in the battlefield. https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article119538

23 Among the citizens conscripted were trade unionists like Gabin Korbeogo, journalists like Issaka Lingani and political actors like Ablassé Ouédraogo. Several human rights organizations have protested against what they see as a targeted application of the decree on general mobilization and warning adopted on April 19, 2023 (MBDHP, 2023).

In this country, not only did the elections boost the parties' programmatic offer on security, but they also led to an alternation, unlike the presidential elections in Mali in 2018 and Burkina Faso in 2020[24]. Indeed, Goodluck Jonathan's defeat was seen as a sanction for his ineffective security policy (LeVan, 2019).

The changeover helped weaken the Boko Haram group, illustrating the stabilizing effect of elections in crisis contexts. Outside the Sahel region, the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) corroborates this argument. As Ali Diabacté Tadjoudine[25] has shown, it was through the 2006 elections that this country emerged from the "second Congo war". The 2013 and 2018 presidential elections in Mali were high-stakes contests due to the security context.

The programs of the main candidates, notably Soumaïla Cissé and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, focused on the return of security. This interest in programmatic thinking on security was also observed in Niger, starting with the 2016 presidential election at the end of which Mahamadou Issoufou was returned for a second term (Saidou, 2019, p. 12). The case of the 2020 presidential election in Burkina Faso corroborated this trend. For the first time in history, a party, in this case the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), drew up a two-hundred-page White Paper on defense. And, unusually, a divide between presidential candidates dominated election debates (Saidou & Bertrand, 2022). Candidates were divided on whether or not to negotiate with armed groups. According to International Crisis Group (ICG), with this election campaign[26], "a reflection is beginning on the advisability of dialogue with insurgents, including jihadists, whereas a logic of confrontation has prevailed until now, without success".

The electoral period was an opportunity for secret dialogue with the armed groups. Credible sources report that the Burkinabe authorities have negotiated a truce with the armed groups to facilitate the organization of the elections (Douce, 2021). While this dialogue is generally confidential, and its immediate aim is to facilitate the organization of elections, it cannot be ruled out that it will lead to more comprehensive negotiations likely to result in peace. Attempts at dialogue launched in 2022 by President Paul-Henri Damiba have yielded few results. Moreover, President Ibrahim Traoré, who succeeded him in September 2022, has not made dialogue his priority. In the Sahel, several experts are optimistic that such dialogue will produce results in terms of a return to peace (Soré & Nana, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2019).

Incidentally, studies have shown the need to go beyond the religious prism in explaining young people's involvement in violence (Pellerin, 2017; Institut d'études de sécurité, 2016). It is therefore realistic to think of these fighters returning to the fold of the state, as shown by the case of Niger's "Boko Haram repentees" (Abba & Dan Dano, 2019). These examples of democratic resilience do not obliterate the tumultuous relationship between democracy and insecurity.

A Tumultuous Cohabitation

Whether of low or high intensity, insecurity always has an impact on the democratic order. In the face of high-intensity insecurity, democracy tends to retreat, as it becomes impossible to organize credible elections and keep the army out of power. The result is a tumultuous cohabitation between democracy and insecurity. The breakdown of the democratic order results from the combined effects of electoral "fetishism" and the political manipulation of insecurity by the military.

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24   In this country, despite President Kaboré's very mixed record, he was re-elected in the first round with 57.74% of the vote, compared with 53.49% in 2015.
25   He was speaking at a conference organized by Burkina Faso's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) on December 7, 2022 in Ouagadougou.
26   https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-et-niger-des-elections-lepreuve-des-insurrections

Electoral "Fetishism" put to the Test by Insecurity

Insecurity weakens democracy by attacking one of its fundamental pillars: the election. This is one of the ingredients of pluralist democracy, despite its aristocratic dimension (Manin, 2012, pp. 171-205). Democratic instability is inevitable when the election is elevated to a sacred institution with no alternative, leading to elections of dubious credibility that reproduce rather than regulate the crisis.

Democracy Trapped in the Electoral Institution

Some minimalist authors (Schumpeter, 1972) have made elections the central criterion of democracy, even if they do not exhaust its meaning (Mayer, 2010; Reybrouck, 2014). While it has been established that the systematic organization of elections produces a dynamic of democratic consolidation (Lindberg, 2009), in a context of insecurity, their organization sometimes becomes difficult, if not impossible. In the absence of an alternative to elections, insecurity sets democracy back. Indeed, depending on the intensity of the conflict, the state may lose sovereignty over certain parts of its territory. In the case of the current transitional regimes in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali, the question is to determine the threshold at which elections can be organized in accordance with the rules laid down in the Constitution. Basically, the question is whether there is an electoral participation threshold to validate elections. Neither the constitutions nor the community law drawn up by the African Union and ECOWAS contain precise rules governing the organization of elections in such contexts.

Despite this legal vacuum, the discourse of international players remains unchanged: "elections at all costs". Constitutional engineering has developed in response to political crises, notably through political agreements and transitional regimes (Aïvo, 2012; Mandjem, 2009), but these models are designed to prepare for elections, not to replace them. However, when insecurity prevents elections from being held, consensual democracy appears as an alternative to appointing governors by means other than voting, following the example of the procedures used in certain transitional regimes (Saidou, 2021). In 2020, for example, to overcome security constraints, researcher Zacharia Tiemtoré proposed selecting deputies by lottery as an alternative to elections[27]. Considered the supreme democratic modality in political theory (Reybrouck, 2014), the drawing of lots is paradoxically absent from regional and domestic constitutional architecture. States at war thus appear to be facing a political impasse, as transitional regimes are ordered by ECOWAS to organize elections within strict deadlines (Abdourhamane, 2023). Yet there is nothing to suggest that the security situation is likely to improve, allowing for free and transparent elections in a peaceful context.

These states remain suspended from the decision-making bodies of organizations until they have restored democratic order through elections. These facts show that democracy in practice in the ECOWAS space is a prisoner of the election because, even in exceptional situations, there is no alternative to the election, which is not, however, the sole mechanism for selecting rulers (Manin, 2012). The moments of crisis experienced by the Sahel have demonstrated the capacity of societies to adapt. However, this crisis does not seem to open a window of opportunity for paradigmatic breakthroughs. The inability to move away from "electoral fetishism" produces counter-productive results, as in some cases elections in a context of insecurity reproduce the crisis rather than regulating it.

Elections Generate Conflict

Long before the security crisis, elections were often marred by irregularities in this region (Wantchekon, 2003; Bleck & Van de Walle, 2018). The weaknesses of electoral processes are linked to various factors such as the dubious reliability of electoral files, the lack of independence of electoral commissions and electoral judges, electoral abstentionism, electoral corruption, etc. (Kokoroko, 2009; Fall & Hounpké, 2010). Insecurity has accentuated these weaknesses, and the crisis context has led to elections that are sometimes botched and lack credibility. In 2020 in Burkina Faso, the revision

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27   https://burkina24.com/2020/07/18/presidentielle-elections-au-burkina-faso-les-propositions-du-dr-zacharia-tiemtore/

of the electoral law to allow validation of the ballot even in cases of low voter turnout[28] caused controversy (S. M. Ouédraogo & D. Ouédraogo, 2020). Nevertheless, the elections were held without major incident, albeit against a backdrop of political tension. By contrast, the Nigerian presidential elections of 2015 and 2019 were not free of incidents. The Boko Haram group launched several attacks in the country's northeastern federated states, leading some voters to abstain (Bukarti, 2023, pp. 10-11). Idam and Emeh (2022, pp. 41-42) have shown that in Nigeria, Boko Haram attacks tend to increase during election periods.

Between 2019 and 2022, 134 attacks were recorded against electoral commission facilities and personnel[29]. The reduction in security incidents during the 2023 presidential election in this country illustrates a trivialization of elections in times of crisis (Dongmo & Gazibo, 2023).

In the case of Mali, serious incidents had disrupted the election campaign for the legislative elections, including the kidnapping of opponent Soumaïla Cissé on March 25, 2020 by armed groups[30]. Because of the fragile security situation, some candidates preferred not to campaign in the field, or abandoned the central and northern regions[31]. The disputes that resulted from this election contributed to accentuating the socio-political crisis that led to the coup d'état of August 2020. In 2012, the coup that put an end to the presidency of Amadou Toumani Touré was also linked to the security chaos that made it impossible to organize elections. Similarly, in Niger, the 2020 and 2021 general elections were marred by security incidents. Incidentally, insecurity in Niger and Burkina Faso explains why ECOWAS has accepted longer-than-usual timetables for transitional regimes in 2022[32]. These regimes justify their political agenda by the practical difficulties of organizing elections (S. M. Ouédraogo & D. Ouédraogo, 2021).

For states benefiting from international aid, it is difficult to embark on a path other than that of elections, in order to establish legitimate, internationally-recognized institutions. These states are thus prisoners of an "electoral fetishism", due to their financial dependence on their international partners and their community commitments. Clearly, at a certain level of intensity, insecurity makes it more difficult to keep to the electoral timetable, thereby eroding the legitimacy of the authorities; and in the absence of an alternative to elections, democracy has difficulty resisting insecurity. Here, elections are far from playing a pacifying role in social relations (Garigou, 1992). Rather, they fuel conflicts and accentuate political crises, which puts into perspective the "electoral path to democratization" thesis, according to which the routinization of elections contributes to democratic consolidation (Van de Walle, 2009). In some cases, the delicate issue of the political neutrality of armies fuels crises through the remilitarization of the political system.

The Inevitable Return of Coups

The coups in Mali (2012, 2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023) reveal the problematic relationship between insecurity and democratic order. These coups d'état in times of security crisis are the expression both of an awry depoliticization of armies and of the tensions running through the security apparatus.

The revenge of the Military: Political Exclusion Gone Wrong

The coups in the Sahel are the expression of a political exclusion that has been bitterly resented by the military, who pride themselves on their historical legitimacy in the formation of states. In West Africa, the political neutrality of armies is one of the principles of constitutional convergence

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28   According to this amendment, if it is impossible to hold elections in certain parts of the territory, they can be validated on the basis of the results obtained in the parts not affected by the "force majeure" or "exceptional circumstance". See article 148 of the Electoral Code

29   https://www.csis.org/analysis/identity-insecurity-and-institutions-2023-nigerian-elections

30   See an article by Jeune Afrique.https://www.jeuneafrique.com/916557/politique/mali-lenlevement-de-soumaila-cisse-le-chef-de-file-de-lopposition-est-confirme-par-le-gouvernement/

31   https://sahelien.com/legislatives-au-mali-la-campagne-electorale-sur-fond-dincertitude-et-dinsecurite-au-centre-du-pays/

32   In Burkina Faso, for example, the duration of the transition has been set at twenty-four months from July 1, 2022, whereas the previous transition (2015) lasted twelve months.

enshrined in the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance[33]. Yet insecurity undermines the legitimacy of civilian authorities. The limits of their responses to regulate the crisis and control corruption deprive them of any credibility to govern[34] (Institut Free Afrik, 2018, p. 38). This crisis of the political elites ends up affecting the very legitimacy of democracy, as shown by the Afrobarometer survey carried out in 2022 in Burkina Faso[35]. As Olivier De Sardan (2023, p. 21) argues, "democracy having become illegitimate, the seizure of power by high-ranking officials paradoxically becomes legitimate in the eyes of a significant proportion of the population". Loada (2023) qualifies this argument by focusing on the tension between democratic demand and supply. He shows that while democracy remains the preferred regime of citizens, the supply of democracy remains unsatisfactory. Faced with this dissatisfaction, the army becomes a credible, even inevitable alternative, to the point where intellectuals call for a legal framework for military transitions (Topanou, 2022). While some actors call for a coup d'état[36], others propose strengthening the army's powers while preserving the Constitution[37].

In some countries, such as Burkina Faso under the first mandate of the Kaboré regime, the military were excluded from ministerial posts. Yet the army does not accept its exclusion from state management, and has always ascribed a political mission to itself (Olivier de Sardan, 2023, p. 36; Sampana, 2015, p. 48). The expression "military politicians" used by Tidjani Alou (2008) in the case of Niger reflects this politicization of armies. In a context of insecurity, failing to summon the army to power, voters elect retired military personnel. This was the case in Nigeria, where Buhari's victory in 2015 was partly linked to his profile as a former military officer and his reputation as a man of iron fists. His choice was thus an indirect form of inclusion of the military in the management of the state.

The military have a number of grievances against civilian leaders, whom they accuse of interfering in the operational management of the war and of being incompetent in security matters[38].

We can thus observe that, in contexts of insecurity, the military draw the justifications for their return to power from the management of the war by civilian leaders. Insecurity offers them a new resource in their strategy to reposition themselves in the political system.

This is why, even in Niger, where civilian rulers had managed to contain insecurity for a decade[39]. (Olivier de Sardan, 2023, p. 185), General Abdouramane Tiani invoked security reasons to justify the removal of President Bazoum[40]. This is the first time in Niger's history that a coup d'état has taken place without a major political crisis. Unlike in Mali and Burkina Faso, where the military in power are autonomous from political parties and even seek to replace them, in Niger there are close links between military and civilian elites[41]. In these countries in transition, the military are adopting a sovereignty-oriented, anti-establishment diplomacy to legitimize themselves[42]. This shift is reflected in the abandonment of pro-Western diplomacy and a rapprochement with Russia (Kounouho, 2023). On the whole, their political agenda and the sidelining of political parties suggest new political ventures with a vocation to take root, rather than transitional regimes[43].

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33   Article 1 (a) of the Protocol states: "The army shall be apolitical and subject to the duly established political authority; any serving member of the army shall not be eligible for elective political office."

34   https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-et-niger-des-elections-lepreuve-des-insurrections

35   It showed that 66% of citizens were in favor of the army intervening when civilian leaders proved to be failing. www.afrobarometer.org

36   Such is the case of Yéli Monique Kam, party president. https://infowakat.net/gouvernance-politique-monique-kam-appel-larmee-a-prendre-ses-responsabilites/

37   See, for example, the declaration of the Union pour la renaissance/Mouvement patriotique sankariste (UNIR-MPS) party of November 16, 2021. https://faso-actu.info/situation-securitaire-lunir-mps-fait-des-propositions/

38   This argument was developed by a senior officer of the Burkina Faso army on December 7, 2022 at a seminar organized by the Electoral Commission in Ouagadougou.

39   Niger ranks 10th in the 2022 *Global Terrorism Index* of countries hit by terrorism, while Mali and Burkina Faso are 2nd and 4th respectively (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023).

40   General Tiani, for example, criticized President Bazoum for releasing terrorists without the knowledge of the judiciary, and for subcontracting the country's security to France. https://www.voaafrique.com/a/le-chef-de-la-junte-nigérienne-promet-une-transition-de-trois-ans-et-met-en-garde-contre-une-agression-/7232209.html

41   The hypothesis that General Tiani acted with the intelligence or on the orders of former president Mahamadou Issoufou seems credible, given the facts observed since the coup.

42   The three leaders have left the G5 Sahel, which they accuse of being an instrument of France, and created the Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel, (AES)) in September 2023 as a collective defense framework.

43   By way of illustration, the Burkinabe authorities have not yet drawn up a transition exit agenda, even though the agreement signed with Ecowas in 2022 provides for the end of the transition in July 2024.

These new coups seem to reflect the military's desire to reposition itself in the political arena. They use the security crisis as a pretext to achieve this objective. Clearly, what is at stake is not only national security, but also the competition for control of the state apparatus between civilian and military elites. Insecurity also affects the democratic order through the tensions it accentuates in the security system.

Crises Intrinsic to the Security Apparatus

The fight against terrorism has rekindled rivalries between players in the security apparatus. In response to the crisis, governments have increased the firepower of their armies and police forces. Paradoxically, this extension of the security apparatus has exacerbated tensions between the various security forces. Coup d'états have confirmed the intensity of rivalries between Special Forces and other army units (Oulon, 2023).

In Burkina Faso (2022) and Mali (2020), the Special Forces played a decisive role in the coups[44]. Colonel Assimi Goïta, for example, was commander of the autonomous Special Forces battalion. These forces were set up to face up to the terrorist challenge, and equipped with heavy resources. What's more, in most of these countries there has been a "police war" for years, pitting the police against the gendarmerie, whose missions are tending to merge. At the start of the security crisis in Burkina Faso, police officers had expressed frustration at the authorities' reluctance to provide them with heavy weaponry while they were deployed in the theater of war (Palenfo, 2017). Since October 2022, their plea has been taken on board by Captain Traoré's regime, which has reinforced their military equipment. However, tensions between the army and the gendarmerie have increased. In October 2023, they led to the dismissal of the Chief of Staff of the Gendarmerie, Lieutenant-Colonel Evrard Somda, amid rumors of a coup d'état and Captain Traoré's desire to disband the unit[45]. These tensions are undermining cohesion within the security apparatus and the democratic order.

Long before the creation of the Special Forces, most Sahelian states have always had an imbalance in armament and treatment in favor of the units responsible for presidential security. This was the case in Burkina Faso with the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP) under the Compaoré regime (Loada, 2020). The RSP staged a coup d'état against the transitional government in September 2015, before being disarmed and disbanded (Saidou, 2020). The same was true in Mali, where the supremacy of the presidential guard has fuelled the crisis since 2012, when the "Red Berets", the elite unit that provided presidential security under President Amadou Toumani Touré, were pushed out of strategic positions by the "Green Berets" led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo (Soumano, 2020, pp. 98-99). In Niger, it was thanks to the firepower of the presidential security force he led that General Tiani was able to overthrow President Bazoum in July 2023 and establish himself as president of the transition.

In other words, the expansion of the security apparatus in wartime has weakened the democratic order in two ways. Firstly, by endowing Special Forces with greater privileges and resources, the fight against insecurity has exacerbated internal conflicts within the security forces. Seizing power by force was the solution found to resolve these tensions, as demonstrated by Captain Ibrahim Traoré's coup d'état in September 2022.

One of the grievances against Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Henri Damiba was his decision to allocate plots of land to his men[46], thus creating unequal treatment between soldiers.

The coup d'état thus seems to have become a means of regulating conflicts within the security apparatus, making democracy a collateral victim. Nigeria, which has been facing insecurity for years, has been able to contain these tensions so that they do not threaten the democratic order.

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44   In Guinea, Lieutenant-Colonel Doumbouya, who overthrew President Alpha Condé in 2021, was head of the Special Forces.
45   François Zoungrana, commander of the gendarmerie's special intervention unit, even dared to violate his duty of reserve to publicly express his institution's grievances. He protests against the marginalization of the gendarmerie in favor of the army. Cf. *L'Évènement* No. 503, October 10, 2023.
46   In an interview with Radio France Internationale (RFI), former president Damiba acknowledged the allocation of the plots but said the decision had been taken by his predecessor Roch Kaboré. https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/le-débat-africain/20230224-entretien-avec-paul-henri-sandaogo-damiba-ancien-président-de-la-transition-burkinabè

Secondly, the extension of the security apparatus has reduced the cost of coups by creating an imbalance in military capacity in favor of the Special Forces. In Mali in 2020, for example, no other military force was a match for the firepower of Colonel Goïta's Special Forces. Seizing power by force had become less costly militarily, especially in a country like Burkina Faso, where since the disbanding of the RSP in 2015, the presidential guard has lost its position as a hegemonic force. As Oswald Padonou (2021, p. 3) points out, for Special Forces, "the initiative of a coup d'état presents a priori less risk and therefore more chance of success". For this author, if these forces appear to be a threat to democracy, in the face of insecurity, they nonetheless remain an "indispensable bulwark". In the case of Nigeria, the forces engaged in the war against the Boko Haram group have certainly benefited from heavy equipment, but this has not threatened the democratic order. This Nigerian exception can be explained not only by the geographical distance between the theater of war and the capital, but also by the consensus among civil and military elites against coups.

Conclusion

An analysis of the links between democracy and insecurity reveals a highly volatile situation, with on the one hand regimes coping with insecurity, and on the other hand regimes on the other succumbing to it. Democracy survives insecurity through its various instruments, which make it a diverse political system and explain its capacity to adapt to crises. Its liberal side has a stabilizing effect since it enables citizens to keep a watchful eye on insecurity. Furthermore, democracy is legally equipped to regulate exceptional situations through instruments such as the state of emergency. From this stems its ability to tame insecurity when these levers are effectively mobilized. The cumulative effects of its electoral, deliberative and participatory aspects also ensures a stabilizing dynamic. Indeed, elections boost citizen debate and political parties' programmatic thinking on security. The adaptability of democracy depends on its trivialization as the sole mode of political regulation, following the meaning given to it by Przeworski (1991).

However, in the face of intense insecurity, democracies under construction are finding it difficult to resist. Mali and Burkina Faso, the first Sahelian states to experience coups since the advent of terrorism, are the most affected by insecurity (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2023). The vulnerability of democracy in times of crisis stems from the lack of contextualization in its implementation. This is the case when states deny themselves any alternative to elections, even when these are impossible to organize according to international standards. Thus, the inability of states to free themselves from "electoral fetishism" sometimes leads to botched elections, generating thus conflicts. The crisis in the Sahel reveals the need to move beyond the democratic model that makes elections sacred. Moreover, the management of the army remains an essential variable for the stability of the democratic order in times of crisis. The crisis context opens up windows of opportunity for the return of militarist ideology. The management of insecurity also accentuates crises in the security apparatus. This dual effect of insecurity increases the likelihood of coups in a context marked by the crisis of political elites and the weakening of ECOWAS, guardian of the regional democratic order.

The article reinforces the argument that there is no absolute incompatibility between democracy and insecurity. If cohabitation between the two is possible, it is no less tumultuous. Security challenges are opening a new chapter in the democratic trajectory of Sahelian states. This historic turning point is marked by ambivalence: While the ability of some states, such as Nigeria, to tame insecurity reflects the entrenchment of democracy, the remilitarization of the political field in other cases draws attention to its fragility. The emergence of new authoritarian domination enterprises in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso is a source of uncertainty for post-transition processes (Mbembé, 2023). The determination of these regimes to reconfigure political orders on a domestic and regional scale puts the thesis of the irreversibility of democratization in Africa into perspective. The future of democratization processes in this region, which began three decades ago with a euphoria that, with hindsight, perhaps borders on naivety, will undoubtedly depend on their ability to take root over time.

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