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THE RISE OF AUTOCRACY IN THE SAHEL OF AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM RESOURCE CURSE THEORY

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Abstract

The countries in the Sahel, aside from being located in the same geopolitical region, also share similar socioeconomic and socio-political challenges. This includes political instability, insecurity, poor governance, climate change and democratic erosion – among others. The corrosion of the democratic gains recorded since the spread of democracy in the 1990s and the rise of autocratic regimes has become prevalent in the last decade. The subversion of the electoral process, limited freedom and military takeovers are an indication of the spread of autocracy in Africa (generally) and the Sahel (specifically). The paper which is anchored on the resource curse theory argues that the Sahel is rich in natural resources that when not properly managed breed corruption and increase the chances of conflict and the likelihood of military takeover. More so, faced with weak institutions, autocrats take advantage of abundant resources to increase patronage networks at the expense of development and democratic growth. The paper found that the rise of illiberal regimes is on the rise in Africa; suggesting a wave of autocracy. This is evident in the spate of autocratic and highly defective democracies in the region; one-party dominance; re-emergence of military coups; and circumvention of term limits. It is therefore concluded that electoral autocracy is on the rise in Africa and is a common phenomenon in the Sahel. This is given impetus by weak institutions which makes it difficult for rulers to utilize resource wealth for human capital development. To this end, the paper adopts a qualitative approach that relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, briefs and internet sources.

Keywords

Authoritarianism • democratization • governance • military coup • resource curse

1. Introduction

The spread of democratisation is subsumed under three waves: the early 19th century, the end of the Second World War and the 1980s. The 1980s, otherwise known as the third wave, introduced democracy to Latin America, Asia-Pacific and Africa and quickly spread across Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Namibia and South Africa from 1975 to 1994 (Cilliers 2016). Indeed, since the 1990s, Africa made significant progress in democratisation whereas the post-democratic transition era saw an increase in multiparty elections, participation, decentralisation and citizen involvement in politics. Recent trends however point to the contrary. The gains recorded in constitutionalism, rule of law and civil liberty are gradually being reversed (Onyalo 2020). The most recent Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index shows that Africa recorded democratic setbacks in recent times, especially in Mali and Guinea – now described as autocracies, due to poor governance quality (Heyl 2022). This decline, although gradual, is most visible in the last decade, particularly in Central and West Africa.

Due to the close nature of elections and leadership transitions in West Africa, the region has become one of the regions where the fastest level of democratic deterioration is recorded (Linzer 2020). In some areas, complete democratic breakdowns occasioned by the re-emergence of military coups are evident. As a result, the democratic progress recorded across the continent has been undermined (International IDEA 2021) and electoral autocracy has become the contemporary form of dictatorship (Kavasoglu 2021), especially where democracy is viewed as a Western imposition on Africa – a common narrative among the African political elite (Cheeseman and Sishuwa 2021).

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Democratisation in Africa has been arduous considering the spate of election-based violence on the continent. The elements of liberal democracy, namely freedom, free press, independent judiciary and free and fair elections, are either missing or significantly limited. Elections have not promoted democracy; rather, the violence and conflicts that greet them have impeded democratic transition (Cilliers 2016). And as Obiagu (2021, 116) observes, 'an attack on elections and electoral institutions becomes the first elemental sign of autocratization'. Meanwhile, the support for a military coup by citizens of some African countries does not necessarily connote the rejection of democracy but demonstrates the frustration at the failure of such government(s) to tackle insecurity and promote service delivery. For instance, some of the citizens of Burkina Faso that prevented a military coup in 2015 and demanded the resignation of Blaise Compaore who took over power through a coup and ruled for 27 years gave support to the recent military coup in the country (Sany 2022). It is believed that abundant resource wealth gives impetus to the rise of autocracy, especially in Africa where rulers are accustomed to rents and corruption (Ross 2015). Many developing countries are resource-dependent and are rentier states – states with heavy reliance on rents; rents being benefits derived from the exploitation of natural resources – where the government is more interested in revenue allocation and ideologies are based on rent distribution (Wantchekon 2002). As Ross (2015, 328) argues, 'many of the poorest and most troubled states in the developing world have, paradoxically, high levels of natural resource wealth'. Such enormous wealth is an incentive for authoritarian rule. This was rightly expressed by Harvey (2021, 9) in terms of the observation that in the absence of strong institutions, 'perverse political incentives exist for elites to substitute growth-enhancing policies for institutional manipulation and corruption to improve their probability of remaining in power'. Meanwhile, resource wealth enables autocratic regimes to increase spending on internal security, thus hindering democratic growth. Government spending includes strengthening the military to quell opposition and civil actions, or repress ethnic tensions. More so, the absence of quality institutions allows the elite to increase their stranglehold on the system and limit the chances of democratisation (Harvey 2021). This is particularly true in the case of the Sahel – a region rich in natural resources, yet underdeveloped, and embattled by democratic erosion.

The Sahel, consisting of Mali, Chad, Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, The Gambia, Guinea, Cameroon and Senegal,[1] presents the picture of a region faced with economic, security and environmental challenges (Mbow et al. 2021). Economically, the Sahel is one of the richest regions of the world in terms of natural resources and also one of the poorest in the world (Cooper 2018). The region is challenged by climate change and unpredictable weather patterns, which increase the chances of drought and famine (OCHA 2016). More so, the region is plagued by environmental degradation, burgeoning population, food insecurity, malnutrition, hunger, famine, poverty, degraded land, armed conflict, violence and terrorism (Konate 2012). Thus, the inability of the Sahelian states to transform natural resources for human capital development and democratic growth is a common narrative (Mbow et al. 2021).

The region has also recorded a re-emergence of military coups, circumvention of term limits, human rights violations (Onyalo 2020) and electoral violence (Obiagu 2021), which suggests the spread of a wave of autocracy. This also indicates the increasing popularity of autocratisation following the 'epidemic of coup d'états' recorded in 2021 (Boese et al. 2022, 7) and 2022.

2. Research Direction: Objectives, Research Questions and Hypotheses

Of course, the discourse on natural resources and authoritarianism is a familiar theme in African studies. Whereas much of the literature discusses the phenomenon by treating Africa as a single country and assuming that all African countries are unequally endowed with natural resources, there is a dearth of literature on how resource wealth drives autocracy (or not) in the Sahel. More so, previous studies do not pay attention to the role of weak institutions in necessitating the wave of autocratisation. This is a significant gap that this paper seeks to fill against the backdrop that the ability of a country to transform natural resource wealth into development is a function of institutional quality. This research is timely given the resurgence of authoritarianism and military coups in the Sahel. For context, 13 successful coups have been recorded in Africa in the last decade: Mali – 2012; Guinea-Bissau – 2012; Central African Republic – 2013; Burkina Faso – 2015; Zimbabwe – 2017; Sudan – 2019; Mali – 2020; Chad – 2021; Mali – 2021; Guinea – 2021; Sudan -2021; and Burkina Faso – 2022 (January and September) (Channels Television 2022). Meanwhile, 8 of these coups took place in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea and Mali), while an attempted coup was also recorded in Niger. One is then poised to ask: is the wave of autocratisation in the Sahel attributable to resource wealth? What role does institutional quality play in rentierism in the Sahel?

Using the resource curse theory, we hypothesise that the rise of autocracy in the Sahel is necessitated by resource curse and driven by weak institutions. If we agree that leaders

1 Although the G5 Sahel is comprised of only Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, other countries too, such as Nigeria, Cameroon, The Gambia, Guinea and Senegal, are often included for an extended discussion (see United Nations-Africa Renewal n.d.; OCHA 2016).

seek to remain in power and control rents, then it is right to suggest that their desire to access resources will move them to become autocratic whilst at the same encouraging other groups or elite to seek power through rebellion or coup. We argue that due to weak institutions, autocrats are motivated to increase their patronage networks and co-opt the opposition into their network. However, where this fails, the incumbent resorts to repression, which, when met with resistance, triggers authoritarian tendencies.

In other words, the quest for control of resources or rent maximisation amid weak institutions becomes an incentive necessitating the incidence of conflict and the rise of autocracy in the Sahel.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach that portrays rich explanations of a complex phenomenon. Aspers and Corte (2019, 155) define qualitative research as 'an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied'. The definition presupposes that qualitative research allows for distinction – through the enhancement of data and in-depth examination of events; process – alternating between theory and evidence and acquainting oneself with a topic through multiple sources and presenting its crucial characteristics; closeness – getting closer to the phenomenon under study; and improved understanding – the product of the integration of a variety of sources. Sofaer (1999) corroborates that qualitative research enables the researcher to track unique and recent events surrounding a study. It illuminates an incident and enables the author to interpret the event using a variety of information. It promotes objectivity and a balanced view of the phenomenon through the analysis and review of opposing views. As a result, this article favours the qualitative approach and relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, briefs and internet sources to make its analysis and present its findings.

4. Theoretical Perspectives

4.1. Resource curse

Expectedly, the abundance of resources should mean improved economic performance. However, the experience in many sub-Saharan African states shows that resource wealth does not necessarily translate to economic development but has led to conflict, violence and a poor economy laden with corruption and bad governance practices. In other words, resources have become counter-intuitive – becoming a curse rather than a blessing. This has been referred to in the literature as 'Resource Curse' – otherwise known as the paradox of plenty. The notion of a resource curse was introduced by Richard Auty in 1993 to describe the potential consequence of resource wealth on a country's stability, socioeconomic development and institutions. The theory was later developed by Jeffrey Sachs and Andrew Warner in 1995 to show the negative correlation between natural resource intensity and growth in resource-rich countries (Sachs and Warner 1995). The theory describes the failure of abundant resources to generate positive outcomes but their tendency to engender violence, corruption and bad governance (John 2010). The concept has equally been used to describe the inability of states to transform their resource wealth to meet the welfare needs of their citizens (Natural Resource Governance Institute 2015). Poor economic growth, conflict and authoritarianism are what have become dominant in such resource-rich countries.

This should not be loosely interpreted that resource-rich countries are doomed to fail. It would appear as if the interplay of variables such as poor resource management, control and bad governance increases the risk of conflict and autocracy in resource-rich countries. This is supported by Ross (2014) in terms of the observation that mineral resources such as diamonds, gemstones and other non-fuel minerals are associated with civil war. In other words, when not properly managed, natural resources breed corruption and increase the chances of conflicts and war. The increase in value of these resources and the competition for their control increases the risk of conflict and insurgency, especially by rebels from ethnically marginalised groups. The inability of the government to restore peace in such conditions further increases the likelihood of conflict and civil war.

Natural resource wealth has been linked to the survival of autocratic leaders. A dictator is torn between allocating state resources for economic growth or power elongation. Faced with this dilemma, the dictator takes advantage of the institutional weakness of the state to extend patronage at the expense of economic development. The dictator also restricts media freedom, increases spending on security and controls the judiciary to ensure his continued stay in office. The ruler's desire to hold on to power is shaped by the accumulation of capital and unlimited political control, especially when large benefits are guaranteed. In this regard, resources provide a lifeline for autocrats to cling to power (Zakharov 2018).

Meanwhile, countries rich in natural resources are noted for having leaders who resist change of power compared to countries with limited resources. In other words, the abundance of natural resources in an autocratic regime becomes a resource curse or a Dutch disease that engenders negative economic growth. This is attributable to the prevalence of rent-seeking, corruption and limited government

accountability (Paltseva 2010). The paradox of resource wealth and growth recession is necessitated by the swarm of enterprises and groups seeking access to rents generated from resources, especially gold, diamond, gas, oil, cotton etc., without recourse for economic growth. More so, the fixation on these few resources leads to the neglect of the productive capacity of the state and the development of potential investment opportunities. This further increases corruption as government officials work to accumulate private wealth at the expense of citizen welfare. Thus, further competition for access to rent is generated, leading to conflict, rebellion and military intervention (Pütün 2015).

A regime dependent on rents has been described as a rentier state. The concept of a rentier state was put forward by Hossein Mahdavy in 1970 and developed by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciana in 1987 to describe how oil-exporting countries depend on rents generated from export rather than taxation. In such a state, revenue is generated through marketing in the global economy, accrued by the state and paid to the government (Altunişik 2014). A rentier state refers to a state 'whose revenue derives predominantly (>40%) from oil or other foreign sources, and whose expenditure is a substantial share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)' (Luciani 2016, 13). Luciana also argues that the origin of the state revenue determines the nature of a rentier state. To this end, he identifies two possibilities: an exoteric (allocation) state and an esoteric (production) one. States where revenue accruals are derived primarily from abroad, and the state apparatus itself performs merely the function of allocation, are exoteric states, whereas in esoteric states, the state apparatus engages in production and accruals are based largely on taxation and domestic revenue.

What is generally observable in Africa is the prevalence of exoteric states where revenues are based on rent and where taxation or production is minimal and the rentier effect of resources means that states will encourage low taxation. According to Ross (2015), in rentier states – states that derive a large fraction of their revenues from external rents – rents impede development through taxation. The government taxes its citizens less; extends patronage – spending to increase the incumbent's re-election chances; and discourages group formation – spending rents on hindering the formation of groups capable of undermining elite control (Ross 2001). Autocratic institutions promote rent-seeking behaviours based on corruption, which discourages the need for taxation and democracy captured by the 'no taxation without representation' maxim (Frankel 2012). Indeed, states that depend on revenue accruing from tax generated from the people are usually guided by the responsibility to promote prosperity (Sollenburg 2012).

Low taxation places no burden on the citizens and frees the regime from demands, thus leading to its stability. In authoritarian regimes, low taxation arises due to restricted political legitimacy and the need to discourage pressure for state control (Gilley 2017). More so, taxation increases citizen awareness of the tax burden and motivates them to hold the government accountable through collective bargaining, protests or violence. Thus, autocratic regimes rather exploit rents and foreign aid than directly tax their citizens. Generally, rentier states have favoured value-added tax (VAT) for additional revenue. In addition to using low (or no) taxation to stabilise autocratic regimes, the distribution of revenue from rents devoid of taxation by elites is also made easy (Kato and Tanaka 2019).

5. Conceptual Framework

There is a great deal of contestation on the meaning of several concepts in the social sciences including those germane to this article. As a result, this section presents an operational framework of the various concepts to aid comprehension.

5.1. Autocracy

Autocracy is defined as a 'politically exclusive rule' (Anderson, Brownlee, and Clarke 2021, 1). This terse definition aptly captures what an autocratic regime entails: a group that exalts the monopoly of control of state power and the absence of an instrument for power sharing with other groups. Leadership in an autocratic regime is undertaken by a military officer, a dictator, an elite or an oligarchic group who influence their stay in power by committing resources to repress the citizens or specific groups (Salhi and Bolle 2007). Since staying in power is the goal of an autocratic leader – albeit through pseudo-democratic institutions – changing leadership may require a transition to democracy, revolution or coup from dissatisfied citizens or the elite. To be sure, autocracy is an oppressive form of politics that implies the concentration of power in one person without consideration for or involvement of opponents. It is a system characterised by the prevalence of repression and the absence of executive institutions, responsiveness, mobilising ideology and political participation.

5.2. Autocratisation

Autocratisation is defined by Pelke and Croissant (2021) as the decline in the democratic qualities of any democratic regime that may result in the weakening or the breakdown of democracy and also the recession of democratic characteristics in authoritarian regimes. It is the decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy that poses a great threat to democratisation in many countries including those in the global south and allows for gradual setbacks in the democratic qualities of the country (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Autocratisation is said to have taken place when there

is a significant decline in universal adult suffrage and the respect for freedom of expression, association and access to information, as well as free, fair and regular elections. Thus, autocratisation describes the breakdown of democracy where democratic elements decline resulting in less democratic, or more autocratic, situations (Laebens and Lührmann 2021).

5.3. Democratic erosion

This is the incremental degradation of the structures and substance of liberal constitutional democracy (Daly 2018). In this regard, the concept describes the gradual breakdown of democratic structures and institutions against the immediate democratic breakdown of a system through military coup d'etat. Bermeo (2016) identifies three varieties of democratic erosion, viz.: promissory coups – ousting of an elected government with the promise of holding elections to uphold democratic tenets; executive aggrandisement – the gradual weakening of checks on executive power and embarking on institutional changes to discourage opposition; and manipulating elections strategically – manipulating the electoral process (i.e. electoral management body, campaign and voter registration) to favour the incumbent.

5.4. Rentier state

The concept of a rentier state is used to describe a society dependent on rents – exports earned from natural resources. The definition of a rentier state is made possible through an examination of its characteristics (Beblawi 1987). The author identifies four striking features of a rentier state:

i. Rents situations predominate a rentier economy.
ii. A rentier economy substantively relies on external rent.
iii. The creation of economy is centred around a few people in society.
iv. The government is the prime receiver of the external rent in the economy.

A rentier economy encourages the prevalence of a rentier mentality – where the norm of reward is not associated with work but is an accidental or situational gain (Beblawi 1987).

The characteristics above, however, do not differentiate between a rentier state and a rentier economy, but rather use them interchangeably and confusingly. As a result, Beblawi and Luciani (2016) differentiate between the two concepts. According to the authors, a rentier state can be viewed from two major angles: the state and the economy. When restricted to the state, it characterises a state that 'derives a substantial part of its revenue from foreign sources and under the form of rent' (p. 11). This is so because prevailing conditions make the state the direct beneficiary of revenue generated from the sale of goods and services with a clear margin away from the production cost. However, when one does away with the restrictive definition and prioritises the economy, it becomes a rentier economy – 'an economy substantially supported by expenditure from the state' (p. 11). In this economy, rents generated outside the system play an important role and are used to support the state. Thus, the relationship between a rentier state and a rentier economy depicts one in which the latter is a subsystem associated with the former.

6. Rentierism in Africa: The Role of Weak Institutions

The ability to transform a country's natural resource wealth into development is a function of the country's institution. Indeed, countries with strong and quality institutions such as Norway, Botswana and Venezuela have been able to avoid the resource trap (Wantchekon 2002) as opposed to Africa where a majority of resource-rich countries are resource trapped. This is necessitated by bad governance, corruption, mismanagement of resources and weak democratic institutions (Pütün 2015). As opposed to nations with strong institutions, nations with weak institutions with resource wealth are usually subject to resource curse (Bergougui and Murshed 2020). That is, the effect of resource abundance on democratisation is a function of institutional quality. The ability to strengthen institutions to be accountable can enable resource-rich countries to be more democratic.

The quality of a country's institution determines its appropriation of resources or their use to drive economic performance. That is, the abundance of natural resources as in the Sahel does not necessarily birth oligarchic or authoritarian tendencies, but its use by the political elite and the existence (or not) of quality institutions (Vahabi 2018). This is because states with weak institutions are unable to utilise resource wealth for human capital development, especially when faced with rents and patronage (Harvey 2021). More so, the absence of institutional constraints on the dictator's utilisation of proceeds from resource wealth results in a resource curse (Zakharov 2018).

To be sure, rents weaken the institutional formation of a country. In less than three decades after the oil boom in the 1970s, most oil-exporting countries became trapped in recurring crises (Karl 1999). As Karl (1999, 32) puts it, '[p]lagued by bottlenecks and breakdowns in production, capital flight, drastic declines in efficiency, double-digit inflation, overvalued currencies and budget deficits'. This increased the chances of political instability and undermined competitiveness. More so, African states are often weak and inefficient and its elites, while no more greedy or self-serving than those elsewhere, tend to extract resources for 'safe' investment outside the continent (Cilliers 2016, 4). This is aptly captured by Harvey (2021, 9) in terms of the observation that 'authoritarianism is associated with weak institutions'. Characterised by weak state capacity, resource-dependent states are unable to manage the fierce competition for state control and the violence that ensues and which often spirals

into riots and coups to topple the government. As a result, the government, in a bid to control such political unrest, either bans the opposition, enforces a merger or cancels elections to create a one-party dominance, thereby resulting in the emergence of authoritarian government; or, it may simply buy opposition over with rents.

Due to a lack of taxation and weak state capacity, rentier states find it difficult to manage their rent revenues, and as a result, become prone to rentier elite corruption, which impedes the state's service delivery capacity. To ensure legitimacy and survival, the state turns to repression and authoritarian rule. Of course, this increases the chances of armed rebellion, civil conflicts and insurgency. More so, the absence of, or little, taxation discourages the state from prioritising representative democracy and the provision of public goods. Also, the reliance on rents from natural resources leads to the abandonment of other sectors of the economy, thus making them unproductive (Omeje 2016). Accentuating the role of institutions in a rentier state, Mildner, Lauster and Wodni (2011) aver that 'resource abundance may incentivise rent-seeking behaviour and corruption and distort the allocation of resources, particularly in countries where institutions are already weak' (p. 33). The attendant unequal distribution of rents, however, increases the chances of competition, which when unmanaged deteriorate into conflicts. In situations where this is met with violence from the opposition, it may degenerate into a civil war (Wantchekon 2002).

Rentierism has been implicated in the Arab Spring uprising. The uprising, which began in Tunisia, quickly spread to other parts of the Middle East and led to regime toppling in some i.e. Libya. Libya, a Sahelian state, was ruled by Qaddafi's *jamahiriyya* for decades. Before the Arab Spring, the country experienced the Benghazi uprising in 2006 due to grievances. This was not unconnected from widespread youth unemployment, nepotism and distribution challenges. The uprising was complicated by Libya's return to the international system – having been under sanctions from the 1980s to 2004 – and the inability of the state to liberalise the economy. Despite quelling the uprising, the challenges continued unaddressed, leading many Libyans to decry the decrepit state of economic development despite its vast natural resources and relatively small population. As Altunişik (2014) further argues, Libya's resources became a curse, as exemplified by the fact of a weak state capacity embodied in the *jamahiriyya* system, which undermined state institutions and made them incapable of responding to the pressures of the uprising. Further, rather than building from scratch the institutions that it would need to ensure its continued sustenance as the supremely powerful body exercising authority over its territory, the state has chosen to rely on the existing tribal structures, which is a gross indication that the state faces a paucity of societal support. Also, driven by the grievance of unemployment, corruption and nepotistic distribution policies, social tension became rife among the people, thus fuelling the uprising.

7. Rise of Autocracy in Africa: The Case of the Sahel

The rise in illiberal democracy is not peculiar to Africa but a global phenomenon that has been recorded in Yugoslavia, Slovakia, the Philippines, Pakistan and Peru (Zakaria 1997). States experiencing dictatorship now account for 70% (i.e. 5.4 billion people) of the world's population, whereas countries with closed autocracies (now 30) account for 26% of the world's population. Meanwhile, the most common form of an illiberal regime is electoral autocracy, which accounts for 44% (i.e. 3.4 billion people) of the world's population (Boese et al. 2022).

Military rule became popular in Africa's post-independence epoch. For instance, Burkina Faso has experienced about 20 coup attempts in its 48 years of independence (Sany 2022). Despite the constitutional representation of the principles of democracy, many African states are now autocratic (Onyalo 2020). Stiftung (2022) reveals that 13 out of the 20 countries in West and Central Africa are now autocracies – indicating a significant decline in democratic values compared to 2010. Concerning the Sahel, Gambia and Senegal are defective democracies; Niger and Burkina Faso are highly defective democracies; Guinea Mauritania, Mali and Nigeria are moderate autocracies; whereas Cameroon and Chad are hardline autocracies (see Table 1). By implication, none of the Sahelian states is a consolidating democracy, whereas the majority are moderate autocracies.

According to Wantchekon (2002), authoritarianism arises because:

1. one-party dominance combined with a weak rule of law incites the opposition to use non-constitutional means such as coup d'etats to compete for political power; and
2. the incumbent preempts such a move by repressing or banning the opposition party (p. 9).

To be sure, the popularity of one-party dominance in Africa betrays the doctrine of democracy. More often, growth is tied around personalities in a neo-patrimonial setting where political victory is based on a winner-takes-all mindset (Cilleirs 2016). Meanwhile, leaders extend their stay in office by sharing power and resources with elites (Carboni and Raleigh 2021) and silencing their opposition through the sharing of such resources (Zakharov 2018). In other instances, autocrats may seek the co-optation of the opposition to discourage rebellion against their rule. They grant the opposition access to resources and shower them with concessions to reduce the chances of confrontation. This is popular in Turkey, Russia and Venezuela. When this fails, incumbents often resort to repression (Kavasoglu 2021), which when met with opposition may degenerate into chaos

Table 1. Democracy status in the Sahel

Country	Democracy/autocracy	Status	Governance category
Burkina Faso	Democracy	Highly defective democracies	Moderate
Cameroon	Autocracy	Hardline autocracies	Weak
Chad	Autocracy	Hardline autocracies	Failed
Gambia	Democracy	Defective democracies	Good
Guinea	Autocracy	Moderate autocracies	Moderate
Mali	Autocracy	Moderate autocracies	Moderate
Mauritania	Autocracy	Moderate autocracies	Weak
Niger	Democracy	Highly defective democracies	Moderate
Nigeria	Autocracy	Moderate autocracies	Weak
Senegal	Democracy	Defective democracies	Good

Source: Stiftung (2022).

and increases the chances of a military takeover. Military coups, however, remain one of the pointers to the wave of autocracy in Africa. In 2021, military coups were recorded in Chad, Mali, Myanmar and Guinea – indicating a sharp increase in the occurrence of coups both in Africa and other parts of the world (Boese et al. 2022). The military in Mali took over power in August 2020 following protests against election irregularity and the repositioning of the protests to unseat President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, accused of corruption and inability to manage the rising insecurity in the country. Although the military handed over power to a transitional government after external pressure, it has however taken power back in May 2021 through another coup (Heyl 2022).

Although military officers have different reasons for taking over power, they generally regard themselves as guardians acting in the interest of the nation to rid it of corrupt politicians and also claim to be politically neutral. However, once in power, they seek means to consolidate their rule and extend their stay in office through the monopoly of force and violence (Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland 2010). Military-aided transitions, which in most cases started as a response to citizens' demand for political change, have been recorded in Sudan, Algeria, Zimbabwe and Egypt (International IDEA 2021).

Indeed, whereas elections remain sacrosanct to the survival and growth of democracy, the quality of these elections has been low in Africa due to a do-or-die mentality (Obiagu 2021). Clean elections are made impossible by electoral violence, stifling of the opposition, contested results, electoral manipulation and third-termism (International IDEA 2021). Elections are regarded as mere rituals and administrative formalities to maintain state legitimacy and appear democratic (Onyalo 2020). Electoral autocracies hold periodic elections for various elective positions while also allowing the opposition to actively partake in the electioneering process. However, the incumbent takes over the regular channels and manipulates the process in its favour. The incumbent infiltrates the entire political system by injecting its cronies into important institutions such as the court, electoral institutions and security agencies to perpetrate electoral fraud (Carboni and Raleigh 2021; Kavasoglu 2021).

Autocratisation has also been driven by electoral conflicts. According to Cilliers (2018, 2), 'violence is changing in Africa. The ballot, not the gun, is becoming the main source of political contestation'. African rulers also tinker with the electoral process through rigging, manipulation and interference to influence election results. This has been experienced in many states, including Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Angola, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Since the onset of the Fourth Republic in Nigeria, elections have been characterised by violence, voter intimidation, harassment and vote-buying. The political violence that greeted the general elections held in 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 has resulted in death and destruction of property. For instance, the last election, held in 2019, led to 108 deaths (Akinyetun 2021). The implication of this is that the country has become not only anti-democratic but also highly fragile.

The various political parties espouse identity-based agendas and polarise the country through their ethnic and religious political narrative. This is a major challenge to the growth of democracy in Africa, especially considering that many African states are multicultural societies. Hence, leaders take advantage of ethnic and religious diversities to stoke ethnic tensions and violence. This is quite popular in Nigeria, Sudan and Kenya (Cilliers 2016; Akinyetun 2021). In the case of Nigeria and Sudan, Akinyetun and Bakare (2020) opine that identity markers such as ethnicity, religion, culture and language are pointers to crises. For instance, the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are locked in an unending identity-superiority contest, which has a dominant effect on political participation and integration of the country. In the same vein, the North–South and Africa–Arab divide in Sudan is a major source of conflict in the country. The elite then takes advantage of this identity consciousness to divide the society and continue its exploitative tendencies.

The circumvention of term limits has also increased in Africa with many countries seeking to remove the constitutional two-term limits. This has been successful in Gabon, Chad and Burkina Faso where term limits have been abolished from the constitution, whereas in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, the incumbents have been able to secure third terms in 2020. It is therefore no surprise that a majority of the Sahelian states have been ruled by long-serving presidents including Idriss Déby of Chad (30 years) and Paul Biya of Cameroon (39 years) (Heyl 2022). Between 2015 and 2020, 13 African countries eliminated constitutional presidential term limits (International IDEA 2021). This was aptly captured by Carboni and Raleigh (2021) thus: 'African states have institutionalised, yet several leaders have survived for decades by limiting any successful opposition, curtailing dissent, extending presidential term limits, foiling attempts to curtail central power through constitutions, and recycling loyal elites in different roles' (p. 416).

Authoritarian tendencies in Africa are majorly fuelled by grievances, fragility and external influence – particularly from Russia and France (Sany 2022). Concerning external influence, Cilliers (2016) avers that the awarding of aid by the West to some of the most repressive leaders in Africa, including Hissène Habré (Chad), Gaafar Nimeiry (Sudan), Samuel Doe (Liberia), Siad Barre (Somalia), Mobutu Sese Seko (former Zaïre) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), has given impetus to the popularity of authoritarianism on the continent.

8. Resource Curse and Autocratisation in the Sahel

As earlier argued, the economies of many African states are dependent on the export of natural resources, which encourages rulers to promote authoritarian rule. Taken further, this paper hereby examines whether the above is true in the case of the Sahel. The Sahel is rich in resources such as gold, uranium and oil. Mali is Africa's third-largest producer of gold, which accounts for 95% of its mineral production. In addition to having coal, phosphate and gold, Niger also has uranium and is the world's fourth-largest producer. Burkina Faso has cotton and gold, for which it is the world's fourth-largest producer. The country also has abundant manganese and zinc. Mauritania is also endowed with resources such as copper, iron and natural gas. Meanwhile, Chad and Nigeria both have abundant oil, which accounts for a share of their export and foreign exchange earnings (Cooper 2018). Beyond the supposition that oil wealth strains democratisation in oil-rich states such as Nigeria, Malaysia, Indonesia and Central Asia, non-fuel mineral wealth also impedes democratisation, as evident in natural resource-rich countries of the Americas, Asia and Africa (Ross 2015).

The Sahel has large fertile soils that aid the production of crops such as millet, rice, sorghum, sorghum, cassava, cotton and cereal. However, productivity has been low due to climate change, lack of water, population growth, poor resource management and internal instability. Scarce natural resources occasioned by human and natural disasters are sources of conflict in the region (Konate 2012). An analysis of the prevalence of coup in Africa using social and political indices has been extensively discussed in the literature (Jackman 1978). However, O'Kane (1993) introduced an economic approach arguing that economic conditions rooted in international trade make African countries vulnerable to coups d'etat. The fluctuation of large export prices and its ability to encourage instability are preconditions to coups. For instance, primary goods such as copper, cocoa and cotton are prone to price fluctuations and for poorer countries that are dependent on the revenue generated from the export of these goods, the fluctuation in price will lead to economic instability, which may have a knock-on effect on the polity that the government has no control over.

This submission is supported by Collier and Hoeffler (2005), who used the greed thesis to determine the role of resource rent in influencing coups in Africa. They found that low income and a lack of growth increase the risk of coups in Africa. According to Bodea (2012), the resource curse challenge is particularly high in weak states characterised by exclusion. In such states, the grievances rooted in the feeling of deprivation and marginalisation motivate the excluded group to engage in violence. The availability of rents can further aid the desire of the group to capture state power. More so, the inability of the state to judiciously share the natural resources among the various groups (especially in a multicultural society as found in Africa) further weakens the regime and increases the risks of instability. For example, in Cameroon, the exclusion and marginalisation of the Anglophone regions from access to oil – despite playing host to Cameroon's lone oil refinery station and the Rio dey Rey offshore basin, which accounts for 75% of Cameroon oil – has sparked armed conflict and secessionist agendas (Halleson 2009).

The resource curse theory when applied to the Sahel emphasises that despite the enormous resource wealth in the region, it remains one of the most impoverished regions in the world, with a devastating humanitarian crisis and glaring evidence of democratic erosion. The resource wealth has not translated into meaningful development due to weak institutions and poor governance capability, which allows rulers to extend their network and hold on to power. In what has become a resource curse, the abundance of resources encourages authoritarianism, corruption and patronage (Akinyetun 2022). This is true in the case of Guinea, which, despite having an abundance of bauxite, diamond, iron ore

and gold, remains one of the poorest countries in the world. It suffers from a resource curse, which has triggered a resource rush by opposition, leading to military coups. The country, plagued by poor governance, weak institutions and widespread corruption, has been subjected to vicious cycles of military overthrows. Before his ousting, President Conde increased investment in the mining sector, which enriched a few elite and impoverished many Guineans. Moreover, the government increased the budgets of the National Legislature whilst slashing the budget of the military and police, and increasing their taxes. These culminated in his overthrow on September 5, 2021 (Myers 2021).

Since rentier states exclude the people in the revenue accumulation process, they often fail to command loyalty from opposing groups, thereby making democratisation impossible and authoritarianism more likely (Altunişik 2014). More so, due to the absence of, or minimal, taxation, political participation is usually absent. Sollenburg (2012, 21) alludes that 'leaders who prioritise short-term gains from rent-seeking over long-term gains from public goods provision that promotes production, must choose policies that allow them to remain in power'.

In a rentier democracy, the hegemonic tendencies of the elite and the disaffection for the multiparty system manifested in the manipulation of democratic practices engender the formation of rivalry groups that seek to distort the status quo, including disgruntled military officers (Omeje 2016). Langø, Bell and Wolford (2022) in an empirical analysis of the correlation between oil discovery and coups in a global conglomerate of states from 1980 to 2010 found that oil revenue increases the desire for state capture through military coups whilst equally enabling the government to prevent such coup attempts. They also contend that expected oil wealth is symmetric to increased coup attempts as coup plotters hope to seize power before the government uses accruals from resource wealth to consolidate its power.

Using Chad as an example, Halleson (2009) notes that even though the first civil war (1979–1982) in the country predates the discovery of oil, the same cannot be said of the second civil war (2005). The rents from oil exploration and the alleged corruption of President Idris Deby flamed the grievance of ethnic tensions and encouraged the rise of rebels seeking to topple the government. Meanwhile, rebels in the Central African Republic (CAR) – rich in gold, diamond, uranium and timber – have seized areas with natural resources. Having endured years of armed conflict, and civil war from 2002 to 2003, the Central African Republic is another example of a country with a resource curse. It is believed that the exploration of uranium and oil in the South and North of Central African Republic, respectively, has increased the incidence of armed conflicts, rebellion and repression (Halleson 2009).

Rents enable armed conflict through a scramble for rents. Elites driven by rent-seeking behaviours and corruption often engage in a zero-sum conflict to ensure the maximising of resources in their favour. They, therefore, attempt to take power through vicious means in an effort towards a guarantee that the control of the available resources vests completely and exclusively with them (Sollenburg 2012). The resulting violence is determined by the volume of resources to be appropriated as 'the higher the degree of dependence on natural resources becomes, the more unstable the economic outlook on growth will become' (Pütün 2015, 352). More so, oil production may be inimical to growth by increasing the chances of civil war, ethnic secessionism, economic crises and democratic erosion (Langø, Bell and Wolford 2022). This is true in the Nigerian case, where, as Halleson (2009) submits, the outbreak of a civil war immediately after independence was motivated by the country's oil resources. There were divided interests – the British tacitly supported the Nigerian government whereas France supported Biafra to maintain its 7% control of Nigerian oil through its indigenous company Safrap. This led to casualties, especially in the oil-producing Niger Delta regions. Meanwhile, in the post-civil war era, militancy has been recorded in these oil-producing regions with militant groups demanding compensation for the environmental damages caused by years of oil exploration. As predicted by rentierism, the state has usually responded to demands for a greater share of oil revenue by the host communities with repressive force.

More so, the economies of the Sahelian states fit into Collier's concept of bottom billion used to describe resource-rich low-income countries. The nomenclature captures the 50 lowest-income countries – most of which are found in Africa. This is represented in the prevalence of (multidimensional) poverty prevalent in the African resource-rich countries, whereas others are characterised by political instability and weak state control. Herb (2005) adds that in an economy of rentierism, there is a high chance of increased poverty. This is because the proclivity of rentier states towards a mono-product increases the economic value of that resource and renders other products redundant. This shrinks economic wealth and increases the chances of poverty. The resultant low income and inequality of unequal distribution of resources discourage political participation and engagement. Individual income and repression reduce the chances of broad-based participation in politics in authoritarian regimes (Pelke 2020). Of course, poor people have fewer resources and reasons to take part in politics.

According to New African (2022), aside from low living standards, social exclusion and a weak economy, an underexplored narrative of the rise in the spate of coups in the Sahel is the external influence of France and Russia (fronted by the Wagner Group). These countries, motivated by the resources in Mali and Burkina Faso, have exploited the cracks in governance and the economy to encourage coups. In their words:

> ...the total number of Wagner employees in Africa [are] at 3-5,000. About 1,000 appear to be deployed in Mali, with analysts guessing that they are being paid in kind with mineral resources by the military junta.

A corollary to the above is that when military juntas arise to take control of a country's governance, their primary motivation is usually to obtain access to resource rents, control over which would be essential in order that the plotters of the coup might be associated with a sense of legitimacy characterising their newfound position of authority – a legitimacy that would stand them in good stead in their endeavours to seek external assistance and buy off the opposition. As Herb (2005) suggests, rentierism discourages rulers' accountability to their people and increases the need to either buy off or repress opposition. This is stressed by Bodea (2012) in terms of the observation that, since one of the strategies of an autocratic regime is to buy off or suppress the people using its military, the abundance of resources and predominance of rents may incentivise its soldiers to rebel against the regime and seek power for themselves; and the proclivity for such a phenomenon to occur is the reason why autocratic regimes commanding sizeable natural resources stand a risk of transitioning into military juntas.

9. Conclusion

Following years of an end to the military curse in Africa, the continent is once again enmeshed in recurring and fast-spiralling military takeovers. While Africa has witnessed 13 coups in the second decade of the 21st century, the situation only seems to be deteriorating with the march of time, as exemplified by the fact that 2021 and 2022 have seen an exponential increase in the spate of coups. Surprisingly, 8 of these 13 coups have taken place in the Sahel, where poor governance, multidimensional poverty, economic decline, insurgency, youth unemployment, corruption, third-termism, constitutional coup and sit-tightism have taken root. Despite the resource wealth of the Sahelian states, their human development index remains low. This suggests that the challenge of the resource curse is worsened by an institution curse whereby the democratic institutions required for democratisation have been weakened by the wave of autocratisation and rentierism. Meanwhile, rents weaken the institutional formation of a country by encouraging low taxation and participation. The lucrativeness of the rents associated with (the natural-resource–rich geographic regions encompassed within) the particular country serves as a powerful motivational factor impelling the desire of opposition groups to capture state power; this is coincident with the incumbent ruler's own desire to hold on to power; thus, since any ruler who occupies the position of state power must thrive together with constantly facing the challenge of a high likelihood of that power being seized away by force, the impetus for ensuring one's capital accumulation and unlimited political control typically tends to be very high among African rulers. To ensure continued access to resources, the state turns to repression and authoritarian rule.

The paper argues that the rise in autocracy in the Sahel is attributable to the scramble for rents, especially in the face of weak institutions and grievances against marginalisation, deprivation and social exclusion. For instance, the exclusion of Anglophone Cameroon from access to oil has sparked armed conflict and secessionist agendas. The unsaturated wealth from mining coupled with weak institutions and corruption has led to the ousting of President Conde of Guinea. In Chad, the rents from oil exploration and the alleged corruption of President Idris Deby flamed the grievance of ethnic tensions and encouraged the rise of rebels to topple the government. Meanwhile, in Nigeria, the militancy in oil-producing Niger Delta and the repressive response from the government are cases in point of how the scramble for rents encourages rebellion from the opposition, forcing the ruler to embrace authoritarianism. However, this is made possible through the breakdown of institutions occasioned by autocratisation.

Given the findings, it is recommended that the government of the Sahelian states must promote democracy by jointly condemning military coups, the circumvention of term limits and electoral violence that presently pervade the region and beyond. The states, under the aegis of the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and G5 Sahel, must sanction states that promote autocracy, whilst also discouraging sit-tightism among their rulers. To aid this, regular leadership training must be provided at the continental, regional and sub-regional levels. The states must ensure the promotion of good governance through consensus-building and resource efficiency. African leaders must emphasise the efficient management of natural resources and discourage the incidence of rents, patronage and corruption. Since the abundant availability of natural resources can create a resource curse or Dutch disease situation, the government of every Sahelian country, to ensure that it doesn't create such a trap for itself, must prioritise institutional quality through the principles of fairness, accountability and equity in handling the available natural resources. More so, the government should, in conjunction with the private sector, liberalise the handling of the country's resources. In addition to this, attention must be paid to economic development through the initiation of policies that aim at eradicating poverty, unemployment and exclusion. Finally, programmes targeted at the intentional creation of wealth, jobs, improved education and training must be formulated, implemented and regularly evaluated. This will reduce the competition for natural resources and control of state power will reduce, while the chances of conflicts will decline in the same dimension.

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