

Democratic Recession, Autocratic Resurgence and The Future of Governance in Africa

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Introduction

Africa's growing population, untapped natural resources, and strategic geopolitical location make it an ideal candidate for major global powers such as the European Union (EU), China, Russia, and the United States (US) seeking to expand their influence and interests (Mintoiba, 2024). However, the extent of such international collaborations precipitating and entrenching authoritarian regimes in Africa remains deeply under-researched.

Immediately after independence, most African countries—torn between the double challenge of state-building and nation-building—embraced democracy from their colonial masters but soon slid into authoritarianism. Globally, the fall of communism produced three distinct trends: the first was the surge of democracy between 1990 and 2005, the second was the re-emergence of authoritarianism with its backlash against democracy in the mid-2000s, and finally an authoritarian surge spearheaded by China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela with a coordinated agenda to contain democracy at the global level (see Diamond et al., 2016). In Africa, the situation was not different, as authoritarian rule remained the absolute normality in its body politic, especially during the Cold War era (Akinola & Makombe, 2024; Yates, 2021).

Democracy is expected to ensure that fundamental liberties, as enshrined in national constitutions, are respected, and there is participation of citizens and equal benefits and privileges for all. However, democracy worldwide, especially liberal democracy, has come under intense scrutiny. From the United States and Europe to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, democracies are struggling to deal with the growth of far-right groups, democratic dictatorship, suppression, disregard for democratic institutions, the increasing use of violence against minorities, opposition figures, and the media, and the return to authoritarianism. For instance, the rise of Donald Trump and far-right groups in the United States; the behaviour of Viktor Orbán of Hungary and the rise of the far-right in Europe; the suppression of freedoms in Hong Kong and dictatorship in Myanmar in Asia; and the return to dictatorship and coups in Africa (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Gabon), entrenching democratic dictatorship (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Rwanda, and Uganda) and changing of term limits for the president (in Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, and Uganda) in Africa.

All these examples seem to depict *liberal democracy in crisis*. Also embroiled in this conundrum is the role of Russia and China in further declining prospects of democracy in Africa.

Democratic breakdown is the endpoint of the degradation of institutions, norms, and practices that uphold a democratic system. This is often facilitated by military coups and authoritarian consolidation. Democratic breakdown is a product of the erosion of judicial independence, suppression of media freedom, manipulation of elections, and disregard for constitutional limits (Bukari et al., 2023). The decline of institutions leads to power centralisation marked by loss of citizen participation, elimination of pluralism, and the rule of law, culminating in authoritarian control such as military dictatorship (Bao, 2022). While the West African sub-region has experienced a notable resurgence of coups (see Kynsilehto et al., 2023), such events are generally becoming rare in Africa. However, owing to the continuous promotion of *electocracy* over democracy, the overall democratic development is undermined by the growth of electoral autocracies (see Glasius, 2023; Maerz et al., 2020; Waldner & Lust, 2018). Thus, despite the resurgence of coups disrupting democratic stability and progress (see Kynsilehto et al., 2023), democracy and its advancement remain the norm. Consequently, ‘while it is tempting to interpret the spate of coups as evidence that democracy in Africa is dying, that would be a mistake. Even in the countries in which a coup has taken place, a majority of citizens want to live in a democracy and reject authoritarian rule’ (AfroBarometer, 2024). As a result, most leaders are coming through the civilian route via competitive electioneering campaigns and not the *Rambo-style* military takeovers (see Yates, 2021). Take Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, for example; having seized power from a democratically elected government in 1981, the fiery revolutionary quickly turned around and came to power as a democratically elected president between 1992 and 2000 (Haynes, 2023). In neighbouring Nigeria, two of the four republican presidents have already served as military leaders—President Olusegun Obasanjo (1976 to 1979) and President Muhammadu Buhari (1983 to 1985)—(Onwutuebe, 2022). While these recent events, including ‘Mugabe’s fall or the first peaceful transition of power in Liberia since 1944, has led to some to hope that a democratic wave sweeping across Africa remains possible, global geopolitics and internal dynamics of many African states make such a scenario unlikely’ (Huang, 2018, p. 1). Thus, even in the face of a democratic triumph, authoritarianism and autocratic leaders have found ways and reasons to consolidate their power, although maintaining their grip on power does not always come easily. Indeed, they must ward off threats of all forms, including from

pro-democracy groups and dissenters at home; stigmatization and illegitimacy of their authoritarian governance tactics abroad; conditionalities on critically needed aid or loans that prioritize democratic governance structures and policies; and evolving and increased security threats.

(Cottiero & Emmons, 2024, p. 3)

Therefore, to 'stabilize or entrench their rule, disrupt democratic civil society, and even extend the reach of repressive institutions beyond state boundaries', most autocrats continue to collaborate with both formal organisations and informal channels (Cottiero & Emmons, 2024, p. 3), possibly as one of the ways they try to insulate themselves from accountability to their people (Glasius, 2023).

In this chapter, we examine recent news reports considering the ideas of liberalism and neocolonialism to investigate the extent to which international collaborations entrench authoritarian regimes in Africa. In doing so, first, we will look at the concepts of liberalism and neocolonialism and how they underpin authoritarian politics in Africa. This will be followed by a review of authoritarian trends on the continent with emphasis on the role Russia and China play in consolidating authoritarian regimes in Africa. Such an understanding will, among other things, help in augmenting resistance towards autocratic regimes and cement the gains of democracy. We use a case study of the Sahel to show how authoritarianism has been entrenched. We finally look at the implications of support for authoritarian powers in Africa, both economically and security-wise.

Theoretical Review on Authoritarian Politics and African Democracy

Liberalism

To grasp the complexity of the task at hand, it is imperative to engage the concepts of liberalism and neocolonialism. Liberalism is rooted in the principles of individual liberty, individual rights, and limited government responsibilities. The theory of liberalism, which has its origins in the basic works of Locke (1967) and Mill (1859), has profoundly influenced modern democratic governance, especially in its ability to emphasise the rule of law and the protection of individual liberties. According to Meiser (2018), the core argument of liberalism is that ensuring the rights of an individual person is the highest goal of government. Thus, the well-being of the individual is the basis of every democracy. Classical theorists such as John Locke (1967) argue for limited government as a safeguard for personal freedoms and property rights. Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville expanded on these ideas, advocating for local self-governance and checks and balances as ways to protect individual rights (Samet & Schmeidler, 2003).

The central principles of liberalism include freedom, (human) rights, reason, progress, toleration, and the norms of constitutionalism and democracy. Liberalism is deeply embedded in Western political culture and ethos. Liberal policies prioritise market-driven efficiency and democratic fairness (Foucault, 2008) and (Brown, 2015). Liberalism underpins democratic governance by protecting individual rights and the common good. Samet and Schmeidler (2003) highlight the principle of consent as a tool for ensuring this balance. While modern liberalism builds on these classical ideals or principles, it has evolved to address contemporary challenges. Amartya Sen's liberal paradox illustrates the tension between individual liberties and social responsibilities, emphasising the need

for balance (Samet & Schmeidler, 2003). Modern critiques of liberalism focus on its limitations in fostering democratic solidarity. Foucault (2008) critiques neoliberalism's emphasis on economic efficiency, arguing that it undermines social welfare and public participation. Brown (2015) expands on this and contends that neoliberalism reduces citizens to consumers, weakening the democratic foundations. One other critique of liberalism is the conflict that often arises when liberalism's focus on individual freedoms intersects with democracy. According to Deneen (2019), liberalism's focus on personal independence and liberties erodes community bonds and democratic solidarity. He argues that prioritising individual freedoms over collective values and actions weakens social cohesion necessary for sustaining healthy democracies.

The relationship between liberalism and democracy, especially during transitions, is evident in cases like Eastern Europe's democratisation in the late twentieth century. In countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, liberal principles like individual rights and freedom of speech provided a basis for the opposition of authoritarian regimes and democratic reforms (Samet & Schmeidler, 2003). However, neoliberal economic reforms often caused these changes, resulting in widening wealth gaps and exacerbating social exclusion, challenging the balance between liberalism and democratic values like equality and justice (Samet & Schmeidler, 2003). Similar issues arose in East Asia after the 1997 financial crisis. While neoliberal policies increased economic growth in nations like Thailand and Indonesia, they deepened social inequality and limited democratic participation (Jayasuriya, 2005). The 2008 financial crisis further exposed neoliberalism's failure to balance economic freedom with equality, as deregulation caused instability and benefited the wealthy (Brown, 2015).

Liberalism and democracy not only share some similarities but also differ in significant ways. While liberalism provides a strong basis for protecting individual freedoms, its practical application often clashes with social justice and community well-being. Empirical evidence from neoliberal reforms and democratic transitions highlights both the strengths and limitations of liberalism in advancing democratic ideals. Both Deneen (2019) and Brown (2015) note that to do this, we need a more balanced approach that integrates liberal principles with democratic values of inclusion, equality, and shared responsibility.

Neocolonialism

The concept of neocolonialism has its roots in the thinking and writings of Dr Kwame Nkrumah. In his *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah, a pacesetter in the fight against colonialism and imperialism in Africa, theorises the tactics and reasoning behind how erstwhile colonial powers' attempt to *recolonise* newly created independent countries globally, especially in Africa, through perhaps more insidious means than they have done in the past. In theory, while a neo-colonial state possesses all the outward trappings of sovereign states, '(i)n reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside' (Nkrumah, 1965, p. ix). Most often, neocolonialists are former colonial masters,

but sometimes other powers can take control, as was the case with South Vietnam, which was controlled by the United States instead of France. These neocolonial powers can also be a consortium of international financiers who are not necessarily connected to any state, as was the case in Congo. By exposing the neocolonial tendencies, the goal is to prevent the rich and powerful from impoverishing the underdeveloped countries.

Neocolonialism operates through economic dependency, political influence, and cultural domination, often masked as development aid or international cooperation (Altbach, 1971). Unlike direct control under traditional colonialism, neocolonialism uses indirect mechanisms, maintaining the exploitative relationship under the guise of partnership and progress. According to Subramani and Kempner (2002), while colonialism and neocolonialism exhibit many similarities, a key distinction is the subtle nature of neocolonial rule. The authors assert that, unlike the overt control typical of colonialism, neocolonial influence operates covertly, often masquerading as development or collaboration. Similarly, Grosfoguel (2007) notes that former colonising powers continue to shape the landscapes of developing countries, particularly those they once colonised, through economic, political, and cultural means. This influence is enacted through international organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, NATO, and other organisations such as NGOs/CSOs. Moreover, mechanisms like global capitalism, free-market policies, deregulation, privatisation, and the promotion of Western democratic values help sustain this form of dominance. Hopkyns (2014) posits that globalisation is frequently perceived as a modern form of imperialism and a vital instrument of neocolonialism. It functions as a 'double-edged sword', cultivating connections while simultaneously expanding control (Hopkyns, 2014). Hopkyns thus argues that globalisation has emerged as a contemporary means of neocolonisation, subtly reinforcing dominant regimes under the guise of cooperation.

Nkrumah (1965) argues that while African nations achieved political independence, their economies remained under the grip of former colonial powers. Multinational corporations, trade agreements, and foreign aid serve as tools of economic control, keeping African countries politically dependent and economically weak. Nkrumah's analysis is reinforced in the work of Amin (1976), who locates neocolonialism within the global capitalist system. Amin states that African countries are pushed to specialise in exporting raw materials while relying on industrialised nations for manufactured goods, perpetuating an unequal trade structure that hinders meaningful development. Frank (1967) also contends that the legacy of colonialism perpetuates underdevelopment in the Global South. Similarly, Rodney (1972) underscores that foreign direct investment continues to extract value from developing nations to enrich industrialised economies. Rodney illustrates how multinational corporations exploit African resources with the help of local elites, ensuring the persistence of economic systems established during colonial rule. Rodney's critique aligns with Fanon's (1961) assertion that colonial powers created economic systems designed to benefit themselves at the expense of the colonies. Fanon further notes that international corporations have replaced colonial

powers as the primary exploiters of African resources, while development aid and loans entrench African nations in cycles of debt and dependency.

Authoritarian Politics and Liberal Democracy in Africa

Liberal democracy in Africa is facing enormous challenges for economic, social, political, and even cultural development. The rise of populism and perceptions of democracy not meeting citizens' needs and producing dividends are giving rise to support for authoritarianism. Democracy hinges on consensus, the principle of majority rule, respect for human rights, and good governance. When the state operates as an effective entity, this hinges on three core factors: the monopoly of the legitimate use of force, effective institutions, and national consensus; thus, coercive power, administrative power, and cultural hegemony (Aberg, 2018). The Westphalian ideal of the state is rendered as where 'authority is one, bureaucracy is one and the nation is one' (Aberg, 2018, p. 51). It is this conception of the oneness of the state that often leads to what has been described as 'internal colonialism'. Internal unity is desirable for states to operate, but the desire for this unity often engenders domination of some social groups by others. Casanova (1965, p. 33) defines internal colonialism as 'a structure of social relations based on domination and exploitation among culturally heterogeneous, distinct groups'. This is simply the domination of a population by another population, resulting ultimately in marginalisation, inequality, and uneven development. Democracy often provides this leeway for the state to meet the needs of all citizens and reduce this marginalisation, inequality, and uneven development. However, when democracies fail to do so, they give way for authoritarian regimes to flourish.

Authoritarian regimes are defined by limited political pluralism and controlled opposition (Linz, 2000). Gerschewski (2013) outlines three key characteristics of autocratic stability: legitimisation, repression, and co-optation. According to Jost et al. (2003) and Levitsky and Way (2010), external influences, such as international relations, impact the resilience of authoritarianism. Authoritarianism, characterised by centralised authority, restricted political diversity, and limited personal freedoms, has been a feature of African political systems, especially following the post-colonial era. Authoritarian regimes and leaders seek to consolidate power and authority. Discussions about transitions from authoritarian rule to democracy since the post-colonial era up to the present have been of great concern, especially with the re-emergence of military rule in West Africa and the desire of democratic leaders to extend their term limits. Thus, the persistence of authoritarian traits, despite the resurgence of liberal democracy since the 1990s, has continued to shape governance, liberalism, and democracy in Africa.

Importantly, authoritarian regimes employ tactics such as suppression of dissent to consolidate power and maintain their control. In the use of political repression, security forces are used to silence dissent (Bayart, 1993). Another key characteristic of such regimes is 'big man' politics, which is characterised by personalised governance and clientelism. This type of leadership is what Jean-François Bayart called 'politics of the belly', characterised by patronage systems, corruption,

personal allegiance through financial benefits, and material incentives weakening opposition and reinforcing authoritarianism (Bayart, 1993). There is also the manipulation of institutions, especially through control of state institutions, to tighten their grip on power (Cheeseman, 2015). The roots of authoritarianism in Africa can be traced back to the post-decolonisation era in the mid-1900s, when many African countries inherited centralised administrative systems from colonial rulers (Mamdani, 1996). According to Mamdani (1996), authoritarian systems were designed to prioritise control over participation and relied on indirect governance and the suppression of opposition, as was the case in Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah. These systems rolled back political dissent and ensured the entrenchment of leaders who ruled without opposition. After independence, instead of dismantling authoritarian systems, post-independence African leaders reinforced authoritarianism through single-party regimes and military rule in some cases (Mamdani, 1996). For example, early post-independence leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania justified authoritarian measures as necessary for fostering national unity and economic development and eliminating opposition. They stated that multi-partyism anchored on liberalism was alien to African political systems. They argued that a strong central authority was essential for bridging ethnic divides, stabilising new states, and implementing ambitious development initiatives.

During the Cold War, authoritarianism was further entrenched by both the Western and Eastern blocs, which, in a bid to secure more allies in Africa, provided financial and military assistance to authoritarian governments or regimes and even overthrew governments and regimes that did not align with their ideologies—liberalism and socialism (Schraeder, 1995). This external backing, according to Schraeder (1995), enabled dictatorial leaders to maintain their grip on power and entrenched their rule. Western and international collaboration thus helped in fostering authoritarian regimes in Africa. International actors, particularly Western states, in a bid to entrench liberalism and neoliberal policies, helped militaries and opposition figures to overthrow such regimes that were not aligned to Western ideals.

Following the shift to multi-party democracies in the 1990s, some African countries continue to have authoritarian regimes, some laced with democratic features and described as hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Levitsky and Way (2010) describe these systems as 'competitive authoritarianism', where elections are organised and exist but lack genuine freedom and fairness. While democratic institutions are present, ruling elites manipulate these structures to suppress opposition and consolidate power. Regimes often have international collaborations and support to entrench their grip on power. For instance, regimes in Rwanda and Ethiopia are celebrated internationally for economic progress but are marked by authoritarianism, strict media control, suppression of dissent, and undermining of political freedoms (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These examples highlight how economic advancement and authoritarianism often coexist, masking deep control and complicating genuine democratic transition (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The link between liberal democracy and authoritarian politics in Africa can be seen in different ways. One such linkage

is the dependency of Africa on foreign assistance and support. This dependency limits state autonomy and often compels governments to prioritise securing external support over addressing domestic demands for reform (Frank, 1967). External influences and economic dependency allow for collaborations with international organisations to influence autocratic regimes. Even neoliberalism and neocolonialism, due to the influence of Western powers, have supported authoritarian regimes in Africa.

International Collaborations of Autocratic Regimes

There has been a great onslaught by major powers—both Western and non-Western alike—to influence the course of the African political landscape (see Akinola & Makombe 2024). While this is not new to Africa, with America’s abandonment of the continent post-Cold War, a huge vacuum was created, which China and Russia now seek to fill (Rubin, 2023). Both China and Russia have, since the last couple of decades, transmogrified from marginal stakeholders to great powers in Africa. While China has focused, to a very large extent, on asserting its influence through economics, Russia’s focus has been on militarisation (see Mintoiba, 2024).

China’s rise has mostly followed a calibrated attempt to expand and consolidate its global economic might (see Ramani, 2021; Mintoiba, 2024), although it is visible in some areas from peacekeeping through to a somewhat complex militarisation of the continent (see Akinola & Makombe 2024). Between 2005 and 2022, for example, the balance of trade has continuously tilted in favour of China. As of 2022, China-Africa trade stood at around US\$261 billion. From 2013 to 2018, Africa was the recipient of 45% of China’s foreign aid, which has risen from a marginal amount of US\$631 million in 2003 to US\$3.11 billion in 2022 (China Africa Research Initiative, 2024). According to Akinola and Makombe (2024, p. 12), China’s investment approach, in contrast to Western powers and Bretton Woods institutions, ‘does not come with a premium on pluralist democracy. Because of this, African autocratic leaders have enjoyed closer relations with Beijing, benefiting from its financial benevolence and expanding its influence over the continent’s resource wealth’. It is worth noting that as a way of protecting its huge investments and perhaps its estimated million population in Africa, China has been heavily involved in the provision and deployment of security, made manifest in its over 20 private security organisations, mostly in Nigeria and South Africa. That notwithstanding, China has carefully avoided dangerous zones like Mali and the Central African Republic (Mintoiba, 2024).

In contrast, Russia’s involvement in Africa has been conspicuous through the co-opting of leaders mostly isolated by the West and follows a playbook already tested—from Syria and Eastern Ukraine, through Libya, among other areas. Take Wagner’s activities in the Central African Republic, for example, where Russia’s Valery Zakharov acted as a national security adviser with Wagnerian troops operating as presidential guards (see Siegle, 2021). Consequently, Russia was even very pivotal in the re-election campaign/re-election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. China has supported authoritarian regimes in Malaysia, Cuba, Egypt,

Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Angola, Algeria, and the Philippines. According to Inboden (2022, 508):

These countries do not fit neatly into the category of authoritarian, most of them have troubled human rights records and are not democratic. These nations appeared to be bound by a sense of solidarity in resisting what they perceive as unfair and selective human rights scrutiny from the West and they also articulate an anti-western, anti-imperialist sentiment.

Authoritarian leaders are actively collaborating with one another to spread new forms of repression and rebuff democratic pressure (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2023). According to Repucci and Slipowitz (2023), in some cases, authoritarian assistance is largely economic. In Africa, Chinese support for autocratic regimes has come in the form of grants and loans, security support, and natural resource management. Russia has supported autocratic regimes in West Africa, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and Guinea, militarily through its Wagner Group.

According to Repucci and Slipowitz (2023), the number of autocratic regimes has increased over the years. They contend that autocratic and authoritarian regimes have become more effective and cooperative with one another. In particular, China and Russia have grown increasingly powerful and are actively working to influence many countries in the Global South. These powers have leveraged economic, political, and security measures to promote and entrench autocratic regimes. Data from Freedom House reveals that over 16 countries have transitioned into some form of autocracy due to a decline in freedoms and democracy globally. In fact, the data highlights that democracy has declined over the past 16 years, with 16 countries experiencing setbacks, while only 25 countries have shown improvement in terms of democratic regime.

Data from Freedom House from 1997 to 2023 show the decline in democracy and freedom has been particularly alarming. This trend is especially evident in countries like Tunisia, Nicaragua, Myanmar, Mali, and Iran, which have all seen significant declines in freedom. A key factor behind this trend is the growing international influence of autocratic regimes, especially through the subtle power exerted by China and its ruling Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has played a significant role in entrenching autocratic norms, often under the guise of state sovereignty. The principle of sovereignty, where states assert that no external authority should interfere in their affairs, has been exploited to shield autocrats from accountability.

Another mechanism used by these regimes is flawed elections. While these elections may appear legitimate, they are often state-controlled and managed without adhering to international norms. Such elections lack genuine competition, suppress dissent, and silence opposition voices. While these regimes maintain the outward appearance of democracy, they undermine fundamental democratic principles. Public dissent is stifled, opposition voices are marginalised, and the rights and freedoms of citizens are routinely disregarded.

Autocratic leaders are now collaborating to entrench norms of suppression and resist democratic pressures. In many cases, these autocrats cooperate economically and through investments to reinforce their agendas. They have also devised strategies to support and sustain regimes that curtail freedoms and limit people's rights to defend themselves. For example, in the Sahel region, the rise of violent extremism and terrorism has created an opportunity for autocratic powers to exert influence. Russia's Wagner Group has supported the military rulers of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad in their efforts to combat violent extremism. At the same time, it has bolstered and endorsed autocratic regimes. These nations have played a critical role in providing security arrangements, including sector reforms and protection, to countries grappling with instability. When French forces were expelled from these nations, Russia stepped in to fill the resulting security vacuum. By providing military support, Russia has sought to strengthen security while simultaneously entrenching military rule and authoritarianism. This has been done without advocating for opposition voices to be heard or for a return to democracy. In some ways, this reflects an attempt to counter the liberal values traditionally associated with promoting democracy.

France's role, particularly in Francophone West Africa, is also noteworthy. Historically, France has supported leaders who align with its interests. When leaders deviate from France's agenda, it often finds ways to undermine or overthrow them. Burkina Faso serves as a notable example. The country's history is marked by coups and countercoups, including the overthrow and assassination of Thomas Sankara, a leader who refused to bow to French demands. The influence of France and its colonial legacy remains deeply entrenched in West Africa. While France ostensibly promotes liberalism and democracy, it has simultaneously supported and surreptitiously facilitated the rise of authoritarian leaders in the region. For instance, Blaise Compaoré enjoyed unwavering support from France during his rule in Burkina Faso, which lasted until a popular uprising forced him out of power. Even after his departure, Compaoré's influence remained significant, due to his close cooperation with France and other allies. Similar patterns can be observed in countries like Mali and Niger, where France has wielded substantial influence over governance.

The above demonstrates the complex interplay between international collaboration and authoritarianism. On the one hand, autocratic powers like China and Russia have played a prominent role in supporting authoritarian regimes in Africa and the Global South. These powers have strategically aligned themselves with authoritarian governments to advance their interests and reinforce autocratic norms. At the same time, some democracies have adopted contradictory practices. While publicly advocating for democracy and liberal values, they have often supported or even installed autocratic leaders who align with their geopolitical and economic interests. These leaders are typically those who provide access to valuable resources or uphold policies favourable to these external powers. We demonstrate these collaborations further with the case of recent happenings in the central Sahel.

The Case of China's Role in the Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger)

The Sahel remains one of the most unsuitable environments in the world in terms of climate/environment, security, governance challenges, and resource use due to issues of competition and allocation. It covers a total land area of 3.053 million km². The Sahel comprises the states of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Mauritania. The Sahel faces a number of grievances and security challenges, such as violent conflicts, terrorism, and the rise of insurgency and banditry. Major issues underlining grievances in the Sahel include inequitable representation in governance, underdevelopment, economic crisis, youth discontent, unemployment, corruption, marginalisation of some groups, and inequitable allocation and misuse of revenue for resources such as uranium, gold, and oil (Venturi, 2019; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2023). Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso rank systematically at the bottom of international indexes such as the Fragile State Index, the UN Development Programme's Human Development Index, and the World Bank's governance indicators (Venturi, 2019).

In terms of governance, the Sahel faces many challenges ranging from political instability, violent ethnic conflicts, weak institutions, food insecurity, and security challenges marked by terrorism and insurgency. Many of the Sahelian states have had cycles of insecurity and instability, which have exacerbated underdevelopment and entrenched authoritarian rule. Bøås and Strazzari (2020, p. 3) describe governance in the Sahel as:

The Sahel can be seen as a region in crisis as it confronts policymakers with a whole range of serious challenges—fragile institutions, poverty, food insecurity, population displacement, transnational crime and jihadist insurgency, among others—which appear to be exacerbated by the effects of climate change. Today, the question of state stability in the region is more prominent on the international agenda than it has ever been, and the magnitude of external assistance and intervention is unprecedented.

One major challenge is political instability and several coups in the region. Military takeovers have become a major characteristic of the Sahel, marked by military dictatorship and the suspension of democratic rule. Three of the countries in the Sahel have recently experienced coups—Burkina Faso in 2022, Mali in 2021, and Niger in 2023. Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger together have experienced a total of 26 coups, with seven being unsuccessful attempts (Mbiande, 2024). Under military rule, there has been a suspension of democratic rule, constitutions, the rule of law, and human rights and a realignment of relations with the West, especially France. Regime changes and recent coups in the Sahel have seen the involvement of new military and economic cooperations with China and Russia, and the abandonment of old alliances with Western powers. Mbiande (2024) states that regime changes in the global North are influenced by the global South. According to Mbiande (2024, p. 3), '[T]he process of change often results in a return to authoritarianism, or the emergence of revolutionary systems The oscillation between non-representative

regimes and democracy is frequently a consequence of political and social instability, originating from social and economic inequalities between the wealthy and the poor. As such, political transitions are often easier to achieve during periods of economic recession due to the lower associated costs’.

France’s role in the Sahel has been well-documented. France has had very extensive economic, military, and political links in Africa, both from the colonial era to date (Carmody, 2011). These economic and military cooperations have had both negative and positive outcomes in the Sahel. France’s desire to still want to have a grip over its former colonies in the Sahel and much of West Africa has led to backlash, with citizens and military rulers cutting ties with France. French military bases in the Sahel have been dismantled, and even the United States African Command (AFRICOM) in Niger has been dismantled. The Sahelian countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are seeking alliances, both economically and militarily, with China and Russia.

The role of China and Russia in entrenching military rule and supporting authoritarian regimes cannot be underestimated. China’s interest in the Sahel, just like the rest of Africa, has grown exponentially. Chinese companies are now investing heavily in Africa. The interest is not just economic but also military. China is accessing African resources, which involves inducements such as concessional loans, the construction of Special Economic Zones, or proxy forces, such as the building of arms and tank assembly plants in Sudan and the supply of weapons to Zimbabwe (Carmody, 2011, p. 20). China’s relations with the five Sahel countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger—have been historic and have been both a challenge and an opportunity for China (Ursu, 2019). Recent relations have been more economic. Militarily, China is supporting counterterrorism measures against violent extremists and terrorists and increasing advocacy for support for security in the Sahel against violence and terrorism.

Clear examples of China’s support for authoritarianism can be seen from the case of China’s support for uranium and oil extraction in Niger. According to Ursu (2019), China received one of the 150 contracts that were offered to bidders by the Nigerien Government in 2007. From that period to 2009, China invested approximately US\$300 million into the Azelik mine, eventually toppling France’s investment in the country (Ursu, 2019). Niger’s return to military rule in 2023 has led to establishing stronger ties with China. Another example is China’s military support for seeking stability in Mali. According to Ursu (2019, p. 131):

China has changed from being a low-profile country to a deeply involved one. Before 2010, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) would only deploy non-combatant personnel to peacekeeping operations. However, in 2012, the country decided to engage more vigorously in UNPKO by sending troops first to South Sudan and then to Mali in 2013.

China has contributed 403 troops in Mali as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and, on its own, has

militarily given arms support to countries in the Sahel. China's role in Mali is also deep, and it is seen to want to bolster its economic and political interests.

Importantly, since the coups in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, China has worked with the military governments and appears to be supporting them economically and militarily, though limited. It must also be emphasised that Russia has played a more forceful role in military support than China has. Russia has used its Wagner Group, as indicated earlier, to support the military regimes and seems to have replaced the French military presence and AFRICOM in the Sahel. China, on the other hand, seemed to be playing softly and diplomatically while supporting the entrenchment of the rule of military dictatorship in the Sahel. China's new role in Burkina Faso, despite shaky relations because of Burkina Faso's 24 years of loyalty to Taiwan, has seen new diplomatic relations between them (Ursu, 2019). Burkina Faso and China re-established relations in 2016, and with the coming in of Ibrahim Traoré and his anti-Western posture, China has again found economic solace with the Sahelian country. China's interest in gold in Burkina Faso has since grown and seen its soft power involvement in military and economic support in the Sahel.

Thus, the mechanisms China uses in bolstering authoritarianism in the Sahel are economic relations, military support, its non-interference policy, and soft power.

Why Are Authoritarian Regimes Attractive?

Both the West, particularly France, and the East (China and Russia) are complicit in their support for authoritarian regimes. The big question is, what makes them so attractive in the first place? On 7 January 2025, Ghana inaugurated its sixth President, John Dramani Mahama, under its fourth republican constitution. This event was one of the many electoral rituals that highlight Ghana's commitment to democracy. Among the invited guests was Ibrahim Traoré, the interim president of Burkina Faso since September 2022, when he and his associates ousted the then interim president and military leader, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba (see Naadi, 2025). Although the BBC report did capture the varied opinions regarding the display of weapons at the ceremony by the Burkinabes. However, it did downplay the loud cheers and applause that followed when Ibrahim Traoré took his turn to congratulate the newly elected president, in contrast to the jeers directed at the outgoing president, Nana Addo Danquah. It is instructive to note that the former entity has successfully established Burkina Faso's first locally funded tomato processing factory within a span of 462 days (approximately 1.5 years) at an expenditure of FCFA 7.5 billion, equivalent to approximately US\$11.7 million. This initiative is anticipated to generate 187 direct employment opportunities and approximately 10,000 indirect jobs. Conversely, the latter entity has allocated US\$58 million towards a cathedral construction project, which is projected to have a total cost of US\$400 million.

In this chapter, our focus is not on Ghana or the pageantry often associated with these inauguration ceremonies. Instead, we examine the factors that strengthen, entrench, and sustain authoritarian regimes, including those that still openly wield guns. What our chapter suggests is that although 'authoritarian regimes have

become more effective at co-opting or circumventing the norms and institutions meant to support basic liberties, and at providing aid to others who wish to do the same' (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p. 1), it has become even more necessary due to the failure of democracy and its proponents to deliver the anticipated democratic benefits, thereby undermining the belief that democracy is the most reliable route to prosperity and security (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Conversely, instead of democratic promotion, liberalism now remains a phase for authoritarian entrenchment (Woldense & Kroeger, 2024). In his article on why democracy fails in Africa, Attou (2024) suggests that the miseducation of citizens in many countries, along with the pursuit of individual parochial interests among the political class, is to blame. Within the African context, authoritarianism includes one-party rule and military dictatorship, which have been dubbed the twin woes of Africa and are believed to be responsible for more of the continent's troubles than any other known tragic occurrence (Darkwa, 2022).

Currently, six African countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Sudan—are governed by military juntas (see Ezeugwu & Chinweuba, 2024). In contrast, many democratically elected leaders in Africa operate *de facto* one-party states, which contravene democratic principles. Teodoro Obiang, Africa's longest-serving leader, has been in power in Equatorial Guinea since 1979. He is followed by Paul Biya of Cameroon, who has served as president since 1982. In the Republic of Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso has cumulatively ruled for 39 years, from 1979 to 1992 and from 1997 to the present. Yoweri Museveni has governed Uganda since 1986, following the overthrow of Milton Obote and Idi Amin, although the legitimacy of periodic elections remains questionable. King Mswati III has ruled Eswatini since 1986. Eritrea has been under the leadership of Isaias Afwerki since its secession from Ethiopia in 1993. King Letsie III has been the monarch of Lesotho since 1997, while Ismaïl Omar Guelleh has been president of Djibouti since succeeding his uncle, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, in 1999. King Mohammed VI has ruled Morocco for the past 26 years, and Paul Kagame has led Rwanda since 2000. This list is not exhaustive (see, e.g. Palitza, 2016; Maoto, 2018; Van Wyk, 2007). 'Focusing on the elite coalitions undergirding autocracies', Woldense and Kroeger (2024, p. 178) contend that, contrary to the thinking that the post-Cold War period had a marginal effect on authoritarianism in Africa, it rather 'sparked profound changes in the constellation of alliances within regimes. It was an international event whose ripple effects altered the domestic political landscape and thereby enticed elite coalitions to transform and meet the new existential threat they faced'. Even so, a new era was created that allowed most leaders to reset and recalibrate the relationships with major powers.

In 2012, although Afrobarometer polls recorded a steep drop of preference for democracy from 75% to 66% of Africa, some 53% said that they would be inclined to legitimise coups if elected leaders abused their mandate. Even worse, 72% of South Africans were willing to embrace any non-democratic leader who can tackle crime, housing, and unemployment (see *The Economist*, 2023). That autocracies continue to thrive, we argue, is a failure of the liberal democracy with its promise of 'self-government in which human rights are recognized and every individual is

entitled to equal treatment under law' (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p. 1). Indeed, evidence suggests that democracy has not been able to alleviate Africa from poverty (see Carlson & McKie, 2023; Ntodwa et al., 2024), nor is it able to tackle the problem of insecurity.

For the most part, neoliberal policies and their socio-economic consequences have shaped African democracies, contributing to public discontent, unemployment, and creating openings for military intervention (Davies, 2014). For instance, Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s and 1990s and recent economic policies by Bretton Wood Institutions and Western countries often emphasise economic liberalisation and privatisation in Africa. These policies have in a way affected the true functioning of democracy in Africa because they have led to widening inequalities and socio-economic disparities in some cases and democratic backsliding, leading to democratic dictatorship and strongmen.

Although bilateral and multinational funders often promote liberal democratic goals as conditions for their donations, there is evidence of their complicity in abandoning these goals in favour of development policies. A classic example is the push for technocratic development goals like the Millennium Development Goals. The fact that Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, and Rwanda—countries with pseudo-one-party systems notorious for hindering democratic processes and criminalising political dissent—were among the most significant aid recipients in 2013 highlights this issue (Hagmann & Reyntjens, 2016a, 2016b). Such a stance, we contend, has the power of emboldening autocratic regimes.

This relates to the subject of neocolonialism, which replicates all the trappings and characteristics of colonialism and imperialism, albeit in a more surreptitious way (Nkrumah, 1965), to which France remains a major accomplice. As King (2022, p. 1) notes, 'France projects itself as being detached from neocolonialism. In some respects, there is reason to believe this claim'. However, in Francophone West and Central Africa, it will appear that the wholesale independence in the 1960s could not sever the colonial ties, as France continued to exert not just economic but also military and even political influence. France continues to pursue its policy of *la Françafrique*, which involves covertly vetting and supporting African political elites, including those considered autocratic. This policy also includes managing the CFA monetary zone, encompassing 12 former French colonies, as well as Guinea-Bissau and Equatorial Guinea (King, 2022). The CFA was first pegged against the French currency and subsequently the euro, subsequently led to fiscal stability of a sort. As King (2022, p. 1) succinctly notes:

However, member states traded decreased inflation for fiscal restraint and limited macroeconomic options. One of the founding principles of the system was that colonies had to keep 50 percent of their foreign currency reserves in the French Treasury, plus an additional 20 percent for financial liabilities. Thus, member states only retained 30 percent of reserves within their borders. The long-term direct economic trade-offs of the CFA monetary zone have included both diminished per capita growth and mitigated progress in fighting poverty.

The emergence of China and other nations adds a new dimension to the neocolonial debate. China's growing influence in Africa and its investment and exploitation of resources represent a new form of neocolonialism (see Alden, 2007). Although China has overtly avoided political interference, the granting of loans, resource extraction, and infrastructure projects clearly mirror colonial patterns of exploitation (neocolonialism). According to Carmody (2011), Chinese investments prioritise projects that benefit China's economy, deepening Africa's resource dependency. The tendency, according to Carmody, is for many African governments to embrace China as an alternative to Western dominance, while others criticise its exploitative practices.

The role of neocolonialism in African democracy and governance systems shows clearly how both Western states and countries like China and Russia continue to shape African political governance, institutions, and centralised authority imposed by colonial powers. Such structural challenges hinder participatory governance, often leading to authoritarian rule. Importantly, neocolonialism in Africa continues to manifest through the collaboration of autocratic regimes with foreign powers and multinational corporations. These collaborations serve mutual interests: Foreign powers maintain economic and strategic influence in Africa, while autocratic regimes secure financial and military support to sustain their rule.

According to Dos Santos (1970), dependency structures created by neocolonialism perpetuate authoritarianism in a way that foreign powers often favour stable autocratic partners who can guarantee access to resources and markets. This prioritisation of regime survival over national development, as both authors observed, entrenches underdevelopment and suppresses democracy (Dos Santos, 1970). Similarly, Rodney (1972) argues that collaborations between autocratic regimes and multinational corporations often prioritise resource extraction for foreign profits over the needs of local communities. He cites the examples of oil-rich Nigeria and Angola, where elites benefit while impoverishing the masses. Also, multinational corporations are also complicit in entrenching authoritarian regimes. Ferguson (2006) notes that multinational corporations often prefer centralised, authoritarian governments to facilitate resource contracts, reinforcing autocratic rule by providing financial resources to suppress opposition. It is worth touching on the role of emerging powers like China in perpetuating neocolonialism and authoritarianism. Both Taylor (2009) and Alden (2007) note that China's so-called non-interference policy and unconditional aid provide autocratic regimes with alternatives to Western support, further reducing international pressure for democratic reforms.

Implications of International Support for Authoritarian Regimes in Africa

According to Mbiande (2024), democratic disruptions and authoritarian regimes have far-reaching effects on development, economic stability, and security. The author notes that military interventions not only interrupt the democratisation process in many African countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger but equally reduce the population's attachment to democracy and entrench a new form of neocolonialism

as well as economic and security dependency not on the West but on countries rising to challenge the dominance of the West, especially the United States. As clearly seen in the case of the Sahel, China, through soft power, is forging relations with the new autocratic regimes in the Sahel, both economically and militarily.

Authoritarian regimes have had implications for security, economic benefits to countries, regime stability, and strategic advantages, while at the same time entrenching and allowing authoritarian regimes to gain more power. Carmody (2011) posits that international support from China—economic investments and military—is sometimes more progressive and in other cases more regressive for Africa. Carmody notes further that Chinese investment in road and rail infrastructure and the revival of the primary sector of the economy (agriculture and mining) in Burkina Faso and Niger present opportunities for growing employment and poverty reduction. Burkina Faso, in particular, has seen huge investments in agriculture and mining. Through investment, there appears to be an economic renewal and interest in reviving industry. Paradoxically, however, these economic investments only serve the interests of China. Carmody (p. 24) notes that

However, by reinforcing resource dependence and reinscribing enclave economies with limited connections to the rest of the national territory, this also risks reinforcing the power of authoritarian states. As resource-based capital accumulation tends to be more conflictual than that in other sectors of the economy, and class inequality increases, new conflicts are emerging on the continent, such as anti-Chinese riots, for example.

Thus, huge economic investment is good, but it risks the same old story of reinforcing an extractive economy and the dependency syndrome. On the basis of social media stories, which are overly exaggerated and full of fake news, we see only Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso making strides towards industrialising and Africanising the economy. However, this is only pushing away the West, especially France, and bringing in China and Russia, which support his authoritarian power and help to entrench the power of the regime.

Again, a look at China's investment in Niger has had unfavourable economic consequences. Specifically, China's involvement in SOMINA had a generally negative impact on the governance of the mining sector (Ursu, 2019). According to Ursu (2019, p. 130):

Instead of empowering the Nigerien Government by diversifying its sources of funding, the unreliability of the investor left the government vulnerable and led it to return to unfavourable deals with its old partners. The lack of reliability of the Chinese demonstrated to both the government and civil society that Areva was Niger's only viable partner, thereby reducing the country's bargaining power during future renegotiations over mining concessions.

According to Carmody (2011), China's case is what he described as a form of 'flexigemony', in which China works with and through both authoritarian and

democratic states in Africa to ensure resource and market access and diplomatic support, in addition to other objectives.

One other issue about the support of China and Russia's intervention in Africa is the stability and non-interference in the sovereignty and domestic policies of countries. This is seen as positive by African leaders and lovers of Pan-Africanism. China often bases its foreign policy and relations with other countries on its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, formulated in 1954: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity; non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence (Taylor, 2008). These have helped countries to see some level of stability, independence, and non-interference. China has contributed troops for peacekeeping in Africa. In fact, China has tried to mediate the conflict in South Sudan and has sent 700 combat troops under the UN flag to try to restore and maintain peace. This is also because of Chinese oil interests in South Sudan (Carmody, 2011). China has also contributed 403 troops to fighting terrorists in Mali under MINUSMA. However, this so-called Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence has allowed China to indirectly use economic relations in the form of grants and loans to extract natural resources from countries to China with no respect for environmental and human rights. China's operations in the Sahel and elsewhere in Africa have seen the growth of authoritarian regimes with China's support for these powers without question about how they treat human rights and other governance issues.

Military support from China is also helping to fight insurgency and terrorism in the Sahel. China has supported Mali's peace efforts and has even provided military support towards ending the activities of terrorists. Russia is leading many of the military efforts in Africa. Russia's military support in the Sahel is in the form of military cooperation agreements and the use of private military companies (PMCs) in bolstering security challenges of insurgency and terrorism. PMCs like the Wagner Group and its likely successor, the 'Africa Corps', have been supporting the military regimes in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso to deal with internal security challenges, counter Western influence, and secure access to resources (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with countries in the Sahel of Mali and Burkina Faso, where it has deployed personnel and equipment and sold arms to these countries. Their presence has been overwhelmingly supported by citizens and has seen an anti-western resentment towards France and the United States. This has led to the closure of French military bases and AFRICOM.

The Russian military presence is perceived to be producing positive results in pushing back insurgency and terrorists. Paradoxically, military support in the form of arms is used to entrench authoritarian rulers and undermine the chances of a democratic return. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2023), Russia's involvement in Africa has bolstered its influence in Africa and is exerting Russia's competition with the West. Paradoxically, Russia's military presence, especially its protection for military rulers' personal security by the Wagner Group in Burkina Faso, is bolstering authoritarianism and supporting their grips on power with no sign of a return to democratic rule (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

Thus, though African countries' collaborations with international powers, China and Russia, have had some positive gains in terms of economic benefits, political stability, and military, these collaborations have bolstered authoritarian regimes and helped to entrench their grip over power, reducing the chances of democratic growth and rule. The so-called principles of non-interference and allowing domestic sovereignty only allow for authoritarian regimes to prefer China and Russia as partners over others, especially the West.

Conclusion

This chapter argues that authoritarianism in Africa is collaborated and supported by international partners, especially western countries and China and Russia. The chapter uses liberalism and neocolonialism as theoretical underpinnings to show how China, Russia, and Western countries, especially France, have aided the growth and entrenchment of authoritarian regimes. The chapter has shown that although the rise of authoritarian regimes in Africa can be attributed to many factors, the role of international collaborations by authoritarian states and neocolonialists' traits has entrenched and facilitated these authoritarian regimes. From neocolonialist and neoliberalist perspectives, Western states, through liberal democracy and economic policies, have subtly supported autocratic leaders who do their bidding. France's role in Francophone Africa has been to use its colonial role to influence the leadership of Francophone Africa. Although France has often advocated democracy through liberalism, it has nevertheless supported autocratic rulers to entrench their power. On the other hand, China and Russia have, in their bid to extend their influence, collaborated with authoritarian regimes in Africa to entrench their power. China has used economic support in the form of grants and loans, while Russia has used security support and resource management to support authoritarianism in Africa.

The mechanisms through which international collaboration works with authoritarian regimes in Africa (economic relations, military support, non-interference policy, and soft power) show that while in the short-term African countries can boost economic growth, security needs, and military support, the implications for democracy are significant. Authoritarian regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have been bolstered and are attracting youthful populations who see them as 'saviours'. Social media has hyped the works of Ibrahim Traoré, and youth across Africa are proud of his rule. The larger implication of this is the preference and love for authoritarian regimes. Already, the Afrobarometer increasingly shows a decline in democracy and a preference for authoritarianism. With support from China and Russia, the future for democracy looks bleak. Thus, external influence and international collaborations through liberalism, neocolonialism, and dependency theory supported and promoted authoritarianism in Africa. We recommend that democracy must come with dividends and results for the people. Democracy must not just be practised for its sake but also must be really for the people. Very often, authoritarian regimes have blamed

the failures of democracy as reasons for the imposition of autocratic regimes. This again goes to buttress arguments that neoliberal policies have not helped in addressing Africa's endemic problems but have compounded them. Economic growth and the practice of democracy must ensure the inclusion of homegrown solutions, justice, peace, and security and the inclusion of youth and women in decision-making and the functioning of democratic rule. The bigger question for all to reflect on also is whether the current practice of democracy in Africa is actually producing results and also what alternatives could be pursued to improve democracy and make it attractive to the populace. At best electoral democracy is not enough, and consolidating democratic rule and ending authoritarianism demands more action economically, socially, politically, and culturally.

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