

ENGAGING WITH SAHELIAN TRANSITIONS

Changing Political and Geostrategic Context Calls for a New Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2020 and 2023 West Africa experienced a series of coups in Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023). This resurgence has occurred in a regional context marked by the fragility of democratic institutions, popular dissatisfaction with poor governance and corruption, and the inability of civilian regimes to respond effectively to the deteriorating security situation, particularly the expansion of terrorist networks in the Sahel. It is also part of a more fundamental challenge to externally shaped frameworks of engagement, often perceived as asymmetrical or imposed.¹

The military transitions underway in these countries have taken a course not seen since the 1990s. While Guinea officially ended its transition, which lasted more than four years, with the election of Mamadi Doumbouya in December 2025, this trajectory remains an exception. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the transitions have continued since 2020, 2022 and 2023, respectively.²

These three countries, now brought together within the Alliance of Sahel States (AES n.d.)—created in July 2024 following the withdrawal of all three countries from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (ISS 2024)—extended the mandates of their military leaders in 2025 without holding

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¹ This dynamic is certainly instrumentalized by military regimes, but it resonates, at least in part, with segments of the population and reflects a demand for greater political, symbolic and relational autonomy, often articulated in terms of sovereignty and dignity.

² The electoral process was nevertheless criticized for excluding major opposition figures and for essentially legitimizing the power of the head of the military junta.

elections, confirming a trend towards the long-term entrenchment of these regimes (Koné and Dramé 2025).³

This brief therefore assesses the modalities of engagement with the Sahelian transitions, starting from the observation that military regimes are consolidating. It outlines the contours of this consolidation, examines the legitimacy of the authorities in power and highlights the way in which they use international cooperation in the service of strategic autonomy. Finally, the brief considers three options for engagement with these new realities on the ground.

FROM TRANSITION TO THE AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION OF MILITARY POWER

On 29 January 2026 the military regime in Burkina Faso dissolved political parties (Sankare 2026). They had already been suspended since Captain Ibrahim Traoré seized power in September 2022. This dissolution forms part of a broader process of reconfiguring political space observed in the three countries of the central Sahel, which have been under military rule for several years. Similar measures had already been introduced in Niger and Mali in March and May 2025, respectively (Koné and Dramé 2025).

The legal frameworks governing the transitions have strengthened executive prerogatives in all three countries.

Control over political space has been accompanied by the closure of civic space, notably through restrictions imposed on civil society and freedom of expression and through the repression of dissenting voices. At the same time, the legal frameworks governing the transitions—the Charter of the Refoundation in Niger, the new Constitution in Mali and the (amended) Transitional Charter of Burkina Faso—have strengthened executive prerogatives in all three countries. This concentration of power reveals a paradoxical dynamic, since it had been identified as one of the institutional weaknesses that contributed to the overthrow of civilian regimes (International Crisis Group 2024; Niger 2025; Lefaso.net 2026).

In an international environment marked by the crisis of the multilateral system and the weakening of democratic levers, this tightening of political control has nevertheless prompted only limited forms of protest or external pressure. In this regard, by breaking with ECOWAS in January 2024—accusing it of imposing illegal sanctions against them under the influence of certain foreign powers—and by creating a new regional structure in July 2024 called the Alliance of Sahel States, the three military regimes effectively freed themselves from the external constraints weighing on them (AES n.d.; ISS 2024).⁴

³ It is important to note that the Alliance of Sahel States resembles a politico-strategic alignment more than a regional institution in the strict sense of the term. Its structures and decision-making mechanisms remain embryonic.

⁴ In accordance with the requirements of the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which calls for the rapid restoration of constitutional order through the organization of elections marking the end of the transition.

Each regime then initiated a national consultative process (Koné and Dramé 2024; ONEP Niger 2025; Sidwaya 2025), which, among other things, proposed extending the mandate of the military leaders serving as heads of state by five years, with no electoral timetable and with the possibility of mandate extension. The transitional legislative body in each country approved this change, thereby giving it a legal basis. However, although the consultative processes were initially presented as participatory, in practice the principle of inclusivity did not prevail. In all three cases, consultations were held while political parties were suspended. In addition, some influential social and political forces were sidelined in Niger (Echos du Niger 2025) and refused to participate in Mali (Koné and Dramé 2024).⁵

These changes to the political space not only reveal the desire to consolidate military rule over the long term. They also fundamentally reshape the democratic character of the political systems in the three countries and redirect the agenda of the ongoing transitions over a longer time horizon. This agenda is also taking shape through an openly authoritarian approach that the authorities justify by the urgent need, on the one hand, to preserve national cohesion in the face of the terrorist threat and, on the other, to build consensus around the project of refounding the state. This project of state refoundation, referred to in most foundational texts and official speeches, constitutes the programmatic basis of the political vision advanced by the three military regimes. It is based largely on a critique of previous civilian elites, accused of having failed, through their corruption and poor governance, to ensure security and socio-economic development. This vision largely justifies the restructuring of political space, making it possible to neutralize the influence of these elites and replace them with a more patriotic military elite. It also entails a more sovereigntist conception of the state's role, asserting the primacy of national strategic interests both in the choice of economic partnerships and in the direction of international cooperation.

THE THORNY QUESTION OF THE LEGITIMACY OF MILITARY POWER

The institutional entrenchment of military authorities and their long-term outlook nevertheless raise questions about the strength of their legitimacy. As already noted, this legitimacy rested on deep popular dissatisfaction with insecurity, socio-economic expectations, and a breakdown in the relationship between society and former elites. While the military authorities initially benefited greatly from popular support, what is the situation today? This is all the more difficult to assess because the political contexts have become less open and less tolerant of dissenting voices.

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⁵ The National Transitional Council in Mali, the Transitional Legislative Assembly in Burkina Faso and the Consultative Council for Refoundation in Niger.

Although the authorities in the three countries have made significant military efforts to reduce insecurity (substantial purchases of military equipment, mass recruitment of fighters, reorganization of operational chains, diversification of military partnerships and so on), major challenges persist in this area. Terrorist groups retain a significant operational capacity in all three countries, as illustrated by the continuation of large-scale attacks, the most recent being the attack on Diori Hamani International Airport in Niger’s capital, Niamey, in January (ADF 2026) and the siege of Bamako, Mali, in April 2026 (Appiah-Mensah 2026). According to the Global Terrorism Index, since 2024 the three countries have ranked among the countries most affected by terrorist violence worldwide (Institute for Economics & Peace 2025). Moreover, the socio-economic expectations that initially fuelled popular support for the coups have, for the most part, remained unmet.

In the absence of tangible results, the promise of restoring stability and refounding the state could quickly reach its limits. Although some segments of the population still view the consolidation of military regimes as a reordering rather than authoritarian entrenchment, the ability of the three countries to respond to structural challenges—in particular, by providing effective security and meeting socio-economic expectations—remains decisive for the long-term construction of state legitimacy. It also depends on building more inclusive and robust institutions capable of delivering these security and economic outcomes. In this context, the authoritarian orientation of institutional refoundation processes raises questions about the long-term viability of the reforms, given the role that the lack of inclusion played in the overthrow of civilian regimes.⁶

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The increase in international geostrategic rivalries and the weakening of multilateralism in recent years have also helped facilitate the long-term entrenchment of military regimes in the Sahel (Kanté et al. 2024). These regimes have demonstrated their ability to turn changes in an increasingly unstable international environment to their advantage.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE SERVICE OF STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

Internationally, the repositioning of military regimes, presented as a desire to diversify security and political partnerships, more fundamentally reflects a strategy of emancipation from traditional alliances and a desire to rebalance power relations in line with their interests.

Upon coming to power, the three military regimes denounced, and subsequently ended, their security cooperation with France, the former colonial power, which they regarded as ineffective in the fight against armed terrorist

⁶ The African experience suggests that military regimes have often reproduced or intensified the problems they claimed they wanted to solve when they came to power.

groups and incompatible with their new sovereigntist orientation. Following the same logic, they withdrew from multilateral cooperation mechanisms perceived as being under French influence in particular and Western influence more generally. The Malian authorities thus secured the departure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (Sow, Koné and Koné 2023). The three countries also withdrew from the G5 Sahel Joint Force, within which they had coordinated regional counterterrorism efforts with Chad and Mauritania. One of the grievances against ECOWAS that was used to justify their withdrawal from the regional bloc was the perception that the organization was driven by a Western strategic agenda.

At the same time, these regimes have pursued a strategic rapprochement with Russia in a context marked by increasing polarization in relations between Moscow and European countries because of the war in Ukraine. Beyond Russia, the three countries have strengthened their relations with other non-Western powers, notably China, Iran and Türkiye, as part of a strategy of diversifying sources of military, economic and diplomatic support that are less constraining and more closely aligned with their strategic priorities.⁷

Moreover, the three regimes continue to actively seek forms of international legitimacy, including through engagement with multilateral institutions such as the UN. However, the changing nature of their interactions with multilateral bodies reinforces the idea that this represents not so much a disengagement as a selective repositioning.

This redefinition contributes to the construction of a discourse of internal legitimation based on demands for respect for national sovereignty and the denunciation of external interference. Above all, however, it reflects a desire to reinvent the paradigm of international cooperation and place it at the service of the project of refounding the state. In this sense, tensions with European partners stem less from a wholesale rejection of cooperation than from the need to redefine it in light of national strategic priorities.

RETHINKING ENGAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSOLIDATED MILITARY POWER

The reconfiguration of geostrategic equilibria and the transformation of Sahelian political systems call for a redefinition of the timing and modalities of engagement with military transition authorities in the Sahel. These changes render traditional approaches to engagement with transitions obsolete and require a reinvention of strategies for intervention.

In such a context, the concept of transition does not necessarily refer to a transition in the democratic sense of the term. Whereas a democratic

⁷ In view of tensions between the European Union and the United States and the changes in the direction of US policy towards the Alliance of Sahel States countries, it is important to present a disaggregated analysis. This will form part of the first option proposed.

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transition is generally expected to be relatively short, involve the broadest possible range of socio-political actors and culminate in elections that mark the return of civilians to power, military regimes instead frame transition within a long-term horizon under the concept of state refoundation, centred on a form of military messianism that lies at the heart of the reform project. This situation calls for a rethinking of the timing of engagement, particularly with regard to what is feasible in the short term.

The reinvention of strategies for intervention is all the more necessary because the room for manoeuvre of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have long been the linchpin of Western engagement in the Sahel, has also narrowed. Indeed, as part of their efforts to assert sovereignty and reduce Western influence, the military regimes in the Sahel have imposed severe restrictions on international NGOs (Ekanem 2025). These measures include licence revocations, the suspension of operations and accusations of espionage or data breaches.

The discourse of the Sahelian regimes in this regard follows the broad lines of the arguments used to legitimize their actions. The aim is to protect sovereignty and promote national interests in a context of re-founding the state. This is reflected in directives issued by Niger's Ministry of the Interior, which instructed NGOs and development associations to align their activities with the regime's vision and priorities (Le Soleil 2025). It is also the message conveyed by President Traoré of Burkina Faso to justify the restrictions imposed on foreign NGOs.

In such a context, what options exist for promoting inclusivity? This analysis suggests that any reflection on this subject must start from the observation that the present moment is no longer one of transition towards democracy but one of the consolidation of military regimes. In such a context, alternative approaches must be considered to enable citizens to express their demands and participate in decision making outside the framework of electoral processes and the modalities of associative democracy. It is also essential to recognize the full implications of the closure of civic and associative spaces, as well as the attempts to control foreign NGOs, and to consider whether prioritizing the inclusion of community actors is a potential avenue to explore. Three options have been identified, as elaborated below.

Option 1: Deal directly with the regimes in power

As discussed above, the military regimes in the Sahel demand respect for national sovereignty and denounce external interference. In this context, they conceive of international cooperation as a tool for advancing national strategic priorities.

Such an approach creates opportunities for cooperation in connection with the responses developed by the three countries to address their structural challenges over the long term, in both socio-economic and security terms. Such cooperation would therefore be based on acceptance of the military regimes' strategic priorities and would contribute to addressing them. This

pragmatic approach seems to be reflected in the shift initiated in early February 2026 by the US administration, which, after denouncing the coups, announced the visit to Mali of Nick Checker, head of the Bureau of African Affairs at the US Department of State (Melly 2026). The announcement, affirming respect for Mali's sovereignty and emphasizing a desire to put relations between the two countries back on track, highlighted the shared security and economic interests of both countries. More recently, the European Union and the African Union Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) have likewise adopted a pragmatic approach and advocated engagement with governments.

In the short term, the first option would therefore be to work with—rather than try to bypass—the state. In such a constrained context, inclusion would need to be promoted in a manner consistent with the interests and priorities articulated by the military regimes. It is in this sense that the EU's decision to focus its re-engagement on areas such as food security and human security, in particular the protection of civilians and the fight against terrorism, can be understood.

While this analysis suggests that the security priorities of the military regimes are not particularly conducive to work on inclusion, it also highlights that the difficulties encountered in restoring security and improving socio-economic conditions could have a negative impact on their legitimacy. Engagement in favour of inclusion could thus be presented as a way to strengthen the regimes' legitimacy. It should be noted, however, that any cooperation with the regimes in this regard would entail a moral hazard, since this strategy could contribute to their consolidation rather than to any transition to democracy.

Option 2: Promote inclusion by working with society

The promotion of inclusion has often taken the form of cooperation with and support for local organizations and community actors through a bottom-up approach. However, as noted above, the room for manoeuvre of some international NGOs engaged in this work has now become limited.

Following the coup of July 2023, the military government in Niger suspended hundreds of local and international organizations. Although the ban on organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch was reported at the end of 2024, these organizations have not received official written notification. They therefore continue to operate under increased surveillance and restrictions. By contrast, the International Committee of the Red Cross was ordered to close its offices in June 2025 and suspended its activities after being accused by the government of interacting with armed groups (Business Insider Africa 2025).

In mid-2025 the military government of Burkina Faso revoked the licences of four foreign NGOs and suspended two others, accusing them of procedural violations and data breaches (Africa Briefing 2025). In July the International NGO Safety Organisation, a Dutch NGO, was suspended for collecting sensitive

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data without authorization, and eight of its staff members were arrested on allegations of espionage.⁸

In such a constrained context, two essential considerations must be taken into account—authorization to operate in the country and the safety of local partners. In order to take these into account, rather than insisting on the political dimension of inclusion, promoting inclusion could instead be reflected in the way international actors operate in the areas—however limited—in which they are authorized to work, such as food security, counterterrorism or any other priority of the military regimes. The aim would be to ensure that any cooperation, however technical, is designed and implemented in a participatory manner by involving the relevant local actors—NGOs and community actors—as equal partners in the development and implementation of programmes.⁹

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Practising inclusion through more technical activities could enable foreign actors to engage in this field without being suspended and without putting their Sahelian partners in danger. However, it must be acknowledged that this more technical form of inclusion risks remaining performative if it does not lead to engagement with the central issues of participation and accountability.

Option 3: Collaborate with Sahelian diasporas

A final option is to recognize that current conditions prevent any serious work on inclusion (and even more so on an inclusive transition) in the three Sahel countries. In such a case, the only remaining option is to work with the Burkinabe, Malian and Nigerien diasporas.

If this option were selected, it would be very important not to collaborate exclusively with former elites or with members of the opposition to the regimes. Such an approach would certainly be criticized by the military regimes as an attempt at interference and as further evidence, if any were needed, of Western countries' lack of respect for the sovereignty of Sahelian countries.¹⁰

Support for an inclusive dialogue within the diaspora, involving both supporters and critics of the military regimes, could enable Sahelian diasporas to contribute to the development of responses to the challenges facing their countries. Such an approach offers multiple advantages. On the one hand, it would allow the various political currents both supporting and opposing the military regimes to engage with one another, which is currently impossible within the three countries. On the other hand, it would enable the diasporas to contribute to reflection on the challenges facing their countries and to propose solutions rooted in a nuanced understanding of realities on the ground. Finally, a prior commitment by European countries to support the outcomes of such a

⁸ The NGO specializes in collecting the data needed for security assessments related to humanitarian operations in conflict zones.

⁹ That is, the participation of all components of society in debates on governance and discussions of public policy.

¹⁰ It is important to underline that this discourse not only earned the military regimes domestic support following the coups; it also resonated strongly among Sahelian diasporas in Europe.

dialogue, whatever they may be, could also signal a willingness to respect the choices of Sahelian populations and contribute, over the long term, to repairing relations between countries.

CONCLUSION

Military authorities in the Sahel are positioning themselves for the long term through projects aimed at the political refoundation of the state. This refoundation project is rooted in a sovereigntist repositioning. Emphasis is placed on respect for countries' decision-making autonomy, their national interests and their sovereign choice of strategic partners. This vision rejects any attempt to steer the national agenda from outside or to bypass the state's priorities and directives.

The entrenchment of military power is accompanied by an explicit dismantling of democratic gains. The state positions itself as the sole and hegemonic actor on the political stage. This evolution weakens civil society actors and makes any attempt to bypass the central state in implementing public initiatives particularly risky.

This situation obliges external actors to rethink the timing and modalities of their engagement. It calls for any international intervention to be calibrated to national priorities. Three options for promoting inclusion in this context have been identified. The first would be to work directly with military regimes that are open to cooperation that respects their national strategic priorities. The second would be to continue working with societal actors but to insist on the procedural rather than the political dimension of inclusion. The third would be to collaborate with Sahelian diasporas. The three options are not mutually exclusive, but each carries inherent risks and limitations, suggesting that promoting inclusion will require patient, long-term engagement.

The entrenchment of military power is accompanied by an explicit dismantling of democratic gains.

ABBREVIATIONS

ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
NGO	Non-governmental organization

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