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Managing Mali's Transitional Agreement through the Politics of Insecurity

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Abstract

This paper examines how insecurity affects transitional governance in Mali following the military coups of 2020 and 2021, asking whether it merely constrains democratisation or actively shapes the transition's political outcomes. Drawing on securitisation theory and frameworks for negotiating in fragile states, it develops the concept of the politics of insecurity to explain how security narratives are strategically deployed by Malian transitional leaders, armed groups, and international actors. The paper engages qualitative political analysis of transitional arrangements, institutional reforms, and security discourses within Mali's post-coup context. The findings demonstrate that persistent jihadist violence, territorial fragmentation, and intercommunal conflict have been instrumentalised to justify delayed elections, expand executive and military authority, and restructure civil-military relations, which affect the success of the transitional agreement. Armed groups such as jihadists and separatists have similarly leveraged instability to strengthen their negotiating positions, while international actors' prioritisation of counterterrorism has often reinforced securitised governance. The paper contributes to scholarship and policy frameworks on post-coup governance and fragile-state transitions by demonstrating that insecurity is not only a backdrop to political transition but also a central political resource that shapes institutional design and power consolidation in Mali and beyond.

Keywords: Insecurity, Transitional agreement, Military coups, Jihadists, Securitisation, Counterterrorism.

Introduction

The paper situates Mali within the broader history of military coups and transitional governance in West Africa, underscoring that the country has experienced five coups since independence and is part of a wider “coup wave” in Sahelian countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger (Sandor & Berlingozzi, 2025). It assesses how insecurity functions as a political resource, strategically used by elites, the military junta, armed groups, and international actors, to shape transitional governance after the 18 August 2020 coup. Mass mobilisation led by religious leaders and the M5-RFP coalition significantly contributed to the removal of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, after which the military promised a transition to civilian rule while simultaneously consolidating power through alliances and by mobilising anti-colonial, jihadist, and nationalist narratives (Kante, 2022; Thuston, 2023). Despite these struggles, Mali’s transitional process remains fragile due to democratic backsliding, ongoing jihadist violence, and uncertainty over whether a genuine return to civilian rule will occur.

Background and Context

Mali has experienced a deep and multifaceted crisis since 2012, when a rebellion in the north led by Tuareg separatists and Islamist armed jihadist groups swiftly outpaced the central government’s capacity to respond, exposing long-standing governance weaknesses and regional marginalisation. The breakdown of state authority in vast swaths of territory unlocked the door for extremist groups, many associated with al-Qaeda and later the Islamic State, to seize towns and impose their own order, turning what began as a local rebellion into part of a broader Sahel insurgency (Bartos & Chin, 2026). Struggles to contain the northern rebellion collapsed into political unrest, culminating in the 2012 coup d’état that overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré, leaving Mali fragmented. Scholars contend that attempts at decentralisation aimed at building peace were repeatedly undermined as jihadist factions entrenched themselves and expanded southward, exploiting local grievances, weak governance, and ungoverned space (Ober, 2022). Following France's involvement to flush out the jihadists, both the regional and international communities supported Mali, but such external engagement complicates post-conflict recovery among citizens.

The situation in Mali deteriorated further with two military coups in 2020 and 2021, when security failures to address extremism and widespread public discontent prompted the military to topple the civilian government and eventually consolidate power under Colonel Assimi Goïta. Goïta's coups stalled democratic transition processes and led to international sanctions, the withdrawal of major partners such as France, and increased dependence on new external partners, including Russia and China (Lendzoumbou, 2025). Amid this military intervention, jihadist insurgencies have also continued to spread across central and northern Mali, carrying out deadly attacks on civilians, state forces, and United Nations (UN) peacekeepers, and frequently targeting the capital with tactics like fuel blockades that disrupt everyday life. Compounding the conflict are recurring intercommunal conflicts over land, resources, and identity—violence that has turned local disputes into cycles of revenge, mistrust among the local population, and family displacement (Sandor, 2017). Armed militias, traffickers, and non-state actors have stepped into governance vacuums, further eroding state legitimacy and complicating reconciliation efforts (DeAngelo, 2025). In response to political rupture, the Malian transitional agreements were formulated within parameters intended to restore constitutional order, oversee institutional reform, and prepare for elections. However, the transitional process unfolded amid ongoing violence and fragmented sovereignty, creating structural tensions between democratisation and security stabilisation.

The paper assesses how analytical perspectives help explain the formation and instrumentalisation of transitional agreements in Mali, specifically in connection with the junta's efforts to remain in power. Rather than simply asking whether Mali's transition failed, the paper asks failure for whom: if the Goïta leadership never intended to implement a genuine democratic transition, the prolonged transition may represent not only a failure but a deliberate strategy to consolidate military rule through the politics of insecurity while formally maintaining the appearance of democratic governance.

The first section presents the theoretical foundation for evaluating whether Mali's transitional agreement serves as a pathway back to democratic stability or instead disrupts expectations of achieving democracy within the promised two-year period. It emphasises how the military reframes insecurity—from a failure of governance to an embedded aspect of political contestation and power consolidation. The second section analyses how the junta has managed the transitional agreement amid ongoing jihadist conflict. It demonstrates that implementation has not occurred in a neutral administrative environment but within a highly securitised and politically contested space. The section further shows the roles of domestic actors and relationships with international and regional

organisations, and how these interactions have influenced the trajectory of the transition. It also discusses repeated electoral postponements, underscoring how these delays create uncertainty about Mali's prospects for returning to democratic rule. The third section discusses Malian public attitudes toward the transitional government. It evaluates how citizens have engaged with and responded to transitional authority, and how shifting levels of popular support over more than three years have shaped the transitional process. The final section concludes with reflections and policy recommendations for scholars and decision-makers. Overall, the paper situates Mali's transitional agreement within a broader context of repeated military coups and democratic fragility, focusing on how political actors navigate, shape, and instrumentalise insecurity during the transition period.

Analytical Perspectives: Managing the Transitional Agreement

This paper applies the politics of insecurity framework to examine the management of Mali's transitional agreement amid recurring political crises and violent armed conflict. Embedded in critical security studies, the framework views insecurity not merely as a condition to be resolved, but as a political resource constructed and instrumentalised by the Malian state and non-state actors to consolidate authority, justify extraordinary measures, and manage dissent.

The theoretical framework highlights three main dimensions: securitisation, legitimacy production, and institutional restructuring, which also explain the case of Mali. The first approach is the securitisation theory associated with scholars such as the Copenhagen School, which explains how political actors frame terrorism and territorial fragmentation as existential threats, legitimising exceptional governance measures such as prolonged transitions and restrictions on opposition (Salter, 2011; Floyd, 2026). This mechanism often results in the postponement of elections, constitutional revisions, and the reconfiguration of civil-military relations. Other scholars, such as Charles Tilly (2008), help strengthen securitisation theory as an analytical framework for the Malian case by structuring how political actions are understood. In this perspective, failed international interventions in Mali can be seen as a political resource that the transitional junta mobilises through repertoires such as public speeches and communication strategies.

The second explanation is that treating insecurity as a function that becomes a source of political legitimacy, as most authoritarian leaders portray themselves as defenders of sovereignty against internal and external threats (Karyotis et al., 2025). A typical example of this is the actions of Malian

transitional authorities as they seek to distance themselves from traditional security partners, emphasising the need to reclaim autonomy in response to the ineffectiveness of French foreign intervention. This change not only frames insecurity as a significant narrative but also reinforces nationalist sentiments, thereby enhancing the regime's longevity. The third mechanism deals with institutional restructuring. Some scholars argue that the management of transitional agreements in contexts of insecurity influences institutions, with transitional authorities selectively implementing provisions of the peace agreement, prioritising regime stability over comprehensive reconciliation (Balzacq, 2005; Karyotis, 2025).

The above explanations also resonate with the concepts of resources and repertoires—or with Hagmann and Péclard's (2010) negotiating statehood framework, which enhances this paper's analysis by clarifying how material resources and symbolic repertoires shape the “politics of insecurity” in Mali's transitional governance. Contemporary scholarship further emphasises that the political strategies and narratives used by Mali's current junta are not entirely novel but draw on longer-standing political repertoires. Cold-Ravnkilde and Sylla (2024), Stambøl et al. (2025), and Boas and Haavik (2025) demonstrate that the junta's use of anti-colonial rhetoric, securitisation narratives, and claims to national sovereignty mirrors the adaptation of historically entrenched political practices rather than the creation of new ones. These studies highlight how existing political actors reinterpret and redeploy familiar collections in response to current crises. For example, Stambøl et al. (2025) trace the persistence of anti-colonial imaginaries in Malian political discourse, connecting present narratives to earlier events in the country's political history, including the era of Modibo Keita. Supplementing this perspective, Schulz's *Rifle, Pen, and Prayer Beads* (2023), along with Diallo and Schulz (2023), explains how political authority and legitimacy in Mali have long been constructed through the interactions among military, religious, and intellectual actors. Overall, these works underline that the present-day politics of insecurity in Mali are best understood not as the invention of entirely new political practices, but as the rearticulation and strategic redeployment of historically rooted repertoires.

In Mali, insecurity has shaped political transitions following the 2012 crisis and the 2020–2021 coups. For example, rather than implementing the Algiers accord as a peacebuilding blueprint, the Malian transitional authorities selectively operationalise its provisions in line with shifting power calculations. The Algiers Accord aimed to address northern rebellions, decentralisation, and the incorporation of armed groups through a peace-and-reconciliation agreement, and it was designed to resolve the conflict (United Nations Security Council, 2015). However, its selective implementation

reflects how insecurity enables the transitional ruling elites to prioritise regime stability over inclusive governance, institutional reform, and prospects for democratic consolidation within a narrative of looming security threats. Democratic transitions in Mali and across West Africa since the 1990s have appeared inconsistent and uneven. Though military leaders often seize power promising reform and responsiveness to citizens' grievances, their initial commitment to change typically weakens as they confront the realities and pressures of governing. This resonates with some scholarly perspectives discussed above, which hold that most military actors in Africa, including Mali initially, have a strong ambition to reform and address citizens' concerns that previous regimes neglected, but this mission tends to diminish as they navigate the complexities of power (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022; Allen, 2019).

Instrumentalising Public Opinion: Military Consolidation of Authority

Security threats were invoked to legitimise the extension of military influence over political decision-making, including delays to electoral timelines and restrictions on civilian oversight. Since coming to power, the Malian military junta has used various strategies to shape and control public opinion, positioning itself as the rightful guardian of national security while suppressing dissent (König, 2024). By leveraging state media, organising demonstrations, and emphasising specific achievements, the regime seeks to shape a narrative of necessity and support (Haidara, 2024). These campaigns reflect a trend of manipulating public sentiment to legitimise authority, consolidate power, and silence opposition.

Protests led by the M5-RFP movement against President Keita, driven by insecurity, institutional collapse, and declining public trust, resulted in the rise of Assimi Goïta's transitional military government (Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023). Some parts of the population in Mali have viewed the recent military takeover and dominance as a return to Mali's sovereignty and as a tangible embodiment of "Malian Samake" to free Mali from external colonial dictation. Malian Samake embodies Malian heritage, representing strength, prosperity, and leadership. It captures the profound symbolism of the elephant and the legacy of the ancient empire. According to Haidara (2024), many Malians initially welcomed the junta, viewing it as a restoration of national sovereignty and freedom from external influence, even declaring January 14 as a National Day of Regained Sovereignty. This explanation further illuminates Wing's (2023) claim that the junta's early popularity stemmed from

public discontent with Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's government, declining trust in political elites, and frustration over the failure of democracy and foreign interventions to ensure security and stability.

The regime has leveraged public opinion to boost its popularity since executing a second coup. During the first coup, which deposed President Keita in August 2020, ECOWAS, comprising fifteen West African member countries, including Mali, stipulated that the Malian transition must exclude junta members and be led by civilians. In response to this demand, Bah N'Daw, a retired military officer, was selected as the President of the transition, with politician Moctar Ouane as Prime Minister (Ricard, 2022). However, on 24 May 2021, Goïta overthrew N'Daw and appointed himself as the President of the transitional government. This move reflects the logic that would allow the junta to exercise unrestricted power and control over the government bureaucracy. The junta then quickly focused on France, which became its main target, levelling numerous accusations against the former colonial master for interfering with the country's sovereignty (RFI, 2022). This predictably led to the instrumentalisation of the Malian citizens' grievances against France, coupled with the hypothetical failure of international interventions to permanently eliminate violent extremism, which equipped the junta with considerable popular support. Concern over this failure was attributed to France, given its prolonged military operations in Mali since 2012. Notable among these defence mechanisms were Barkhane, Takuba, and MINUSMA. As a result, ECOWAS was unable to assert itself against the Malian junta due to strong popular support, as evidenced by street protests on several occasions in 2020 and beyond (Maillard, 2021). These events further generate anti-French sentiment—and broader anti-colonial imaginaries—that serve as a highly useful resource for legitimising the junta's claim to power, aligning well with the politics of insecurity framework.

The putschists vigorously campaigned to deter international and regional powers from meddling in Mali's internal affairs. According to France 24, the military transitional government in October 2020 filed a formal complaint with the United Nations Security Council against France for “violating Malian airspace and delivering weapons to Islamist fighters” (France 24, 2022). On the other hand, the Security Council did not accept the junta's request to present evidence of spying and subversion carried out by France, which was perceived by the majority of Malians as international collaboration in favour of France. The same allegation was made against MINUSMA, which, as mentioned earlier, led to the abrupt termination of the military operations of Barkhane, Takuba, and MINUSMA at the junta's request. The military junta did not always oppose France during the early months of the transition, as it was a much-appreciated partner of France and vice versa. For example, during the N'Djamena summit in February 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron noted that the current

military transitional government had performed extremely well within its first six months compared to the previous regime of the democratically elected President Keita, which had lasted seven years (Haidara, 2024). Nonetheless, events in Mali started to change when MINUSMA and other civil organisations accused the French Barkhane military command of killing civilians (mistaken for jihadists) in the central regional town of Bounti (Ammari & Lyammouri, 2025). Although the Malian Defence Minister Sadio Camara issued a statement supporting the French version of events, he later pursued a dramatic turn against the French establishment and was also the main architect of Russia's return to Mali.

The above explanations vividly illustrate the Malian transitional government's exploitation of anti-French sentiment among the population and reflect the inconsistency of France's position in Mali, which was based on the interests it could derive from this partnership (Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023). This reproach was used against French power because the French firmly opposed the junta's unconstitutional seizure of power in Mali and prolonged stay in power. However, a segment of the Malian people seems convinced that the military is best positioned to lead national policy and reconciliation, which are now structured around security-related issues. People question the country's decades-long relationship with France and ask for a return to Russia as a credible and trustworthy partner. As Elischer (2022) points out, the relations between Mali and Russia have a long history of cooperation, rooted in the economy, agriculture, education, and defence. Therefore, the Malian transitional government uses public opinion about the French as a proxy to delay the transition to democracy and entrench its unfettered authority in the country. This suggests that there are limitations to the success of Malian transitional agreements, as it does not consider the agency of a quick transition to civilian rule that goes beyond two years.

Mali's Democratic Transition: Progress and Paradox

The democratic transition in Mali from the 1990s to the 2020s presents a paradox: aspirations for decentralisation and genuine governance, set against a backdrop of persistent instability and conflict. Following the 1991 military coup, Amadou Toumani Touré led a transitional government (1991–1992) that organised democratic elections, bringing Alpha Oumar Konaré to power (1992–2002), during which decentralisation reforms were institutionalised. This sequence links military transition to democratic consolidation and the implementation of governance reforms in Mali. The post-1990 efforts to democratise aimed to address historical grievances, particularly those of the Tuareg

population, through decentralisation (Ober, 2025). Moreover, Mali's democratisation and decentralisation reforms in the 1990s, as discussed by Ober (2025) and earlier scholars such as Jennifer Seely (2001), Samba Kassibo (1997, 2006), and Moussa Coulibaly (2010), targeted to address longstanding tensions between the Tuareg regions and Bamako by promoting greater local governance and political inclusion. However, these responses often fell short in practice, leaving underlying grievances in the Tuareg–state relationship largely unresolved.

The 1991 military coup in Mali, while paradoxical in its intent to democratise, opened up opportunities for institutional reform and democratic pathways that had been blocked by President Moussa Traoré's regime (Soumano, 2020). However, the military leaders who emerged under the leadership of Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) took a different approach to transitional arrangements than many military junta leaders in Mali and across Africa, who often refused to relinquish power to civilian governments (Villalón, 2023). Touré and his junta collaborated closely with democratically elected civilians during a year-long military-civilian transitional process. Together, they produced a new Constitution and facilitated multiparty elections. The junta committed to transitioning to democracy within a year, which included organising a new legislature and presidential elections (Bleck, 2011). Notably, the junta members and their elite forces were barred from standing as presidential candidates in the 1991 election. This transition involved engaging in dialogue with various political actors and civil society in Mali. The new Constitution was drafted and adopted with significant input from civil society organisations and political parties in the country. The provision that barred junta leaders from participating as election candidates helped ensure the integrity of the electoral process.

The successive governments under Presidents Alpha Oumar Touré and Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta implemented this strategy as a superficial measure rather than enacting meaningful reforms. As a result, the central authority's decision to delegate security responsibilities to local armed groups undermined state legitimacy and intensified regional tensions (Ober, 2026). Moreover, the political landscape following the 2020 coup revealed enduring public discontent with the pre-coup political elite. The new military junta has exploited this resentment to consolidate power, even amid ongoing international calls for a return to democratic governance (Elischer, 2022). The shortcomings of Mali's leadership over the previous three decades created a fragile foundation that allowed the military to be viewed as an agent of change. Thus, while the goal of democratisation was to foster stability and development, it ultimately contributed significantly to Mali's ongoing crises.

Comparison Between ATT and Goïta: Differing Historical Contexts

The comparison between ATT and Goïta emphasises how Mali's transitional governance reflects shifting historical contexts: ATT's coup occurred in the aftermath of two postcolonial authoritarian regimes and at the end of the Cold War, when pro-democracy movements were gaining momentum across the region. By contrast, Goïta seized power after nearly three decades of formal democracy in Mali, which many citizens perceived as having delivered little beyond regular elections with low turnout and limited improvements in governance. In effect, the ATT's regime works toward a political process that creates the conditions for a successful democratisation agenda and a peaceful transfer of power in the country. The ATT regime released all political detainees, and inter-ministerial committees were established within respective institutions that would support a democratic transitional process for good governance and equitable distribution of justice for all Malians (Wing, 2015). The setup committees submitted a report on public consultative conferences that included civil society groups, politicians, traditional religious actors, community members, and constitutional lawyers in a very transparent manner (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997; Bratton, 1994). Such reports of the committees mainly focused on constructive debates among more than one thousand Malian citizen participants representing NGOs, civil society organisations (CSO), political parties, media, and other local members.

The committee member's works created a significant milestone in the transitional agreement because it was the first structured and more formidable independent, organised group in the history of Mali due to the relatively free exchange of ideas among different components of the political and social spectrum in the country without political interference. The above de-facto national conference of Malians adopted a formal agreement endorsed and signed by all participants—reflecting consensus over significant national matters such as constitutional reform, electoral timetable, the establishment of the independent electoral commission, judicial system reform, and local government reforms (Pringle, 2006). The members of the committees were appointed through national consensus and were composed of key national figures with high moral standings. Thus, in 1990, the Malian transitional agreement agenda proceeded in a very conducive environment and succeeded in a manner that conditioned the military-led government of ATT to respect and implement the initial one-year planned transitional timeline.

The military transitional government in 1990 further accepted the recommendation of a law that would create a formal body representing democratic opposition, which must be funded by the Malian state and ratified by the parliamentary members. The military hunters appeared to have positively responded to the demands of most of the Malian citizens to expand rights despite where they originate from (e.g., either the opposition or incumbent government). These approaches resulted in the unprecedented creation and improvement of the novel institutions' functions, including The Malian National Human Rights Commission, the supervisory body of CSOs, and the Malian press and trade unions. During this period, no known clampdown on dissent was recorded because the national and international media were free to operate without the fear of censorship—a pragmatic policy approach of the junta tends to have an enduring legacy in the country (Heemann, 2018). The 1990 junta took policy measures against corruption and abuse of power by civil servants to promote and strengthen the state's governing capacity. This passion for institutional reforms and for empowering the people accounts for the state's capacity to uphold transparency, accountability, and integrity in managing the country's extractive industry in the north and other financial institutions.

In contrast to the current Malian military transitional government, the 1991-1992 transitional government strictly followed the transitional agreement, transferring power to the civilian government within one year of the end of the transitional period. A national referendum was held, and a more liberal Constitution was adopted, including a ten-year presidential term limit. However, presidential elections were held every five years. For example, Table 1.1 provides evidence of the previous 1992 elections in Mali. This further indicates attempts by the transitional authority to strengthen the democratization process in the country, as compared with the current Goïta's transitional government's efforts to delay all means of the electoral process and move away from the promise of transferring power to a civilian government within two years.

Table 1.1: Malian Elections Under Military Transitional Government in 1991

Dates	Types of elections	Turnover (%)
January 12	Referendum	43.5
January 19	Municipal	32.1
February 23	First round of legislatives	22.3
March 8	Second round legislatives	20.5
April 12	First round presidential	23.6
April 26	Second round presidential	20.9

Table 1.1: Source from the Malian Ministry of Interior

A proportional electoral representation mechanism was adopted in the country for the 1991 legislative elections and subsequent elections, leading to the creation of many smaller political parties. However, the transitional military junta ensured that parties with Islamist and tribal orientations were excluded because the Malian secular Constitution prohibits parties formed and participating during the legislative and municipal election based on ethnicity and religious and political roots (Ba & Bøås, 2013). However, many Islamic organisations in the country gained popularity because of free speech adopted during the ATT tenure. Also, they maintained political influence because of their legitimacy among the local networks and the status quo. Numerous empirical accounts noted that the above frameworks work because the 1991 elections were free and fair because the military-led democratic transition instituted the first presidential election that placed Professor Alpha Omar Konare as the winner after a second round in 1992 (Sangaré & Savané, 2020). Moreover, Konare, a history professor, was also re-elected for a second term in the June 8, 1997, presidential election, which witnessed some boycotts in protest of the annulment of the legislative elections.

The superficially unimpeachable trajectory of the Malian democratic transition had gained domestic and international recognition but had some hidden long-term consequences. After the second term of Konare, many citizens began to question the government's competence to fight corruption and the patronage system, which raises questions about whether the incumbent state follows due process and democratic principles in reforming (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). Worth noting too that ATT has been accused of fostering a kind of superficial political “consensus” that papered over serious problems and even allowed some collusion with narcotraffickers and jihadists to proceed. The impacts later have decisive consequences for subsequent regimes, including the current military government. State fragility and economic collapse led to an insurgency in Northern Mali in January 2012 and a military coup in Bamako that followed in March of the same year. Since then, the country has been in a quasi-permanent state of crisis and reconstruction because of violent conflicts between the state and Islamist militants, which have almost 40 percent of the country and made it ungovernable, especially in the northern and central regions (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022).

The activities led to international intervention to stabilize and flush out armed jihadists in the country, but the conflict was exacerbated, leading to untold suffering for the local population during the transitional military regime of Amadou Sanogo. Mali's democratic trajectory brought a swift transition in 1991, and the return of the military to the barracks, but the context has offered an opportunity to empirically study the resilience of the future democratic transitions in the country, as will be discussed later. Furthermore, the contexts of the 1990 and 2012 military transitional

governments serve as benchmarks for understanding why the current Goïta-led transitional government appears to be failing to uphold the democratic norms the country was known for.

By and large, the comparison between ATT and Goïta emphasises how Mali's transitional governance reflects shifting historical contexts: For example, ATT's coup aligned with regional pro-democracy momentum at the end of the Cold War, while Goïta's takeover emerged from widespread disillusionment after decades of formal but underperforming democracy. This contrast underscores how differing political legacies shaped public perceptions and the legitimacy of each transition.

Mali and the New Wave of Embedded Military Coups

Analysing the current Malian transition as a process that led to the breakdown of democratic institutions is necessary because it unarguably highlights the junta leaders' failed approach to governance and the challenges that paralyse the transition to democratic rule. Some argue that mere electoral or administrative bureaucratic reforms that change actors and institutions through a military coup cannot be considered a tangible transition unless they lead to a breakdown of the dictatorship or to the consolidation of a democratic regime managed by civilians (Bitar & Lowenthal, 2015). The military coup of August 18, 2020, engineered by elements of the Malian Armed Forces, has fully exploited the poor economic situation of the country and the weak response of the previous civilian government of Ibrahima Boubacar Keita to confront the extremist violence in the country, which had generated a massive protest movement of thousands of Malians (International Crisis Group, 2022). However, many citizens were frustrated and expressed dissatisfaction with the transparency of the Malian electoral process, which could potentially remove President Keita from office via the ballot box following his 2013 and 2018 election victories (Wing, 2015). For example, the 2018 electoral consultation took place in a chaotic and clouded political climate, and electoral fraud by the incumbent was more evident than ever. These factors have empowered the new military regime and helped it defy the agreement to serve only 18 months in power (BBC, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the division between the regime of Keita and the public opinion had significantly deteriorated due to corruption, clientelism, and exponential growth of inequality, and the foreign policy had become a cause of popular grievances among the passionately anti-colonialist population (including the military) following violent armed jihadists infiltration in the country and the establishment of the French army and other pro-western military bases in Mali in 2012 and beyond

(Whitehouse, 2017). The above factors served a catalyst for the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (NSP) to seize power and cautiously agreed to establish an 18-month transition government until an election can take place following the 2020 military takeover (Oxford Analytica, 2022). The interim junta leader, Colonel Assimi Goïta, further promised Malians, "We make a commitment before you to spare no effort in the implementation of all these resolutions in the exclusive interest of the Malian people" (Al Jazeera, 2020). As previously mentioned, Goïta returned power to the appointed transitional President, Bah Ndaw, but later orchestrated a second coup nine months later and replaced Ndaw as the transitional President. He has since been declared the interim president of Mali, without implementing the substantial transitional agreement charter he had promised earlier. Specifically, Goïta and the junta worked away from the 18-month plan to two more years, which elapsed last February 2024.

The regime remains silent about when to hand power to civilians and continues to build its image through patronage, coercion, and co-optation of the country's most influential actors. The regime established a complex system of governance, including issuing decrees to purge opponents, granting itself overwhelming, unquestionable authority, and imposing indefinite bans on opposition parties (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Such a governing system reflects an authority or system of rule that symbolises the concentric model, suggesting that its association with the peripheral (e.g., citizens and international organisations) should be fully controlled by a few individual junta leaders—in order to have the leeway to entrench its authoritarian regime (Cappelen & Sorens, 2018). The Goïta-led regime has acquired great power over time, but its actions appear to undermine the fundamental freedoms of Malian citizens and their democratic rights.

The concentration of transitional authority in the hands of a few junta leaders in Mali demonstrates a model that is opposed to any liberal approach and external influence, increasing uncertainty during the initial stage of the transition and leading to its instability and prolongation, which presents a picture of failures of the transitional agreement. The junta, therefore, focusses its efforts more on building its image through regime preservation rather than on the goals of the transition to prepare the ground for a genuine democratic process to take effect (Soumano, 2020). The subsequent alliance between the junta and the Russian Wagner Group illustrates this logic. Rather than serving solely as a counterinsurgency partnership, the alliance reinforced the junta's capacity for regime preservation, thereby undermining the transitional roadmap, restricting democratic freedoms, and delaying the return to constitutional civilian rule. Soumano (2020) characterizes this strategy as the management of uncertainty, whereby transitional authorities strategically exploit insecurity, institutional

ambiguity, and shifting political conditions to consolidate their hold on power. Rather than advancing the objectives of the democratic transition, these strategies prolong the transition, weaken accountability, and create conditions that make civilian rule increasingly uncertain. For example, it results in democratic backsliding in Mali where the Goita-led transitional government has exploited the uncertainty and security conditions of the country as the major obstacle to the success of the electoral reform and the transfer of power to civilian rule (Ògúnmodedé, 2024).

The impact of paranoia and fear of the unknown precipitated the Malian junta's negation of their initial agreement to hand over power in 2020 and attempted a second military coup in 2021 to be in complete control. By and large, the current transitional military junta's actions show that it is in no way democratic because of weak reforms. The junta's new historic phase clearly illustrates the politics of creating and destroying the state's governing capacity and institutions which fundamentally works against the goal of building strong democratic institutions and handing over to civilian rule as most often agreed upon in the transitional agreement (Magnusson & Clark, 2005). In practice, the behaviours of the Malian transitional leaders suggest failure, as none of their promises were fulfilled through implementation, but they made a significant gain in combating jihadist threats.

The Same Old Story: Fragility of Democratic Transition

The Malian military steps in to respond to state decay, but once it takes power, it uses the same old story to extend the transition timeline, prolonging its stay until further notice. Thus, Mali's military transitional authority has repeatedly postponed elections, first scheduled for early 2022. The junta failed to hand over power to an elected civilian government, amended the constitution to grant President Goita new executive powers, and shuffled associations to turn its back on potential sources of international accountability (Civicus, 2024). For example, the president was given powers to set policy and can fire the Prime Minister and all cabinet members because the government is accountable to the President instead of the parliament—a visible sign of democratic erosion and failures of the transitional governments.

In June 2023, Malians approved a new constitution in a national referendum. The new Constitution expanded presidential powers and allowed members of the junta to compete in elections (Reuters, 2023). However, in September 2023, the government delayed the presidential election scheduled for March 2024 without specifying a new date. The date of the next legislative polls also remained

unclear (Freedom House, 2024). In September 2023, the government announced a similar delay in the presidential election, which had been scheduled for February 2024, citing problems with electoral data and a new constitutional provision (U.S. Department of State, 2024). In 2024, the military junta imposed an indefinite ban on the activities of political party associations because more than 80 Malian political parties and civic groups had called on the junta to honour its promise to hold presidential elections in 2024. However, the junta noted that the measure to ban political activities and media organisations from covering all political activities was to maintain public order and "sterile political debates" about Mali's transition back to civilian rule (ORTM, 2024). The further argument indicates that the junta leaders put the legislative elections on hold until after the presidential election, with the date to be determined by the new president. At the same time, the junta announced that the presidential election would be postponed for technical reasons, including the adoption of a new constitution—completed last year—and a review of the country's electoral lists, as well as a national dialogue to be convened (Krieger, 2022). Thus, no new date has been announced for the general election, and the junta continues to impose decrees to monitor political activities, which are among the latest indicators that Mali's interim military government has no immediate plan to relinquish power. Table 2 below presents the junta's actions that undermine transitions and the logic of attempts to hold back their ability to execute the Transitional Charter.

Table 2.2 Framework of Democratic Backsliding Efforts

Composition	Strategies
May 2021	• Bah N'daw was arrested & dismissed because he wants to replace two coup cabinmate leaders
January 2022	• France ambassador was expelled & France announced withdrawing its forces from Mali
April 2022	• Suspended France 24 and Radio France International in Mali
May 2022	• Withdrew Mali from the G5 Sahel alliance & asked Takuba Task Force & MINUSMA to leave
October 2022	• Banned the activities of Malian CSOs that receive funding from France
January 2023	• Aminata Cheick Dicko forced into hiding after meeting with the UN Security Council
June 2023	• Rewrote Constitution and held referendum. Court ordered the dissolution of African Democratic parties that pressure for elections
November 2023	• The following people were criminalized for expressing their opinion: Rokia Doumbia, Clement Dembele, Bandiougou Traore, Chouala Bayaya Haidara, Mohame Youssouf Bathily, and Adoul Niang
December 2023	• Disbanded observatory for Electoral Governance
January 2024	• Announced the country's withdrawal from ECOWAS
February 2024	• Suspended Kaoural renewal for defamatory & subversive remarks
March 2024	• Banned Coordination of Movements of Associations & Sympathizers of Imam Mahmoud Dicko. Confiscated the passport of Imam Dicko at the airport. • Civil society and Associations of pupils/student organisations
May 2024	• Holding of election from two to five years has been indefinitely postponed. Colonel Alpha Yaya Sangare was charged for seditions because of his publication of a book critical of the junta's human rights

Source: Author's compilation from Le Monde news (2023).

New Partnership for Regime Preservation and Security Construction

Mali's current transitional junta has focused on strengthening the armed forces, reasserting the state's sovereignty, and revamping its international partnerships with Russia and China, which subsequently led to the deployment of Wagner's paramilitary forces, now renamed Africa Corps (Pokalova, 2023). Additionally, Mali's junta made a strategic and rational decision to form the Alliance of Sahelian States together with military rulers in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. The trio of military rulers announced their country's withdrawal from ECOWAS and proposed creating a new currency for the alliance. Such an alliance appears to be born out of convenience to consolidate their internal powers and protect their regime against foreign and regional influence, and certainly against possible foreign military intervention in their country. These efforts were more about building the regime's capacity to resist any forces that opposed its agenda of continued transitions, and, as a result, they abandoned their colonial and regional ties and sided with the Russians without any preconditions for a diplomatic relationship. Theoretically, the Malian junta appeared to have scored some political and diplomatic wins to counterbalance international and regional influence in support of an immediate power transfer to civil rule (Gazeley, 2022). This was one of the reasons why the junta tactfully turned to Russia to provide weaponry and security in the fight against the armed jihadists in the country, while delaying the transition to civilian rule. The junta leaders have categorically stated that Mali's sovereignty must be respected and that the country's relations with international and regional bodies would be mutually beneficial to all, but not dictated by foreign influence (International Crisis Group, 2023).

By all indications, Malian transitional leaders' creed is that the military rise to power is a narrative accepted by a large part of the population and often represented on military materials worn by women in Mali (Le Monde with AFP, 2023). Irrespective of the junta's impact on the development of the armed jihadist crisis in the country, this viewpoint could be rationalised by the change in the military approach since the junta came to power through a new partnership with Russia's Wagner Group. The relationship allowed the transitional government to undertake large-scale procurement of military equipment from Russia and, yet to be confirmed, to adopt a more offensive military approach to counterinsurgency (Haidara, 2024). What these features revealed about the success or failure of the transitional government is reflected in the actual configurations of the partnership with Russia and the possession of equipment to bolster its military capability against the threats of both the jihadists and external aggressions at the same time not to depend on its former colonial France. The transitional

junta's shift in security strategy paved a way to break the long-standing 2015 peace agreement with Tuareg rebels, leading to the recapture of Kidal—a town the Malian military had not occupied for over a decade—which was celebrated by many Malians as evidence of the regime's control and bolstered popular support (Doukhan, 2023; Africanews, 2022). While the reconquest was symbolically and strategically important, it did not decisively defeat the Tuareg rebellion, as evidenced by a 2024 ambush near Tinzaouaten by Tuareg rebels and Al-Qaida affiliate of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) forces that inflicted heavy casualties on FAMA (Malian Armed Forces) and Wagner troops.

The junta's turn to Russia was based on self-serving purposes for regime preservation and more so, to reject all transitional agreement deals. The consequences of this security partnership between the Malian transitional government and its Wagner auxiliaries have resulted in many deaths and human rights abuses because people were killed and presented as jihadists, as well as stigmatised as Fulani (Kumar, 2023). Such mass killings of the transitional government may be perceived as evidence of the effectiveness or success of the fight against jihadism, but the Malian military and its Wagner allies were accused of killing between three hundred and six hundred civilians in Moura, a village in the central region of Mali (Amnesty International, 2022). The transitional government's actions have restricted the space for democratic freedoms, silencing political actors such as journalists, activists, politicians, and human rights organisations. Notably, Oumar Mariko, a prominent pro-democracy figure, was forced into exile after discussing the role of the Malian army and its Wagner paramilitary allies in a gruesome killing committed in Moura (König, 2024).

This explains the spectre of confusion that hangs over the transitional government's ability to follow the due process of the law, and it also highlights serious challenges and the risks of the country going backwards because the alliance provides the junta with the power to imprison many people for various reasons, especially political opponents who publicly criticize the approach of the transitional government to counterinsurgency. Such military partnership also diverted the attention of the new Malian authority away from the transitional agreement charter because "the Transition was supposed to end on March 26, 2024. However, it was postponed indefinitely, unilaterally, without debate within the government (Voanews, 2024). The junta's inability and unresponsiveness to hand over power demonstrates that they are trapped in a bid to enforce orders by fighting the violent jihadists and the northern separatist groups that re-emerged again in August 2023.

The above raises questions about whether the transition is a success or a failure amid the struggle to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of MINUSMA and other international forces, such as the French troops in the country. The spread of violent armed jihadist conflict has convoluted the transitional agreement process and overwhelmed the military transitional government despite its alliances with the Russian Wagner group. It further complicated the prospect of eventually transitioning to democratic rule eventually. The junta's approach to the jihadist discourse further produces different elements of armed groups in Mali who "imposed suffocating blockades" on many peripheral towns and regions—disrupting political and economic conditions that exacerbate the worst humanitarian suffering in the country (Tapily, 2024). In a further development, the relationship between the transitional government and its international partners and the ECOWAS regional bloc indicates a kind of power struggle that obstructs an immediate transfer of power to civilian rule in Mali. It led the Malian transitional government to refuse to commit to a one or two-year timetable—to hand power to civilian rule. Instead, the junta focused on transforming the regime into a cult with an adherent willingness to support Russian policies openly and plans to undermine — indeed ravage—the French and their so-called dubbed Western democracy (Sakwa, 2021). However, it appeared that the way these bodies, such as the ECOWAS, approach the junta and their transitional framework with threats of sanctions undermines the objective they are trying to achieve. The junta drew the attention of the international community and the regional powers to the issue of a double standard, and the role of the French in Mali and the Sahel spoke volumes about what we are seeing and how that tend to meddle in the democratic transitions.

Malians' Position in the Transition: Social Mobilisation

Further analyses illustrate that the prospect of a successful democratic transition might largely depend on the depth and breadth of support among the regime's citizens (Afrobarometer, 2023). Afrobarometer round 10 and 12 public opinion surveys, first conducted between 2019 -2020, and the second between 2021- 2023, found that popular support for the junta has been consistently robust, exceeding 85 per cent in all regions of the country in which the survey was conducted (Afrobarometer, 2023). Afrobarometer's survey results indicate that some norms are critical to Malian society, such as trust, legitimacy, political interest, and involvement in political and civil society organisations, and this support helped the transition leaders to comfortably prolong the transition without pressure from the citizens. However, it is unclear whether these factors have fostered authoritarianism or whether the junta's authoritarian system of rule has shaped citizens' behaviour. Moreover, regarding citizens'

views on the new transitional regime, there is consensus that overwhelming support was given to the current junta to oversee government affairs and to lay the groundwork for a possible pathway to civil democratic rule, as dictated by Malians. In this context, the junta leverages the politics of insecurity by framing ongoing threats—such as terrorism and communal instability—as evidence that strong military authority is necessary, using fear and nationalist narratives to legitimise its rule and delay accountability, which allows it to maintain popular support despite poor material performance compared to the presidency of Keïta. In this way, insecurity itself becomes a political resource that boosts the junta's authority.

Popular support for the transitional leaders to hold onto power may erode over time, as people face numerous difficulties in the country. Representing support for the regime is easy, but measuring it concretely as it diminishes, especially in the case of the Malian military authority that resorts to obstructive measures to restore power to civilians, is complicated. Affirmations of support for transitional leaders to remain in power have been repeatedly expressed on social networks (e.g., Facebook & WhatsApp forums) and at major demonstrations in public places in Mali. For example, large demonstrations in support of the military transitional authority were held on January 14, 2022, in almost all of the country's major cities (Haidara, 2024). However, the anti-transition government was not allowed to protest or to criticise the transitional government. As a result, the lack of space to openly debate or express one's opinion indicates the difficulty of measuring popular support at particular points in time in Mali. It also helped the junta succeed in silencing many people and in refusing to give power to civilians.

Malian support for the junta enables them to remain in power and be careless about ending the transitional period as promised. As mentioned earlier, the transitional leaders have set no date for elections in Mali, and the time formerly agreed on—February 2024— between the junta and ECOWAS, has not been respected. The junta's refusal to end the transition has contributed to widespread hardship and undermined the transitional process. Economic conditions for the Malian population have worsened since the coup d'état, affecting both urban and rural communities (Ibrahim, 2022). Moreover, this added fuel to the fire as major cities in Mali are facing an energy crisis that is severely affecting communities and businesses. Thus, the popular support for the transitional authority is indisputable, but it divides Malian society. Families or neighbours are pitted against each other because those who oppose the transitional government are powerless to find space for themselves. This support gave the junta the tool for the incarceration of some of Mali's well-known dissenting voices. It helped suppress any signs of dissent or questions about the ending of the

transitional period. Overall, support for the transitional government remains stronger in urban areas, especially Bamako, than in rural areas, where the motto of “the army’s rise to power” struggles with local realities (Adetuyi, 2021; Haidara, 2024). Conversely, in some locations, such conflict reflects worsening security conditions, coupled with socioeconomic conditions that are more difficult today than before in many parts of the country.

Further explanations hold that the cultural backdrop against which Malian political development unfolds sheds light on the extent of citizens' loyalty and support in demonstrating a sense of patriotism toward the new regime. This kind of patriotism served as an incubator for ideological support for the junta. It profoundly impacted current Malian transitional politics more than the laws passed by the legislature, ultimately leading to a dictatorship in the country. Despite the traditionally hostile attitudes of religious scholars toward the secular state or the junta, part of the religious grandeur has been its ability to impact myriad cultural influences in support of the junta. By and large, this openness of the religious authorities in Mali in recent years has been due to the challenges posed by Salafism, which has served as a central signifier of resistance to Western democracy and neocolonialism in Mali (Sangaré & Savané, 2020). The new military junta capitalised on the above explanations that criticise the agency's limitations and Western democracy's failures (Van Vliet, 2014). In this view, the junta has sought to reduce the likelihood of challenges to their transitional authority and use soft approaches to allow the rise of conservative and anti-Western (French) sentiments across the country, which has given them a space to expand and entrench their authority over time—ignoring the transition mandate.

The transitional junta has also presented itself to the Malian people as a bulwark against the imperial bogeyman. This was why even some Malian intellectuals opposed to authoritarianism were induced to align with the lesser evil of the hunters. This has garnered more support and sustenance for the transitional government, even if they deviate from earlier promises. The centrality of Malian citizens' attitudes toward the transitional government raises new questions for scholars of democratic transition, and the conflict over Malian citizens empowering the military transitional regime played a significant role in preventing the transitional government's success in the country.

Conclusion

This paper finds that Mali's transitional agreement cannot be understood solely as a roadmap toward constitutional order. Rather, it represents a contested political space in which insecurity is actively managed, framed, and mobilised by the military political actors. Instead of simply asking whether Mali's transition failed to implement the agenda of the transitional agreements, the paper asks: failure for whom? If the regime of Assimi Goïta never intended to pursue a sincere democratic transition, the prolonged transitional process highlights not only institutional failure but also a deliberate strategy to entrench military authority while maintaining the formal appearance of democratic governance. From this perspective, the politics of insecurity does not merely complicate the transitions but also fundamentally structures them by directly affecting political timelines, institutional arrangements, and outcomes (Taruvunga, 2024). Consequently, the transitional framework therefore served, at least in part, as a crucial mechanism for maintaining governance continuity following the coup, while also enabling the junta to strengthen its political standing.

At the same time, the Malian military junta's transitional process largely failed to address the country's looming security challenges and to pursue inclusive political reforms. While the military regime gained some domestic support by promoting sovereignty narratives and challenging jihadist rhetoric—particularly following the overthrow of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta—persistent democratic backsliding and rising jihadist violence exhibit deeper structural problems. These dynamics have significant regional implications given Mali's strategic position in the Sahel and its borders with many West African states. The Malian case therefore provides broader lessons for transitional governance in conflict-affected contexts: security crises such as jihadist insurgencies can distort transitional timelines, weaken accountability mechanisms, and reshape reform commitments. Thus, durable political transitions might require separating security management from strategies for political power consolidation, emphasising the importance of deeper engagement by domestic, regional, and international actors in addressing governance and security challenges in Mali and across the Sahel.

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