

Editorial

As we mark the fiftieth anniversary of CODESRIA in 2023, we must recognise the organisation's influential role in shaping collective reflection on the state of Africa, to which this Special Issue (SI) stands as a testament. Previously, the Council has published similarly targeted interventions designed to address contemporary challenges in Africa, with a view to locating the institution as a key knowledge production actor in Africa's unfolding story.

This Special Issue examines the multifaceted crises unfolding in the Sahel, drawing upon insights from African scholars who are deeply invested in the region and its peoples. Their contributions offer much-needed and compelling perspectives on a complex predicament while underscoring the critical role of knowledge production in shaping African futures.

In sharing these diverse reflections, we are reminded of a significant study supported by the Council, the insights of which illuminate the current unrest in ways that should have prepared us for what we now face in the Sahel. In a pioneering publication featured in the CODESRIA Book Series in 1998, titled *The Military and Militarism in Africa*, Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily identified a persistent state of ambiguity that has prevailed in African nations. The ambiguity lies in the simultaneous opportunities and perils that come with prolonged transitional periods. These transitions are characterised by both authoritarian tendencies and sporadic openings for democracy. This seminal study not only requires an update but also underscores the crucial significance of a comparative approach in the current global context marked by a resurgence of militarism, especially in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The crisis of confidence in the liberal democratic model is a global phenomenon that has been associated with the rise of populist movements, the ascendance of the political right in Europe and elsewhere, and the radicalisation of xenophobic, anti-migrant politics across the Global North.

In this complex landscape, social scientific analysis and knowledge production have a crucial role to play. Although African scholars have, at times, withdrawn from major policy debates due to the dismantling of universities and research institutions, their engagement is now more vital than ever.

With its rich history and diverse cultures, the complexity of the Sahel region defies simple categorisation. While the dynamics between the military and civilian spheres have evolved unevenly across the continent, in the West African region specifically, recurring coups have significantly shaped the region's political landscape. The military has frequently operated in parallel with civilian authorities, blurring the lines between these entities.

The Sahel crisis also emphasises the significance of regional institutions in conflict resolution and the advancement of democracy in Africa. By and large, inconsistencies in policy and a lack of trust among relevant agencies have resulted in the deterioration of security policy in the Sahel. The absence of a clear and coordinated strategy reflects the fraught foundations of mutual engagement. In this context, the diversification of security partnerships becomes a critique of conventional security cooperation, particularly the ineffectiveness of the counterterrorism norm.

Although security stands as the most pressing policy issue of the moment, it is crucial to recognise how it intertwines with broader issues such as political governance, resources governance, regional mobility governance and, more broadly, a fragmented approach to 'democracy' as a cross-cutting issue. While reform is necessary, it often takes a backseat to immediate crisis management. Recurring coups are, however, not symptomatic; they are the manifestation of a systemic problem that is rooted in the very nature of the postcolonial settlement. This is why the framing of recent coups as either 'good' or 'bad' misses the analytical depth one ought to bring to what is happening in the region.

Given the above, the current crisis is a stark reminder that the path to democracy in postcolonial Africa remains undefined and obviously intractable. Likewise, the question of nation-building in plural societies continues to be a work in progress. Although coups may appear to pave the way for alternative governance models, transitioning to such models is challenging, particularly in the short to medium term. Reforms should prioritise African sovereignty over domestic political proceedings, coupled with the establishment of an appropriate model for participatory and inclusive politics, at the very least.

As the extent of the spill-over effects of the war in Ukraine and the Israeli retaliation war on Palestinians is yet to be fully understood, the premises of a more belligerent and unstable world are being sown. Given Africa's geographical proximity and strong historical ties to the Middle East, and the continuous political connections of its northern countries with that region, Africa is vulnerable to turbulences in that part of the world. Concerns about a possible reignition of the grievances that gave rise to the Arab Spring are not unrelated to the ongoing crisis in the Sahel. One recalls that the current upheavals in the Sahel are a direct corollary of the 2011 uprising. The France-NATO-backed removal of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi and the subsequent dismantling of the Libyan state led to a proliferation of small and light weapons and terrorist factions across the region. This is a strong reminder that the path to peace may be arduous but is worth pursuing above all else.

For CODESRIA, the developments in the region reinforce the need to invest intellectual energies in framing a pan-African understanding of the challenges of democratisation we have so far experienced and to carry the lessons learned across the regions of the continent. In 2024, we plan a series of engaging convenings backed by rigorous documentation of the multiple contexts within which new militarisms is emerging. Some of these convenings will carry a major policy component, not just to draw out policy lessons at the end of the research process but also to focus on the policy processes. As the example of the role of regional actors referenced above suggests, a policy environment that is out of step with carefully thought through knowledge is a recipe for disaster. CODESRIA stands poised to help ensure that knowledge and policy process are in sync on this matter.

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