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Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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Exploring the Interface between Coups, Violent Extremism and Poor Governance in the Sahel

Background

On 26 January 2023, the Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa (SIGLA) at Stellenbosch University and the [Centre for Gender and Africa Studies](#) (CGAS) at the University of the Free State co-hosted a webinar on the above theme. It was truly an international conference with speakers and members of the audience emanating from Britain and Denmark to Israel, England and the United States to Ghana, the Ivory Coast and South Africa. (Video [here](#))

Summary of discussions

In his opening address, Prof Samuel Tshehla, Dean of the Faculty of Military Sciences (Stellenbosch University) and Acting Director of SIGLA commented on the timely nature of the discussion not only in light of the deteriorating situation in the Sahel but also examined its relevance to other regions on the continent, including Cabo Delgado in Mozambique. In his keynote address, Prof Kwesi Aning from the [Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping and Training Centre](#) (Ghana) also commented on the topical nature of the webinar in light of the resurgent coups and how these challenge the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its policy against coups. Put simply, continued coups undermine not only civil-military relations but also democracy itself and ECOWAS' legitimacy.

Why is the region so prone to coups? Prof Gellar (Indiana University) provided an important historic caveat to the discussion noting that coups are not a recent phenomenon in the Sahel. Indeed military takeovers have been the bane of the region since the 1960s and 1970s. Also

providing context to our understanding of poor civil-military relations, Prof Dirk Kotze (UNISA) provided a political and structural analysis to the phenomenon. He argued that these states have as their basis, the French constitutional model – a highly centralized state with a strong presidential system that lends itself towards authoritarianism. To exacerbate matters, security is highly militarized, if one considers the role of gendarmerie in maintaining public order and the fact that the state, like its former colonial power, saw itself as highly secular in most Muslim countries. This according to Prof Kotze places state structures into conflict with society whilst the highly centralized political system does little to accommodate alternatives to incumbent political elites. According to Prof Aning the political structures encourage confrontational politics between political elites. Moreover, their manipulative control of state institutions as well as endemic corruption in the midst of poverty alienates ordinary citizens from the states.

Building on this theme of popular alienation, Prof Mandrup (RDDC, Denmark) notes that military coups are often the result of political elites hijacking democratic processes. Moreover, young military officers who stage the coup, as we saw recently in Burkina Faso frame themselves as reformists in the tradition of [Thomas Sankara](#) seeking to emancipate their people. This partly explains why when the military captures power from the political establishment, it is often accomplished with popular jubilation. This, however, is short-lived as Prof Gellar argues that the military is often incompetent to provide for the general welfare of their people and, with their command-and-control ethos, they are unable to engage in neither electoral politics nor democratic governance.

Complicating issues further, Prof Esterhuysen (Stellenbosch University) avers that these armed forces, seen as solutions by some, including themselves, also reflect the systemic problems in wider society and the state – issues of ethnic recruiting and personal loyalties. Hardly surprisingly, Prof Solomon opines that despite their stated objective of defeating Islamist insurgents, the new military juntas are incapable of doing so. In fact, he argues that these coups have also served to delegitimize state structures and have reinforced support for the jihadists. Moreover, when these Islamists are regionalizing and internationalizing, military takeovers harm regional cooperation. The most recent coups in Mali have resulted in the withdrawal of French forces from the country as well as Bamako's withdrawal from the [Sahel G-5 forces](#). This has further undermined the regional fight against the Islamists.

The issue of poor governance preoccupied the attention of several speakers and how this has fuelled the Islamist insurgency across the Sahel. Sanet Madonsela (UNISA) examined how a combination of climate change together with poor resource governance in Mali has fuelled conflict between Fulani herdsmen and Dago pastoralists as each sought land for grazing and farming in a country where two-thirds of the land is desert terrain. Militants in the area, Madonsela notes, then exploited these communal conflicts and Bamako's missteps in resource governance to attract more recruits.

On the thorny question of what is done, both Prof Segell (Haifa University) and Prof Murithi ([Institute for Justice & Reconciliation](#)) painted a bleak picture of foreign rivalries between France and Russia playing out regionally in the Sahel to the detriment of locals. Prof Segell noted that such foreign actors, no matter how long they remain on the ground, eventually exit, often leaving behind chaos. The examples he provided include Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. He also notes the strength of violent extremist organizations as they intersect with

organized crime syndicates in the region and the risk posed of these militant insurgents spreading to coastal countries in West Africa. Segell also notes that the strength of the insurgency was taking place at a times when regional forces were severely weakened. The Sahel G-5 is now effectively the G-4 with the withdrawal of Mali, and the possible withdrawal of Burkina Faso.

Whilst acutely aware of the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, Prof Tim Murithi, ended off by striking a more hopeful tone, emphasizing [a transitional justice approach](#) to the crisis wracking the Sahel. Softer approaches, he argues, which stress inclusivity, addressing legitimate grievances and reparations is what may be needed to move the Sahel onto a more positive trajectory.

Further reading: Webinar detail available on the SIGLA page [here](#)

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