



The Sahel Military Regimes' Anti-Western Discourse: The Case of Mali

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Abstract: This study analyzes the anti-Western rhetoric in the communiques of the military transitional government in Mali read on the Office de Radio et de Télévision du Mali (ORTM) within the framework of Teun Adrian Van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse analysis theory. The second coup d'état in Mali in May 2021 led to the eviction of civilian elements from the transitional government and the failure to hold the promised elections. Under regional and international pressure, the anti-Western discourse, particularly anti-French, became the official discourse of the Malian military authority. The research argues that this discourse reflects a pragmatic approach at national, regional, and international level and is structured around the themes of terrorism, state sovereignty, and neocolonialism.

Keywords: Socio-cognitive discourse analysis, Teun Adrian van Dijk, anti-Western rhetoric, anti-French rhetoric, military regime, coup, Mali

Öz: Bu çalışma, Mali'de askeri geçiş hükümetinin Office de Radio et de Télévision du Mali (ORTM) aracılığıyla okunan bildirimlerindeki Batı karşıtı retorik, Teun Adrian Van Dijk'in sosyo-bilişsel söylem analizi teorisi çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Mali'de Mayıs 2021'de gerçekleşen ikinci darbe, geçiş hükümetinden sivil unsurların çıkarılmasına ve vaat edilen seçimlerin gerçekleştirilememesine yol açmıştır. Bölgesel ve uluslararası baskılar altında, özellikle Fransa karşıtı söylem, Malili askeri otoritenin resmi söylemi haline gelmiştir. Araştırma, bu söylemin ulusal, bölgesel ve uluslararası düzeyde pragmatist bir yaklaşımı yansıttığını ve terörizm, devlet egemenliği ve yeni-sömürgecilik temaları etrafında yapılandırıldığını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyo-bilişsel söylem analizi, Teun Adrian van Dijk, Batı karşıtı retorik, Fransa karşıtı retorik, askeri rejim, darbe, Mali

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Introduction

The military of a country is responsible for defending the state against external threats and enemies. However, in practice, there are many examples where the armed forces exceed this mandate and use their force to challenge or even to overthrow the executive branch of their own country for other purposes (Feaver, 1999: 214). The most common method for this action is the military coup. In post-colonial Africa, this politico-military phenomenon is frequently practiced and observed. A study conducted in 2012 revealed that more than two hundred military coups took place in post-colonial Africa between 1960 and 2012, and more than one hundred of them were successful (Ben Barka and Ncube, 2019: 3). From 2012 to the present, more than fifteen military coups have been observed, mainly concentrated in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel (Boisvert, 2022).

A wave of coups d'état, particularly initiated by the overthrow of the democratically elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, through a military coup in Mali in 2020, has become a persistent reality in sub-Saharan Africa. These recent coups are generally attributed to four major trends identified in political science and international relations literature. First, due to the continent's abundant mineral wealth and geopolitical importance, Africa has once again become a zone of competition for neo-colonial influence. Second, the weakness of democratic institutions and civil society in sub-Saharan Africa, often described as Africa's failure to entry onto the stage of history, exacerbates this instability (N'Gani, 2024: 989). Third, Africa's delay in positioning itself in a globalized world and the negative effects of globalization on the continent are also considered. Finally, the tendency to amend or abolish the constitutional order to remove or extend presidential term limits is considered one of the main factors behind these coups (Manboah-Rockson et al., 2024). During the recent coups in sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahelian countries particularly Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have received significant attention from the international community. One of the main reasons for such attention is the adoption of the anti-colonial or the anti-Western discourse shared by the military juntas in these countries. This particularly anti-French rhetoric has become a means to legitimize the military coups that have multiplied in the Sahel since 2020. The first coup in the region occurred in Mali in 2020, followed by another coup in 2021, two military coups in Burkina Faso in 2022, and finally the military coup in Niger in July 2023. This study problematizes the contextual case of Mali and asks: Is the anti-Western discourse of the Malian military regime merely a way to gain internal legitimacy and consolidate its authority, or is it indicative of a deeper pursuit of regional self-sufficiency and a new positioning in the global balance of power?

There are several reasons why Mali was selected as the case study among three countries for this research. First, the process -referred to as “triple military governance” in the Sahel, institutionalized with the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) in September 2023 and evolved into the ASS Confederation in July 2024- began with the military coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021. Indeed, the “anti-Western discourse” -this study aims to analyze- was first observed as a phenomenon in Mali, particularly after the second military coup in May 2021. In this regard, this study considers the military regime in Mali as a precedent for the forthcoming military juntas in the other two countries. Furthermore, the socio-cognitive critical discourse analysis approach by Teun Adrian van Dijk, this study adopts, particularly emphasizes the role of media as a tool in the discursive construction. The military regime in Mali, in this respect, provides better material for analysis, both methodologically and theoretically, as the discourse developed in official documents is disseminated to the masses through the state channel Office of Radio and Television of Mali (ORTM).

The literature review on recent military coups in Mali and the Sahel region, generally focuses on political instability (Ayoola et al., 2024; Boniface, 2022), external interventions (Montclos, 2022), new organizations and alliances (Aning & Axelrod, 2024), and regional security issues (Sogodogo, 2024; Toure, 2024). These studies associate the roots of military coups with weak state institutions, lack of democracy, and geopolitical importance of the region. For instance, the impact of French military interventions, regional security dynamics, and international interests in the Sahel's underground resources are frequently emphasized topics. Furthermore, this literature often highlights how military regimes in Africa frequently damage regional cooperation and become isolated on the international stage. In this context, the effects of military coups and the subsequent political transformations are analyzed within a historical and political framework. However, this study significantly diverges from such approaches in literature. Specifically, using Teun Adrian van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse analysis theory, it examines how the Malian military regime constructs its anti-Western discourse as a political tool. While the existing literature typically focuses on political and economic causes, this study emphasizes the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of the military regime's strategies to remain in power. It particularly analyzes how the military government in Mali presents a discourse to the public through state television and the role this discourse plays in mobilizing the masses. Moreover, this research goes beyond the general geopolitical competition examined in other studies by closely analyzing the cognitive construction of the military regime's discourses. It also discusses how the anti-Western anti-French rhetorics, broadly and in particular, in turn, are employed among the population around themes of sovereignty, counter-terrorism,

and neo-colonialism, and how such discourses are turned into tools for sustaining the regime's legitimacy respectively. In this regard, our study reveals how discourse functions not only as a means of communication but also as a shield of legitimacy.

The remainder of the study is structured around this introduction, followed by methodology, theoretical framework, and three main sections. The methodology section addresses the sources used in the qualitative case analysis adopted in this study, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. In the theoretical framework, Teun Adrian van Dijk's socio-cognitive critical discourse analysis is thoroughly explained. This section details why this approach was adopted and how it is applied in the research. The first section examines the process through which Mali's military government seized power and their refusal to set a timeline for presidential and parliamentary elections in the transition to civilian political life, despite their earlier promises. This is evaluated as a determination to remain in power. At this point, attention is drawn to the utility of the anti-Western, particularly anti-French, discourse to control the reaction against the military government and maintain power, given the absence of a transition to civilian political life and the restoration of constitutional order in Mali. In the second section, through the lens of van Dijk's approach, the suitability of the discourse developed by the military government in Mali is deconstructed and analyzed at three levels: local, regional, and international. This analysis focuses on the context in which the discourse is constructed, a central aspect of van Dijk's discourse analysis methodology. The third and final section analyzes the construction of the anti-Western discourse by Mali's military government through three main axes: terrorism, sovereignty, and neo-colonialism. This section examines how these themes are constructed using passages, concepts, emphases, and adjectives employed in the discourse. Briefly, the general conclusion of this research is that the anti-Western rhetoric observed in the military regime in Mali, especially against France, is an example of strategic discourse construction to legitimize military rule and consolidate power in the short term. Within the framework of Van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse analysis used to analyze this discourse construction, the convergence of the themes of sovereignty violation, the West's failed war on terror in the Sahel and neo-colonialism in line with the national, regional and international context is defended. However, based on the findings, the study raises the contradictory nature of the long-term sustainability of this anti-Western rhetoric in Mali's foreign policy and its possible implications for regional stability.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative case study that uses primary sources such as the visual, oral, and printed statements published by the military junta, policymakers, and state institutions that established the military regime following the coup in Mali via references to their anti-Western, specifically anti-French, and anti-colonial rhetoric. The socio-cognitive approach of Teun Adrian Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, serving as the theoretical framework for the study, specifically addresses discourses reflected in press outlets and developed through media products. Given that the Malian military junta makes its official declarations and announcements through the Office of Radio and Television of Mali (ORTM), which is the state's media outlet, this study uses ORTM as the primary data source.

Primarily, the transitional government established in Mali after the 2020 and 2021 military coups informs the public through communiqués issued by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, which acts as the government's spokesperson. These statements are not only on the ministries' websites but also on their social media accounts and are declared to the public on the ORTM. Thus, instead of directly referring to the official communiqués, this study analyzes the content of these communiqués on the ORTM's official YouTube channel as a primary source, representing media as a tool for constructing discourse in Van Dijk's discourse analysis. Furthermore, we have benefited from media products, also disseminated by independent media but that revolve around the discourse of the military administration's political decision-makers in Mali, as secondary sources for discourse analysis. Studies on the recent coups in the Sahel region, particularly in Mali, were also part of the secondary sources used in this study. In this regard, the discourse analysis was adopted to interpret the military decision-makers' discourses as well as the announcements and documents published by official channels. Additionally, we employed content analysis to examine secondary sources. Aiming to deconstruct the discourse of Mali's military leaders through a critical and post-structuralist approach, this study uses discourse analysis to select and attribute meaning to expressions used in official texts and policymakers' speeches. Therefore, the main purpose of the article is not to assess the truth or falsity of the coup government's claims, but to focus on the Malian government's aim of constructing anti-French and anti-Western discourses. Adopting a qualitative approach emphasizes the interpretation and understanding of the data obtained within the framework of the research. Finally, this study emphasizes both historicity and causality; in other words, the military coup in Mali was analyzed not only as an isolated political phenomenon but also within the context of other social phenomena and in relation to other related events (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Theoretical Framework: Teun Adrian Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive Critical Discourse Analysis

This study adopts critical discourse analysis (CDA), one of the sub-approaches of discourse analysis, as its theoretical framework to interpret the anti-Western discourse employed by the military administration in Mali. Teun Adrian Van Dijk's socio-cognitive discourse analysis is utilized to illustrate and interpret how the Malian military administration uses anti-Westernism as a legitimizing discourse through state broadcasting bodies. This theory, as its name suggests, draws from critical theory, introduced by the Frankfurt School as an alternative to positivist methodology. As an original methodology in the social sciences, it focuses on understanding and emphasizing the social. Critical theory advises approaching the discourse context production as knowledge from the perspective of the free and the subaltern, rather than from the viewpoint of those in power (Geuss, 1981: 1-2). Michel Foucault further refined this approach by arguing that the power holder not only produces power itself but also produces the knowledge necessary for its comprehension, in other words, the discourse legitimizes that (1978). According to Ruth Wodak, those in power shape discourse. Each discourse is shaped and interpreted within a historical process of production. Consequently, power groups legitimize their structures of domination through discourses aligned with their ideologies (Wodak, 2002: 12).

The critical discourse analysis explores the interrelationships between power groups, their social influence, and the discourses they develop in this context. Dominant power groups and social institutions constantly legitimize and reproduce their use of power through oral and written arguments, rhetoric, and expressions. The socio-cognitive CDA, as defined by Van Dijk, seeks to unveil and clarify the relationship between power and knowledge and to reveal the truth (van Dijk, 1995: 84). According to Özer (2022:40), relevant vocabulary for this analysis includes terms such as: “*power, domination, hegemony, ideology, class, gender, race, discrimination, interests, reproduction, institutions, social structures, and social order*”.

Van Dijk first addressed the issue of discourse in his work *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension*, co-authored with Kintsch in 1983. In his later works, such as *Discourse and Communication: New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media Discourse and Communication* (1985), *News Analysis* (van Dijk, 1988), and *News as Discourse* (2013) he conceptualized the socio-cognitive critical approach examining the relations between power and discourse in the media. This approach particularly emphasizes the context of discourse production. According to this analytical perspective, discourse is anchored in social, cultural, historical, and cognitive contexts (van Dijk, 1991: 110-111).

In the case of Mali, Van Dijk's emphasis on context allows for a nuanced and critical analysis of the discourse constructed by the military regime at the national, regional and international levels. Here, ORTM, the state media outlet, plays an important role in the military regime's dissemination and construction of anti-Western discourse, especially at the local level. The military regime's rhetoric, which is constantly emphasized in the communiqués read or in the discourse of decision-makers at ORTM and shaped by the themes of violation of state sovereignty, neo-colonialism and the failures of Western actors' counterterrorism strategies, directly appeals to the bad memories and cognitive perceptions of colonialism among the Malian population. In this context, Van Dijk's CDA approach makes it easier to understand how these discourses are aligned with the existing beliefs and perceptions of the target audience and how they are used to ensure local legitimacy as well as regional cooperation (van Dijk, 1993).

In addition, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach serves as a lens for recognizing how the military administration uses anti-Western discourse as a strategic tool to deal with geopolitical challenges. For instance, the constant claim of neo-colonialism attributed to France serves to delegitimize external pressure and criticism of the military regime in Mali regarding democratic transition, while at the same time allowing the military junta to strengthen its relations with non-Western actors, especially Russia. At this point, Van Dijk's focus on the interplay between power, discourse and cognition allows for a critical analysis of how discourses constructed by those in power are established in broader social and political structures (Ibid.). In the interplay of power, discourse and cognition, the current case discusses the role of discourse in the maintenance of military power in Mali and the repositioning of the country's position in the global power hierarchy.

What is "Civil Political Transition" in Mali?

In August 2020, a military coup overthrew the popularly elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and Prime Minister Boubou Cissé in Mali. This marked the beginning of the third wave of coups in the post-colonial era in the Sahel region and more broadly in sub-Saharan Africa (Boisvert et al., 2022: 3-4). Less than a year after the overthrow of President Keïta and PM Cissé in August 2020, the same military junta, led by Assimi Goïta, initiated another military intervention. This intervention led to the dissolution of the National Transitional Council (CNT), which had initially been formed to facilitate the transition to a civilian government. During this second coup, the transitional President Bah Ndaw, the transitional PM Moctar Ouane, and several high-ranking officials were arrested due to their intention to organize a referendum on constitutional reform and presidential elections, in line with the commitment

made in May 2020 to achieve a transition to civilian rule within 18 months (Ouest France, May 25, 2021).

The military coups in Mali have recently spread to other Sahelian states (Powell and Ben Hammou, November 22, 2021), as noted above. However, it is evident that the juntas in these states have taken cues from Mali in establishing their power post-coup and gaining legitimacy. The “anti-Western positioning and discourse,” the subject of this study, was first adopted in Mali, particularly by the junta led by Assimi Goïta in May 2021. Indeed, after the first coup in 2020, the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), led by Goïta, did not initially adopt an anti-Western or anti-French stance. In fact, in the CNSP’s declaration, read on ORTM on August 19, 2020, the military junta reiterated its commitment to all previous regional and international agreements to which Mali was a party, as well as its desire for cooperation, stating: “MINUSMA, Operation Barkhane, the G5 Sahel, and the Takuba Task Force remain our partners.” (Jeune Afrique, August 19, 2020). Nevertheless, the CNSP initially faced internal disagreements regarding the timeline for the democratic transition toward a promised civilian political life as stated in the same coup declaration. It then had to contend with external criticism for not fulfilling its promise. On August 19, 2020, the statement read on ORTM indicated that a “civil political transition” would be established through elections to be held “within a reasonable timeframe.” The military junta even asserted in the statement that it did not hold power, implying that its goal was not to remain in control. The relevant sections of the declaration were as follows:

“We are not interested in power, but we are committed to the stability of the country, which will allow us to organize general elections within a reasonable timeframe to enable Mali to establish strong institutions. [...] Civil society and socio-political movements are invited to join us in creating the best conditions for a political transition leading to credible general elections that will lay the foundation for a new Mali.” (Jeune Afrique, August 19, 2020).

Despite the goodwill messages proclaimed by the Malian junta, the military coup was strongly condemned by the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU). However, the most vehement reaction came from the sub-regional organization the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), of which Mali was a member. Following the CNSP’s declaration on August 19, ECOWAS member state representatives held an extraordinary online meeting on August 20 to discuss the situation in Mali. Overall, the coup in Mali was deemed unacceptable. The Nigerian President emphasized ECOWAS’s stance against the coup by stating: *“We demand the reinstatement of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita as President of the Republic. [...] We have decided to immediately dispatch a high-level delegation to ensure the prompt*

restoration of constitutional order.” To restore the constitutional order in Mali, the ECOWAS imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions (France 24, August 20, 2020). A month after the coup, Bah Ndaw, a former military officer and politician appointed as President by the military junta, received assurance from ECOWAS that the sanctions would be lifted, provided that he appointed a civilian prime minister. As a result, on September 27, 2020, Moctar Ouane, a former Foreign Minister and seasoned diplomat, was appointed as the prime minister of Mali (Al Jazeera, September 27, 2020). Furthermore, on December 3, 2020, it was announced on the public channel ORTM that the military government had established the National Transitional Council (CNT) as the transitional assembly replacing the National Assembly, and the CNT began its activities on December 5 (Diallo, December 4, 2020).

The messages conveyed in the coup declaration, the appointment of a civilian prime minister, the creation of the CNT, and the 18-month transition period had initially raised hopes that the Malian military government would fulfill its promise of a “civil political transition.” In fact, the allocation of CNT seats among civilians, unionists, and political party representatives fueled positive expectations regarding the process (Diallo, December 4, 2020). In mid-April 2021, the transitional authorities announced the electoral timeline for the transfer of political power to civilians: a constitutional referendum scheduled for October 31, 2021, was planned for the constitutional revision promised by the coup leaders from the start, while the presidential and legislative elections were slated for February-March 2022. However, it is known that this timeline was announced under pressure from regional and international actors, and the military government had initially considered a transition period of at least three years before transferring power to a civilian regime (Cazenave, May 25, 2021).

On May 20, 2021, it became evident that the military leaders had devised a separate timeline and program for the promised transition to civilian governance when they once again overthrew the Ndaw and Ouane administration, which they had themselves installed. Under the leadership of Assimi Goita, head of the CNSP and the vice-president under Ndaw, these officials were arrested and detained in Kati along with other members of the transitional government. The Malian military regime not only failed to organize the promised elections but also announced in March 2022 a two-year extension of the transition to civilian rule. As the presidential and legislative elections, originally scheduled for March 2024, approached, a new debate emerged concerning a five-year extension of the transition period (France 24, May 10, 2024). In summary, the Malian military regime initially used the promise of a democratic “civil political transition” as a rhetorical tool to consolidate its power. Subsequently, in order to maintain its authority and legitimize the anti-democratic

transition process, it adopted a new strategy of positioning and discourse: the anti-Western posture and rhetoric, particularly focused on anti-French sentiment.

Wielding Anti-Western Discourse as Armor: What Context?

In his approach to discourse analysis, Van Dijk pays particular attention to the context in which discourse is constructed. CDA places context at the epicenter of the analysis, emphasizing that discourse is shaped by social, political, cultural, historical, and cognitive contexts (van Dijk, 1991: 110-111). This perspective examines not only the textual content of a discourse but also the environmental conditions under which the content is produced and interpreted. Based on the specific case of Mali, the anti-Western discourse by coup-led juntas in the Sahel, primarily centered around anti-French sentiments, must be analyzed within specific political, social, historical, and cognitive contexts. These contexts can be categorized at different levels: national, regional, and international. The anti-Western stance of the Malian military regime is grounded in the popular anti-French sentiment at the local level. Regionally, similar coup-led regimes have been established in Burkina Faso and Niger, following the Malian military junta's policies and discourses. Internationally, these coup-led regimes, in conflicts with Western countries, have aligned themselves with Russia. These multifaceted contexts are crucial for understanding the origins and functions of the anti-Western discourse adopted by the military regime.

Since the May 2021 coup, marked by the deterioration of Franco-Malian relations, an analysis of contexts at different levels is essential. At the European summit in Brussels, held on May 25, 2021, then French President Emmanuel Macron described the coup in Mali as an *"unacceptable coup within a coup that calls for sanctions"* (Cazenave, May 25, 2021), signaling a decisive turning point in bilateral relations. However, at the G7 summit one month after the coup, Macron announced the gradual reduction of the French military presence in the Sahel as part of Operation Barkhane, leading to its eventual total withdrawal. This new orientation not only exacerbated the already growing anti-French sentiment at the local level but also introduced a new argument within the security context. Indeed, France, as a former colonial power, had deployed military forces in Mali and the Sahel since 2013 to support the countries in the region in their fight against terrorism. However, the continued spread of violent extremism in the Sahel has led to growing criticism, with the French military presence being seen as a failure (Tercan & Badalov, 2024: 115-7). This growing anti-French sentiment became more visible during the popular demonstrations supporting the military coups, first in Mali and later in Burkina Faso. These demonstrations revealed the extent of hostility toward France, further highlighting the complexity of political and security dynamics in the Sahel region (Gain, 2023). Not only France, but also

the legitimacy of the entire Western presence on the ground, has been called into question. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has been operating in the country since 2014. Additionally, the EU has intensified its security and development policies in the Sahel region since 2010. For instance, five out of the EU's seventeen Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions are deployed in the Sahel. Moreover, under France's leadership, the European *Takuba Task Force* was established, aiming to deploy European forces in cooperation with local forces in the Sahel between 2019 and 2021 (Garcia, 2022: 91-92). However, despite this significant Western military presence since the outbreak of the crisis in Mali in 2012, the lack of tangible results and the continued socio-economic marginalization of Mali have exacerbated anti-French sentiments. In this political and socio-economic context, it has become strategic for the military junta to adopt not only anti-French but also broader anti-Western discourses at the local level. At the regional level, the opposition to France observed in Mali's national context is also manifest in the Sahelian context, with similar arguments. In the political administration established after the first coup in Mali in August 2020, the appointment of a civilian politician as Prime Minister Moctar Ouane led to the lifting of sanctions imposed by ECOWAS (Aljazeera, September 27, 2020). However, following the second coup in May 2021, the Malian military junta's failure to adhere to the transition timeline toward civilian governance and to take concrete steps in this direction led ECOWAS to impose even stricter sanctions in November 2021 (Le Monde, November 8, 2021). Meanwhile, relations with the EU, and particularly with France, deteriorated due to allegations that Mali was collaborating with the Wagner mercenary group and the suspension of the transition to civilian rule. By the end of 2021, Mali found itself regionally isolated, adopting a policy of withdrawal. However, the establishment of a military regime in Burkina Faso in 2022 adopted a similar approach and discourse to Mali's and shifted the balance in the Sahelian context (Gain, May 12, 2023). Thus, the military junta in Burkina Faso, which came to power with an even more assertive anti-Western position and discourse than the Malian government, terminated defense agreements with France and adopted an anti-colonial rhetoric since Ibrahim Traoré, the officer leading the junta, was even portrayed in the international press as a "freedom fighter." On December 11, 2022, on the occasion of the 62nd anniversary of independence, Ibrahim Traoré, as the transitional President and head of state, delivered a message to the Burkinabe people in which the anti-colonial rhetoric was clearly evident: "*Our independence is not yet achieved because our lands are occupied, our economy is struggling, and our hands are tied. [...] The fight for total independence began a few weeks ago.*" (Presidency of Faso, December 11, 2022).

Similar to the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso, the military coup that overthrew Mohamed Bazoum in Niger in July 2023 propelled these three nations to the forefront as representatives of the anti-ECOWAS bloc at the regional level and the anti-Western, specifically anti-French, bloc at the international level in sub-Saharan Africa. Niger's military junta also terminated defense agreements with France and severed diplomatic relations. As a result, France closed its embassy and ended its entire military and diplomatic presence, following the example of Mali and Burkina Faso (Dağ, 2023a: 157-158). Following this process, Burkina Faso and Niger also withdrew from the G5 Sahel, mirroring Mali's withdrawal in 2022. Furthermore, in response to accusations that ECOWAS was planning a military intervention to restore Bazoum to the presidency, the three countries declared that they had formed a military alliance, stating that an intervention in any of the three states would be considered an attack on the entire alliance. This cooperation was formalized through a trilateral cooperation agreement —the Alliance of Sahel States (Jeune Afrique, September 16, 2023). Analyzing the regional context, it is notable that Mali shares borders with two nations that have undergone a similar process of power change through coups. During this period, these countries developed a regional alliance, using the aforementioned anti-Western, particularly the anti-French, discourse and practices as central elements of their cooperation. Consequently, for the Malian military junta, this discursive construction proved strategic and suitable for use within a regional framework.

The international context is also a crucial level to address in analyzing the discourse adopted by the Malian military junta. Indeed, the junta's relations, particularly after the second coup, began to deteriorate with France while accelerating with Russia (Turan, 2025:4). In June 2021, Macron's announcement regarding the gradual end of Operation Barkhane was perceived by the Malian military junta as an "abandonment" in the fight against terrorism. In September 2021, the EU and France began alleging that the Malian military government had reached an agreement with the Russian Wagner mercenary group, thus accusing the junta. In response to these accusations, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated during a UN session that Mali, as a sovereign and independent state, could not be criticized for its collaboration with private military companies (Shurkin, 2022). Subsequently, Mali's relations with France continued to deteriorate, while those with Russia steadily improved. In a context where allegations were being debated that Russia was carving out a role in African geopolitics through Wagner, Burkina Faso and Niger found themselves at the center of these allegations in the post-coup period, even before the allegation that Mali had also reached an agreement with Wagner had become more apparent

(AB Pictoris et al., 2023). Particularly during the Ukraine War, began with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Western bloc, organized around the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), took a clear stance on the side of Ukraine against Russia. In this period, one also observed that Russia, in response to this Western strategy, sought to establish its influence in regions considered part of the Western sphere of influence. In the Sahel, which had been within the Western sphere of influence for many years, the rise to power of military juntas supportive of Russia and their adoption of an anti-Western position makes sense within this context (Dağ, 2023b: 69-70).

In the international context, the power dynamics between major powers led to a strategic rapprochement between the Malian military junta and Russia, particularly after Mali was marginalized by the Western-centered international community and subjected to constant criticism. Moreover, Mali had already maintained very close relations with the Soviet Union (SU) during the Cold War. Russia is often perceived as a "natural" ally by many African countries due to the SU's positive anti-colonial legacy (Ndiaye and Dieye, 2022: 120). The notion that the international system adopted a unipolar structure under American hegemony after the Cold War began to evolve, notably after the Munich Security Conference in 2007. This period was marked by the emergence of China as the new superpower in the early 2000s, and by Russia once again presenting a challenge under the leadership of Vladimir Putin.

¹ After suppressing domestic actors labeled as pro-Western, Russia intervened in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and most recently Ukraine (2022). Russia has also positioned itself geopolitically by intervening in external conflicts such as the Syrian and the Libyan civil war, taking sides in these conflicts. In Africa, Russia has begun extending its sphere of influence toward the Sahel, manifesting its presence in the Central African Republic through the Wagner group and various mercenaries (Mensah and Aning, 2022: 49-50).

During this period of multipolarization in the international system, Mali allied itself with Russia, which already had "problematic" or even "conflictual" relations with the West, within the framework of a "win-win" strategy or the principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The agreement with Wagner holds additional importance since this mercenary group typically acts as a close bodyguard to the

1 For detailed information on the emerging roles of China and Russia on a global scale, see: Hamilton, R. (2024). *The China-Russia Relationship: The Dance of the Dragon and the Bear*. Part of the book series: *Global Power Shift*, Springer.; See the chapter on the increasing roles of China and Russia in the African context in the same book: *China and Russia in Africa*. in Hamilton, R. (2024). *The China-Russia Relationship: The Dance of the Dragon and the Bear*. Part of the book series: *Global Power Shift*, Springer: 25-51.

ruling power in the country and provides military advice. While Wagner generally reaps financial gains by managing sites where underground mineral and energy resources are extracted and processed in the country, it also protects the authorities that offer it this opportunity (Ndiaye and Dieye, 2022: 120). The military junta in Mali has also adopted anti-Western rhetoric to align itself with Russia, to receive security support in maintaining its power, and to legitimize its rapprochement with Russia. Therefore, the adoption of this discourse can be seen as a tool enabling the Malian military junta to remain in power and secure international support in the international context as much as possible.

The Discourse Construction Axes: Terrorism, Sovereignty, and Neocolonialism

In the national, regional, and international contexts, the adoption of anti-Western rhetoric by the Malian military authorities represents a pragmatic and strategically coherent positioning in response to current circumstances. Van Dijk's focus on contextual elements such as historical grievances and cognitive frames allows us to better understand how this rhetoric strategically aligns with the collective identity and shared narratives of the people of Mali. This rhetoric revolves around several key axes: the responsibility of the West in the spread of terrorism in Mali, the failure and inefficiency of anti-terrorist operations conducted by Western powers, the alleged support for terrorist groups at the expense of Malian interests, the violation of national sovereignty, the intention to fragment territorial integrity and divide the country, the affront to the dignity of the Malian people, and finally, the neocolonial objectives and practices perpetuated by the West. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach reveals that these axes are not only rooted in historical injustices but are also consciously designed to appeal to collective memories and fears, thus increasing the potential for mobilization in Malian society.

Van Dijk's approach emphasizes the influence of state-controlled media outlets, such as ORTM, in shaping public perceptions and legitimizing power structures. By repeatedly publishing these statements, the military government makes its discourse the dominant discourse in the sociopolitical context. These discursive elements are prominently featured in official communiqués issued by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, as well as by the government spokesperson. It is particularly significant to note that these communiqués are systematically broadcast on ORTM, and frequently delivered by Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga, government spokesperson and representative of the ministry. For instance, in the government communiqué no. 035 dated July 31, which led to a breakdown in relations with France, Radio France Internationale and France 24 were suspended (ORTM, July 31, 2022). This is in line with Van Dijk's view that control over media narratives allows ruling groups to create a

dominant discourse by excluding dissenting voices. By banning foreign media, military rule has made anti-Western discourse the main frame for assessing events in Mali. Colonel Maïga notably emphasized this anti-Western discourse. In the corresponding press article, it was expressed that Maïga, the appointed interim PM, assumed the role of spokesperson for the discourse adopted by Mali's military administration: "[...] *like his predecessor Choguel Maïga, a proponent of provocative speeches against Westerners, particularly France*" (France 24, August 23, 2022). The fact that the communiqués were not only on the websites of the relevant ministries but were also shared on the social media accounts of other ministries and state bodies, and read to the public on ORTM, demonstrates the construction of a public discourse by the military administration in Mali. This reflects Van Dijk's view that discourse operates in cognitive and institutional contexts and takes root in social consciousness through repeated exposure and institutional support. At this stage, it would be pertinent to analyze examples of the aforementioned rhetoric that shape the anti-Western discourse in these communiqués.

One of the first communiqués in which the axes of anti-Western discourse are clearly visible is the one concerning the end of France's Operation Barkhane and the withdrawal of the Takuba Force, read on ORTM on February 18, 2022. In this communiqué, the military junta stated that France had violated Mali's sovereign rights by unilaterally ending the Operation Barkhane without following legal procedures: "These unilateral decisions constitute flagrant violations of the legal framework binding France and Mali" (ORTM, February 18, 2022). Furthermore, the "failure" and "ineffectiveness" of the French operations, first under Serval and later Barkhane, were alleged, while at the same time it was claimed that French activities in Mali threatened the country's "territorial integrity": "Despite the presence of Operation Barkhane and international forces from 2013 to 2021, Mali faced the risk of partition, and the terrorist threat, initially localized in northern Mali, spread across the entire national territory" (Ibid.).

In this communiqué, the emphasis on the "Libyan intervention," which becomes predominant in later public addresses and frames the West as the cause of terrorism in the Sahel, deserves separate attention. In almost every communiqué, the Malian military government asserts that the Sahel was dragged into the quagmire of terrorism as a result of the Libyan intervention in 2011. For example, this communiqué claims that if NATO had not intervened in Libya in 2011, Operation Serval would not have been necessary. According to the rhetoric of the military junta, the Libyan intervention brought the problem of terrorism to Mali, while France's military operations were unsuccessful and ineffective, leading to the spread of terrorism throughout the Sahel:

The Government of Mali recalls that Operation Serval would not have been necessary if NATO had not intervened in Libya in 2011. This intervention, which fundamentally altered the security dynamics in the region and in which France played a leading and active role, to the detriment of Africans, is the root cause of the current security problems in Mali in particular and the Sahel in general. (Ibid.).

The emphasis on the 2011 Libyan intervention recurs consistently in the communiqués. Thus, in the communiqué dated August 19, 2022, the military government reiterated that the intervention by France and its allies -the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)- in Libya had caused terrorism and destroyed security in Mali and the Sahel: *“The Transitional Government emphasizes that the deterioration of the security situation in Mali and the Sahel is an immediate consequence of the intervention by France and its allies in Libya.”* (ORTM, August 19, 2022). The same communiqué stresses that the fight against terrorism is a shared responsibility involving all states. However, it highlights three principles, repeatedly emphasized in many other communiqués, to which Mali insists other states must adhere in their cooperation with the country: *“Respect for Mali’s sovereignty; respect for the strategic choices made by Mali; and the defense of the interests of the Malian people in decision-making”* (Ibid.).

On July 31, 2023, the ORTM broadcast the joint communiqué from the transitional governments of Mali and Burkina Faso in support of Niger’s junta, in response to the ECOWAS discussing military intervention following the coup in Niger, asserting that the impact of any potential military intervention would be the same as that of the 2011 Libyan intervention. It stated that any intervention in Niger would be considered an intervention in Mali and Burkina Faso, and that the consequences of such an intervention would be as grave as NATO’s intervention in Libya: *“[...] warn against the disastrous consequences of a military intervention in Niger, which could destabilize the entire region, just as NATO’s unilateral intervention in Libya, which was the root of terrorism spreading in the Sahel and West Africa [...]”* (ORTM, July 31, 2023). Here, the NATO was explicitly blamed for violent extremism in the Sahel, while the Western military intervention in Libya was described as the “origin” of the problem (Ibid.).

Additionally, the governmental communiqués 64 and 65, read on ORTM regarding issues with Algeria, also referenced the increased threat of terrorism in the Sahel due to NATO’s intervention: *“[...] it is true that the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has exacerbated the terrorist threat [...]”* (ORTM, January 25, 2024). This was followed by a joint communiqué read on ORTM on January 28, 2024, in which Maïga once again reiterated the reasons for Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger’s withdrawal from ECOWAS. One of the reasons cited for the withdrawal was that the

organization had betrayed its founding principles by falling under the influence of foreign powers and had become a threat to member states (ORTM, January 28, 2024).

The communiqué containing the harshest statements against France was dated July 31, 2022, in response to French President Emmanuel Macron's comments on the Malian junta during his visit to Guinea-Bissau on July 28, 2022. What sets this communiqué apart is its title: "[...] *in response to the hateful, defamatory, and erroneous remarks of French President Emmanuel MACRON*" (ORTM, July 31, 2022). Macron had claimed that the Russian Wagner mercenaries and the Malian military junta had targeted one of Mali's ethnic groups and committed acts of violence. These accusations were described in the communiqué as "erroneous" and "defamatory" and were said to aim at provoking "ethnic hatred" in Mali against the junta. France was also reminded of its negative responsibility in the Rwandan genocide. The historical reference to one of the most egregious cases of France in this postcolonial African memory functions as a rhetorical strategy to invalidate the moral authority of France, in line with Van Dijk's view of how historical grievances are used to enhance the impact of discourses. Subsequently, the unilateral actions taken by the Malian state, taking relations between Mali and France to a complete breaking point, were listed: The expulsion of the French ambassador from Mali and the suspension of the activities of France 24 and Radio France Internationale. These two French media outlets were described as "*behaving like the radio of a thousand hills in the Republic of Mali*" (Ibid.).

The cessation of the activities of French media is a situation that should be particularly analyzed in light of van Dijk's discourse analysis. Through this decision, the Malian military administration silenced the media it considered to be against it and in opposition to it. In other words, the only media outlets that can provide information, especially to the Malian people, are state-run, and the junta has created an atmosphere where the media is used as its tool of propaganda and legitimization, as van Dijk asserts. A further resolution entailed the announcement of the end of military cooperation with France. This decision was justified by the "unsatisfactory results of France in the fight against terrorism." Moreover, France was accused of dividing and fragmenting Mali: "[...] *France, which has always worked to divide and partition our country, is ill-placed to [...]*" (Ibid.).

It was also mentioned in the communiqué that "terrorist groups and their foreign state sponsors" are instrumentalizing conflicts and attacking Mali's "social cohesion." The context of the discourse implicitly suggests that one of these foreign states is France. This communiqué is a striking example of Mali's emphasis on "neocolonialism and anti-colonial struggle," especially in the construction of the anti-French discourse. In his speech on ORTM, the spokesperson for the transitional government repeated

the following phrases three times with emphasis: *“The Transitional Government demands that President Macron permanently abandon his neocolonial, paternalistic, and condescending posture and understand that no one can love Mali better than the Malians themselves.”* (Ibid.).

In communiqué 042 regarding France’s decision to suspend public development aid, France was once again explicitly accused of threatening the country’s integrity and supporting terrorism. Since February 2022, France has repeatedly claimed that a private French junta was undermining the dignity of the Malian people. Through this communiqué, the transitional government announced the prohibition of all activities of non-governmental organizations in which France was technically and materially involved: *“[...] especially as it contributes to the restoration of our dignity, which has been undermined by a French junta specializing, on the one hand, in providing dehumanizing aid for our people used as a means to blackmail the government and, on the other, in actively supporting terrorist groups operating on Malian territory.”* (ORTM, November 22, 2022).

Referring to the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the events in Moura from March 27 to 31, communiqué 052, issued on May 13, 2023, also includes discourse on the violation of Mali’s sovereignty and an attack on the country’s territorial integrity. First, it is argued that the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is being manipulated and that Mali is being denied the right to make its own strategic choices. The reaction to the report regarding the elections promised in Mali also clearly emphasizes the sovereignty of the Malian state (ORTM, May 13, 2023). Furthermore, in the communiqué regarding the withdrawal of the MINUSMA, read on ORTM on June 16, 2023, it was asserted that the MINUSMA was “dysfunctional” in the fight against terrorism. It even stated that the MINUSMA had now become *“part of the problem, particularly by fueling intercommunal tensions exacerbated by allegations of extreme gravity, which are highly detrimental to peace, reconciliation, and national cohesion”* (ORTM, June 16, 2023). It was also argued that the MINUSMA had violated three principles that Mali had repeatedly emphasized in its communiqués and to which countries seeking to cooperate with it should pay attention. These principles generally refer to the violations of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs.

The Communiqué 052, issued on May 13, 2023, and read on ORTM regarding the UN report on the events that took place in Moura from March 27 to 31, described the report as “contradictory” and “paradoxical,” which warrants analysis. Indeed, this

section of the communiqué refers to Mali's complaint to the UN Security Council (UNSC) against a French junta that allegedly committed violations of its sovereignty and territorial integrity. France is then explicitly accused of gathering intelligence and supplying weapons and ammunition to terrorist groups in the Sahel:

"In this context, it is contradictory and paradoxical to note the speed with which the fact-finding mission was set up at the time when Mali filed a complaint with the United Nations Security Council on August 15, 2022, concerning acts of aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a member state of the United Nations by the French junta, with evidence of flagrant and repeated violations of its airspace and espionage, for having gathered intelligence to the benefit of terrorist groups operating in the Sahel, while supplying them with weapons and ammunition." (ORTM, May 13, 2023).

The letter from Mali's transitional government to the presidency of the UNSC, dated August 15, 2022, mentioned in the statement, explicitly accuses France of activities in favor of terrorist groups and against Mali. The accusations leveled against France in this letter are as follows: *"Providing 'weapons' and gathering 'intelligence' for the benefit of terrorist groups,' 'espionage,' and 'intimidation' of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa)..."* (Le Cam and Châtelot, August 18, 2022).

It is interesting to conclude this section, which illustrates the anti-Western discourses, with communiqué 031 dated May 16, 2022, marking the first time such discourses were used. This communiqué reports an attempted counter-coup against the ruling military junta in Mali during the night of May 11 to 12. It allows us to analyze what the Malian military government aims to achieve with the discourse it adopts. The fact that this coup attempt, which was not covered by the national or international press, was "discredited" at a time when regional and international pressure and reactions toward the Malian military government regarding the "transition to civilian rule" were intensifying, necessitates a critical approach. Although the coup was allegedly supposed to have taken place on May 11 and 12, the fact that the communiqué was published on May 16 and read on ORTM makes this "dubious" claim even more controversial. According to the communiqué, the attempted coup disrupted the plan to restore constitutional order. It also emphasized that the counter-coup plotters were a junta supported by a "Western" state. Why was a "Western" state directly identified rather than using the concept of a "foreign" state? In summary, the period of "transition to civilian rule" was extended by an allegation of a counter-coup, the truth or occurrence of which remains unknown, and another military junta supported by a Western state was blamed for the failure to return to constitutional order:

[...] a small group of anti-progressive Malian officers and non-commissioned officers attempted a coup d'état on the night of May 11 to 12, 2022. These military personnel were supported by a Western state. [...] The Government of the Republic of Mali condemns in the strongest terms this shameful attack on state security, the aim of which was to hinder, if not annihilate, the substantial efforts to rebuild our country and return to constitutional order, a guarantee of peace and stability. (ORTM, 2022b).

Conclusion

The rise of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger takes place in a context of political fragility and chronic instability that has characterized the Sahel for several decades. The adoption of anti-Western, particularly the anti-French, rhetoric by these regimes serves both to consolidate their power internally and to justify their refusal to transfer power to civilians. These regimes reference historical grievances and the failures of foreign interventions to legitimize their military rule and maintain their hold on power. The Malian military junta is a quintessential example of the construction of the anti-Western, and more specifically the anti-French, discourse adopted as a strategy for legitimizing its authority.

This study, which centers on the discourses observed in the military government in Mali, adopts the discourse analysis method and Teun Adrian van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA focusing on the relationship between power and knowledge, fundamentally arguing that dominant groups not only generate power but also produce knowledge to legitimize the use of this power through rhetoric and discourse. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, meanwhile, focuses on the relationship between power and discourse in the media, placing context at the center of discourse construction. Van Dijk's approach posits that discourse constructions are shaped by historical, cultural, social, and cognitive contexts. Thus, this study deconstructs the continuous postponement of the promised transition to civilian political life by the military government in Mali, which aims to establish and maintain its dominance as the ruling power, through the lens of van Dijk's approach. First, the reasons and objectives behind the military junta, which seized power by force, adopting an anti-Western discourse to legitimize its rule and avoid transitioning to civilian political life, are discussed. Then, through a socio-cognitive critical analysis, we argue that the military government in Mali has a favorable context for constructing its discourse at local, regional, and international levels. Finally, the study analyzes how the three pillars of this discourse —terrorism, sovereignty, and neo-colonialism— are portrayed as a relationship between power and discourse in the media, specifically through the transitional government communiqués broadcast on Mali's state television channel, ORTM. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach allows us to understand how such themes

are consciously reinforced to mobilize public support and deprive external actors of legitimacy.

The rhetorical construction of this discourse is clearly observable in the communiqués issued by the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, often read by Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga, spokesperson for the Transitional Government, on the public television channel ORTM. Indeed, the new discursive construction of the transitional government in Mali corresponds to a favorable context at the national, regional, and international levels. This rhetoric is organized around three main axes. First, there is a strong opposition to the West in general and France in particular, based on the perception of the West's responsibility in the spread of terrorism in the Sahel following the 2011 Libyan intervention, the failure of the Western counterterrorism strategies, and France's alleged support of terrorist groups against Mali. Second, in the discourse concerning Mali's alliance with Russia, particularly with the Wagner Group, Western nations are accused of undermining Malian sovereignty, with France specifically denounced for its presumed attempts to fragment Mali's territorial integrity. Additionally, Western countries, and France in particular, are criticized for their "neocolonial" rhetoric and practices, while the Malian military government positions itself as a key actor in the anti-colonial struggle.

This article examines how linguistic and cognitive tools are utilized in the analysis of the anti-Western discourses of military regimes. While many studies in the literature focus on the political and geopolitical dimensions of military interventions, this research highlights how discourse plays a central role in the legitimacy strategies of military regimes. Additionally, by employing van Dijk's socio-cognitive CDA, it offers a new methodological and theoretical perspective by revealing the national and international impacts of the rhetoric structured around the themes of terrorism, state sovereignty, and neo-colonialism. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the linguistic dimensions of post-coup processes.

While this discursive strategy may be effective in the short term for reinforcing the authority of military regimes, it raises a critical question about the long-term future of the region. Are the members of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) truly prepared to permanently sever their complex and historical ties with their former colonizer, France, and fully embrace new geostrategic alliances? Future studies based on this question could examine the long-term impacts of military regimes' discursive strategies on regional stability and foreign policy. This research demonstrates how military governments use anti-Western discourse as a tool for legitimacy in the short term. However, questions such as whether these discourses will lead to a permanent

shift in foreign policy or to what extent new geostrategic alliances will be sustainable should be explored in future research. Additionally, further investigation is needed into the social and economic consequences of such discourses.

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