



# Change in the Sahel: Hashtags and Power

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This study explores how young people across the Sahel are using digital tools to engage in politics, shape electoral processes, and influence democratic change. Focusing on Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Togo, the study examines the growing role of social media platforms, messaging applications, online campaigns, and digital networks in youth-led civic activism during elections and political transitions.

This research was conducted by Research ICT Africa (RIA), a leading African digital policy and research think tank that has worked for more than a decade to advance evidence-based digital governance and inclusive information societies across the continent. The study was commissioned by the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD).

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union within the framework of the AHEAD Africa project. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

The study also benefited from valuable feedback provided by Evelyn Mantoiu, Giovanna Tanzi, Daniel Ekomo, and the Digitalise Youth Project team.

We would like to thank Yossabel Chetty and Herman Wasserman from the Centre of Information Integrity in Africa for their support with data collection, analysis, and report drafting. We also thank Alan Finlay for his editorial review of the publication.

Copy editing: Justin Willems.

Design and layout: Sara Hurtado Meseguer.

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# 1. Introduction



## 1.1 The Return of Political Upheaval in the Sahel

Between 2020 and 2023, the central Sahel experienced a resurgence of military coups and constitutional disruptions. Coups in Mali (2020, 2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and Niger (2023), alongside political crises in Guinea (2021), Chad (2021), Cameroon, and Togo, mark what many scholars describe as a renewed era of **“coup contagion”** in West and Central Africa.<sup>1</sup> These developments are not isolated institutional breakdowns, but reflect deeper crises of electoral legitimacy, governance, and sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

At the centre of these transformations lies the region’s youth demographic. Youth marginalisation, manifested through unemployment, limited political inclusion, and socioeconomic precarity, has created fertile ground for mobilisation.<sup>4</sup> However, unlike earlier waves of protest politics in Africa, contemporary **youth engagement is increasingly hybrid, unfolding simultaneously in physical and digital spaces.**

**The Sahel is one of the youngest regions globally, with a majority of the population under the age of 25.<sup>3</sup>**

Civic space has simultaneously narrowed. Governments have adopted restrictive media laws, curtailed opposition activity, and implemented internet shutdowns during periods of unrest.<sup>5</sup> Yet, rather than silencing dissent entirely, these constraints have intensified contestation in digital spaces. In particular, the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) has emerged as a central discursive battleground where narratives of democracy, sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and reform are articulated and contested. Among these, the most prevalent narratives concern the interference of foreign countries particularly France, and an anti-Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sentiment, while in Cameroon, online discourse centres on the continued rule of the ageing President Paul Biya.

This study argues that the Sahel should not be conceptualised merely as a peripheral crisis zone characterised by fragility and instability. Instead, it constitutes a region with potential for digitally mediated political transformation. The interplay between youth activism, online discourse, and regime response reveals broader dynamics of how digital technologies reshape contentious politics in contexts of institutional fragility. By examining political communication on X, Facebook, and TikTok through prominent hashtags used between April 2023 and February 2026, this research situates the Sahel at the forefront of debates on digital activism, sovereignty, and regime change. An analysis of the policy landscape across Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali, highlights both the potential and the limitations of current legal and regulatory frameworks for digital governance in the region.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Eizenga and Paul D. Williams, “The Puzzle of Jihadist Insurgency in the Sahel”, *African Security* 13, no. 3 (2020): 191–213; Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, “Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset”, *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 2 (2011): 249–259.

<sup>2</sup> Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Gabrielle Lynch, *Performances of Injustice: The Politics of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Kenya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *World Population Prospects 2022* (New York: United Nations, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Alcinda Honwana, *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2023).

## 1.2 From Street Protest to Hashtag Politics

Globally, the past decade has witnessed a **shift from predominantly street-based mobilisation to hybrid activism** that blends offline protest with online narrative construction.<sup>6</sup> While physical demonstrations remain crucial, digital platforms increasingly serve as arenas for agenda-setting, framing, and the transnational diffusion of protest narratives.<sup>7</sup> In the Sahelian context, youth activists deploy hashtags not merely as communication tools but as political instruments that structure collective identity and mobilisation.

Hashtags function as organising devices that aggregate dispersed voices, create symbolic coherence, and amplify grievances. Research shows they can generate connective action, enabling decentralised coordination without formal leadership.<sup>8</sup> In fragile political environments, they also provide relative anonymity and allow rapid response to unfolding events.

This shift from street protest to hashtag politics does not displace physical mobilisation but reflects a hybrid model in which online and offline dynamics reinforce each other. One of the guiding questions of this study is therefore: under what conditions does youth digital activism translate into political transformation? In politically sensitive environments such as those found in parts of the Sahel, the use of social media, in particular X (the platform most commonly used for political contestation), also reflects broader dynamics of shrinking civic space. Military governments and dominant elites often influence traditional media, encouraging citizens to turn to digital platforms for alternative sources of information and expression.

6 Özkula argues that **“digital activism is understood as both technologically driven (technological determinism) and distinct from, yet enmeshed with, traditional activism”**.<sup>9</sup> Although subject to certain forms of oversight, digital spaces are generally more flexible than offline environments, where protests, assembly, and traditional media may be subject to stricter restrictions. Consequently, youth activists frequently rely on social media to document events, share political information, and challenge official narratives.<sup>10</sup>

However, the prominence of social media in digital activism also introduces important challenges. Features such as algorithmic amplification and open network structures facilitate not only mobilisation but also the spread of disinformation and coordinated propaganda campaigns. In the Sahel region, where information ecosystems are already strained by conflict and political polarisation, these dynamics can complicate efforts to sustain credible civic dialogue. Research highlights that digital platforms may simultaneously empower grassroots activism and enable competing actors, including state authorities and external actors, to shape narratives through strategic information campaigns.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the analysis of digital activism on social media must account for both its potential to enhance civic participation and its vulnerability to manipulation.

6 Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017).

7 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8 Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*.

9 Suay Melisa Özkula, “What Is Digital Activism Anyway? Social Constructions of the ‘Digital’ in Contemporary Activism”, *Journal of Digital Social Research* 3, no. 3 (2021): 60–84.

10 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023*.

11 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation* (Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute, 2019).

### 1.3 Conceptualising Digitally Mediated Political Transformation

The study explores **the extent to which youth digital activism in the Sahel oscillates between reformist democratic claims and rupture-oriented sovereigntist narratives**. Rather than assuming a uniform pro-democracy orientation, the analysis examines whether and how digital youth activism reflects competing visions of political order.

In contexts characterised by persistent conflict and contested governance, digital platforms become critical arenas where narratives around national security, state legitimacy, and civic rights are negotiated. Conflict-related events often catalyse online mobilisation, as citizens use social media to document developments, share information, and critique official narratives.<sup>12</sup>

**Digital influence is strongest under three conditions:**

- **Alignment between offline mobilisation and online discourse** enhances political consequence. When street protests and hashtag campaigns reinforce one another, they generate heightened visibility and pressure on political elites.
- **Institutional crisis**, manifested through electoral disputes, constitutional manipulation, or security breakdown, creates openings for digital narratives to shape political outcomes.<sup>13</sup>
- **Regional narrative resonance** amplifies domestic mobilisation, as cross-border flows legitimise and normalise particular frames of sovereignty or reform.

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**States respond through three main strategies: repression**, including arrests, legal restrictions, internet shutdowns; **counter-framing**, including official hashtags and campaigns to delegitimise opponents; and **digital control**, including surveillance, content regulation, strategic communication.

Cross-border narrative flows play a role in reshaping national political discourse. In particular, the diffusion of sovereignty-related frames following coups in Mali and Burkina Faso appears to have been reflected in and adapted by digital activist practices in Niger and beyond. This regionalisation of digital contention suggests that political transformation in the Sahel cannot be understood solely within national boundaries. Instead, digitally mediated narratives constitute a transnational public sphere in which youth actors negotiate competing visions of authority, democracy, and sovereignty.

By analysing hashtag data from X, Facebook, and TikTok from 2023 to 2026 across Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Togo, Niger, Chad, Mali, and Guinea, this research contributes to debates on digital activism, contentious politics, and regime change. It demonstrates that the Sahel is not merely experiencing cyclical instability but a deeper transformation in the modalities of political engagement. In this context, **youth actors are redefining the relationship between street and screen, reform and rupture, nation and region**.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).



## 2. Literature Review and Contextual Framework

## 2.1 Youth Political Agency in Africa

Africa's demographic structure has produced one of the largest youth populations in the world, often described as a “**youth bulge**”. While this demographic shift has the potential to contribute to economic growth and democratic participation, many young people across the continent remain politically and economically marginalised. High levels of youth unemployment, limited access to formal political institutions, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities have contributed to widespread frustration among younger generations.<sup>14</sup>

In many countries governed by hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes, youth often experience significant barriers to political participation despite constituting a majority of the population.<sup>15</sup> As a result, traditional channels of engagement, such as political parties and formal civic institutions, frequently fail to represent youth interests or reflect their political aspirations.

Earlier scholarship often characterised African youth as politically apathetic or disengaged from democratic processes, but more recent research challenges this assumption, demonstrating that **young people across the continent are actively participating in politics through alternative forms of engagement**.<sup>16</sup> This is reflected in the Global Youth Participation Index, where all seven countries received an overall participation score of 35% or higher.<sup>17</sup>

Rather than relying solely on conventional institutional mechanisms, youth activism increasingly manifests through informal networks, grassroots movements, and digitally mediated forms of participation. These forms of engagement reflect what some scholars describe as “insurgent citizenship”, whereby marginalised groups challenge existing political arrangements and assert new claims to participation, representation, and accountability.<sup>18</sup> In this context, youth activism often takes place outside formal party structures and is instead embedded within decentralised civic networks that operate both online and offline.

Digital technologies have played an increasingly important role in shaping contemporary youth political participation. In environments where traditional media outlets are often state-controlled or subject to political pressure, **social media platforms provide alternative channels through which young people can express political grievances, share information, and mobilise collective action**. Platforms such as X, Facebook, and TikTok have become important spaces for political discussion, narrative construction, and protest coordination.

Through these platforms, youth activists circulate videos of demonstrations, comment on political developments in real time, and engage with broader regional and global audiences.<sup>19</sup> Social media therefore functions simultaneously as an information infrastructure, a mobilisation tool, and a symbolic arena in which political identities and narratives are constructed and contested.

<sup>14</sup> Honwana, *The Time of Youth*; Danielle Resnick and Daniela Casale, “The Political Participation of Africa’s Youth”, *Africa Development* 36, nos. 3–4 (2011): 97–120.

<sup>15</sup> Jon Abbink, “Being Young in Africa: The Politics of Despair and Renewal”, in *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (Oxford: James Currey, 2005); Adam Branch and Zachariah C. Mampilly, *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest and Political Change* (London: Zed Books, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Honwana, *The Time of Youth*; Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, “Reflections on Youth”, *Public Culture* 17, no. 1 (2005): 19–30.

<sup>17</sup> Global Youth Participation Index, “Country Reports”, European Partnership for Democracy, <https://gyipi.epd.eu/country-reports/>

<sup>18</sup> James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Branch and Mampilly, *Africa Uprising*.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Wasserman, *Media, Geopolitics and Power: A View from the Global South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

**African youth are not politically disengaged; rather, they are reconfiguring the meaning and practice of citizenship through digitally mediated forms of participation that operate within the constraints of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political systems.**<sup>20</sup>

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Between April 2023 and February 2024, several countries in West and Central Africa experienced significant political developments that highlighted the growing importance of digitally mediated youth activism. In Burkina Faso, the military government led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré consolidated its authority while pro-sovereignty narratives gained traction across social media platforms. Online discourse frequently celebrated nationalist and anti-imperial themes, particularly on TikTok and X, where youth-driven content amplified support for the regime and promoted broader Pan-African symbolism.<sup>21</sup>

In Niger, the military coup of July 2023 that removed President Mohamed Bazoum triggered widespread public mobilisation. Youth activists and civil society networks played a prominent role in circulating protest imagery and political commentary online, often framing the coup within broader narratives of national sovereignty and resistance to foreign influence.<sup>22</sup>

Similar dynamics were visible in other countries across the region. In Mali, the ongoing military transition was accompanied by rising nationalist rhetoric that circulated widely on social media, where pro-sovereignty narratives and regional solidarity with Burkina Faso and Niger became prominent themes.<sup>23</sup>

**Social media platforms have become central spaces through which young people interpret political events, construct narratives of sovereignty and resistance, and co-ordinate both online and offline forms of activism.** As a result, youth political participation in contemporary Africa cannot be fully understood without examining the digital infrastructures that shape communication, mobilisation, and public discourse.

## 2.2 Digital Activism in Hybrid Regimes

The rise of digital activism has attracted significant scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in relation to how social media platforms facilitate new forms of political participation and protest mobilisation. One influential strand of this literature focuses on the role of hashtag activism and networked communication in shaping contemporary social movements.<sup>24</sup> Hashtag activism allows users to aggregate dispersed political conversations

<sup>20</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*; Tanja Bosch, *Twitter and Participatory Citizenship in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 2023.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Niger Coup and the Future of the Sahel* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2023); Sam Mednick, "Niger Coup Triggers Regional Tensions", Associated Press, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Bosch, *Twitter and Participatory Citizenship*.

into recognisable digital campaigns, enabling rapid dissemination of information and the formation of temporary online publics.

On platforms such as X, **hashtags enable real-time commentary and discussion of political events**, often allowing activists to bypass traditional media gatekeepers.<sup>25</sup> **TikTok's short-form video format allows users to produce emotionally resonant and visually compelling political content**, while **Facebook supports the formation of digital communities through groups, livestreams, and event coordination tools**.<sup>26</sup> Across all three platforms keywords (which include hashtags and other campaign identifiers) enable content to be grouped and assessed.

Another important dimension of digital activism concerns the technological affordances of specific platforms and the ways in which algorithms shape political visibility. Each social media platform offers distinct communicative possibilities that influence how activism unfolds. X facilitates rapid dissemination of political commentary and enables interaction between activists, journalists, and political elites. Facebook provides spaces for community organisation and long-form political discussion, while also connecting domestic activists with diaspora communities. TikTok, by contrast, relies heavily on algorithmic recommendation systems that can rapidly amplify visual content, allowing short videos to reach large audiences even when posted by relatively unknown users.<sup>27</sup> These algorithmic dynamics significantly influence which political narratives gain visibility and traction, thereby influencing public debate and shaping the broader informational environment in which political contestation occurs.<sup>28</sup>

In fragile institutional settings, the political consequences of digital activism are often complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, **social media platforms can expand opportunities for political participation** by providing citizens with alternative channels through which to express grievances, mobilise protest, and hold authorities accountable.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, **the same platforms can also facilitate the spread of populist rhetoric, nationalist narratives, and coordinated disinformation campaigns**.<sup>30</sup>

In several Sahelian contexts between 2023 and 2024, digital activism contributed not only to protest mobilisation but also to the legitimisation of military regimes and the circulation of anti-imperial narratives. Instead, in hybrid political systems, platform-mediated activism can **simultaneously support reformist demands for accountability and reinforce narratives that justify political rupture, including military coups**.

**As a result,  
digital activism  
does not necessarily  
produce democratic  
outcomes.**

<sup>25</sup> Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Diana Zulli and David James Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme: Conceptualizing Technological Mimesis and Imitation Publics on TikTok", *New Media & Society* 24, no. 8 (2022): 1872–1890.

<sup>27</sup> Zulli and Zulli, "Extending the Internet Meme".

<sup>28</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

<sup>29</sup> Bosch, *Twitter and Participatory Citizenship*; Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

<sup>30</sup> Bradshaw and Howard, *The Global Disinformation Order*.

## 2.3 Youth Digital Activism and Its Democratic Effects in the Sahel

In **Chad**, youth digital activism has developed in response to a persistently authoritarian political system and recurring restrictions on digital freedoms. The country experienced one of the longest social media shutdowns in Africa, from 2018 to 2020, implemented by the government to suppress online mobilisation following contested political reforms. Despite this, young Chadians cultivated innovative strategies to circulate information through virtual private networks (VPNs), encrypted messaging platforms and diasporic networks.

During the 2021 presidential succession crisis and subsequent protests, youth activists used digital platforms to share evidence of repression, mobilise solidarity, and draw international attention to political abuses. Paradigm Initiative reports that these digital practices have complicated the state's attempts at narrative control, particularly as Chadian youth increasingly connect with broader regional discourses on democratic reform.<sup>31</sup>

In **Guinea**, digital activism has become central to the political landscape, particularly during periods of constitutional crisis. The mobilisation against President Alpha Condé's attempt to alter the Constitution in 2019–2020 relied heavily on Facebook, WhatsApp, and online media outlets. WhatsApp is widely used in the region as an instant messaging platform offering end-to-end encryption, which facilitates coordination among activist groups. However, in parts of the Sahel, government authorities at traffic checkpoints commonly ask people to show their phones and manually check whether they carry content deemed problematic by the state.<sup>32</sup>

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Youth-led digital networks associated with the Front National pour la Défense de la Constitution disseminated protest information, broadcast live footage of demonstrations, and coordinated their mobilisation efforts using social media. Studies show that Guinean youth used digital tools not only to organise protests but also to archive political violence and document electoral malpractice, thereby reshaping the informational environment and challenging state monopolies over political communication.<sup>33</sup> This dynamic continued during the 2021 coup, as social media became the primary arena through which political narratives were contested and legitimised.

In **Togo**, youth digital activism has long been intertwined with struggles against the Gnassingbé dynasty's extended rule. Since the protests of 2017, young Togolese activists have used hashtags such as #TogoDebout to mobilise large demonstrations and circumvent traditional media censorship. These digital networks have connected rural and urban activists and linked domestic struggles with diaspora movements. Digital mobilisation in Togo has contributed to a heightened political consciousness among youth, although state repression, including targeted arrests and data surveillance, continues to limit the transformative potential of these efforts.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Paradigm Initiative, *Londa 2023: Digital Rights and Inclusion in Africa Report* (Lagos: Paradigm Initiative, 2023).

<sup>32</sup> Sahana Udupa and Herman Wasserman, "Digital Surveillance and Everyday Politics in the Sahel", Centre for Information Integrity in Africa, 2025.

<sup>33</sup> Mamadou Konaté, "Digital Protest and Constitutional Contestation in Guinea", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 59, no. 4 (2021): 589–608.

<sup>34</sup> Mawuli Ella, "Digital Activism and Youth Mobilisation in Togo: Social Media and the Politics of Protest", *African Studies Review* 63, no. 3 (2020): 95–113.

Collectively, the experiences of **these countries demonstrate that youth digital activism has become a central mechanism through which democratic aspirations are articulated and contested in the Sahel.** Digital platforms have enabled young citizens to expose electoral malpractice, challenge authoritarian governance, amplify grievances, and mobilise unprecedented numbers of participants.

They have also provided transnational channels through which political repertoires circulate, giving rise to what Nothias describes as a Pan-African digital public sphere that weakens traditional state boundaries and creates shared imaginaries of democratic possibility.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the proliferation of digital repression strategies across the region, ranging from internet shutdowns to cybercrime legislation, underscores how digital technologies have intensified struggles over power, legitimacy, and state authority.

The impact of youth digital activism on democratic change in the Sahel is therefore both transformative and contested. It expands civic participation, enhances transparency, and reconfigures the public sphere, yet it also provokes state backlash, exacerbates political polarisation, and risks co-optation by non-democratic actors. As such, a greater understanding of these dynamics is essential for assessing the evolving landscape of democratic governance in a region wherein digital tools have become inseparable from political life.

## 2.4 Sovereignty Narratives and Digital Nationalism

In recent years, **political discourse across the Sahel and parts of West Africa has increasingly centred on narratives of national sovereignty and resistance to external influence.** These narratives often frame political crises, regime change, and military interventions as part of broader struggles against neo-colonial domination, particularly in relation to former colonial powers such as France.<sup>36</sup> Social media platforms have been instrumental in disseminating and popularising these narratives, enabling activists, influencers, and political actors to circulate messages that emphasise national dignity, independence, and the reclamation of political autonomy.

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Digital spaces have also facilitated the emergence of regional solidarity discourses that link political developments across multiple countries. Events in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are frequently interpreted through a shared narrative of sovereign resistance, with online communities framing these countries as part of a broader geopolitical shift within the Sahel.<sup>37</sup> Through shared hashtags, memes, and symbolic imagery, activists construct a transnational discourse that connects national political struggles to wider regional dynamics.

A related dimension of this discourse is the revival of digital Pan-Africanism. Many youth activists draw on historical symbols and figures associated with anti-imperialist and Pan-African movements, including revolutionary leaders and liberation struggles from earlier periods. These historical references are frequently reinterpreted through contemporary digital media practices, such as TikTok video edits, viral speeches, and visually stylised political imagery. In doing so, activists construct a digital political culture that blends historical memory with contemporary political grievances.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Toussaint Nothias, "The Rise of the Pan-African Digital Public Sphere", *African Affairs* 119, no. 476 (2020): 463–484.

<sup>36</sup> Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London: Routledge, 2017); Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa*.

<sup>37</sup> International Crisis Group, Burkina Faso.

<sup>38</sup> Bosch, *Twitter and Participatory Citizenship*.



# 3. Methodology



### 3.1 Research questions

The main research question is: **What does youth digital activism in the Sahel look like, and how do its narratives seek to produce political effects across different contexts?**

Rather than attempting to establish the measurable consequences of digital activism, such as concrete offline outcomes, this study focuses on the intent, form, and projected effects of online activism. In this sense, “political consequence” is understood in terms of how activism is articulated, how it aims to influence audiences, and how it elicits observable responses, particularly from state actors.

To answer this overarching question, the study advances several sub-questions:

- How can digital activism in the Sahel be characterised?
- How do states respond to youth digital activism?
- How do digital narratives differ between coup contexts and constitutional crises?
- How do sovereignty narratives travel regionally?
- What explains divergence across cases such as Guinea, Chad, Cameroon, and Togo?

### 3.2 Research design: A relational comparative approach

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design to develop an interpretive and relational understanding of youth digital activism across seven Sahelian countries. Drawing on the comparative case study tradition of George and Bennett<sup>39</sup> and interpretive political science, this approach enables the systematic identification of shared patterns and context-specific divergences in digital mobilisation, state responses, and electoral politics.<sup>40</sup>

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Rather than treating such cases as discrete and bounded units, the study employs a relational comparative strategy.<sup>41</sup> Digital activism in the Sahel operates through transnational flows of information, symbols, and strategies facilitated by digital platforms and regional political solidarities. Each country is therefore analysed as a node within a broader socio-digital network. This approach captures the diffusion of hashtags, diaspora amplification, and cross-border sovereignty narratives that characterised the period 2023–2026.

### 3.3 Digital data collection and platform analysis

Digital and web-based archives constitute the core empirical material for examining online mobilisation. Publicly available content from platforms including X, Facebook, and TikTok is analysed in accordance with established ethical guidelines for digital research.<sup>42</sup> First, secondary data were collected to identify and analyse literature on instances of youth-led movements during periods of political unrest, conflict, and elections in the seven Sahelian countries.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Philip McMichael, “Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative Method”, *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 3 (1990): 385–397; David Levi-Faur, “On the ‘Net Impact’ of Europeanization: The EU’s Telecoms and Electricity Regimes between the Global and the National”, *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 1 (2004): 3–29.

<sup>42</sup> Leanne Townsend and Claire Wallace, *Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 2016); Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0)* (Association of Internet Researchers, 2012).

Alongside the secondary literature review, the study employed digital data collection tools to examine online mobilisation directly. For systematic digital analysis, the study made use of SentiOne, an artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled social listening and media monitoring platform. SentiOne facilitates longitudinal tracking of keywords, hashtags, and influential accounts across social media, blogs, and online news sources. Hashtags that were used between 2015 and 2026 were identified through analysing surges in social media use aligned with elections, constitutional crises, protest waves, and coup episodes over the eleven-year period. A broad set of hashtags that were comparable across countries in the region were collected and added to SentiOne, which then scraped multiple sites and platforms to find posts, articles, blogs or comments that contained these hashtags.

While the eleven-year period was used to identify the hashtags, the data analysis tool only archives data from the preceding three years. Although the tool can record social media events both in real time and as archived data, this study has analysed only archived data. Therefore, the digital analysis only examines the time period of 1 April 2023 to 28 February 2026.

Hashtags are campaign-specific and those that were used five or six years ago may not be the same ones used today. This understanding will support further studies, as future research can now branch out into more contextually-specific use of hashtags or other social media campaign identifiers, with a focus per country rather than on a regional-basis.

Digital activism is conceptualised as a repertoire of political practices reliant on digital infrastructures to express dissent, coordinate action, and influence political processes.<sup>43</sup> In Sahelian contexts, this repertoire encompasses hashtag movements (for example, #Amoulanfé in Mali and #StopBadGovernance in Chad), online petitions and citizen documentation of electoral malpractice, among others. The analysis examines how these forms of activism evolve over time and interact with political events and governance responses.

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### 3.4 Discursive analysis and coding framework

The analytical strategy integrates digital ethnography and content analysis. Coding procedures categorise data according to three primary dimensions: (1) patterns of topics generating youth digital mobilisation; (2) motivation in the posts (critique, call for youth mobilisation, expression of support for a decision/leader, disagreement with a situation); and (3) transnational and non-hierarchical connections.

First, mobilisation patterns are analysed through narrative frames, symbolic repertoires, and recurring hashtags. Second, institutional responses are also coded to capture types of repressive measures such as the use of laws and regulations, internet shutdowns, surveillance, and strategic counter-framing campaigns. The framework draws on scholarship on digital repression and algorithmic governance to assess how states attempt to manage or contain networked dissent.<sup>44</sup>

Third, cross-border connections are traced to identify how protest repertoires and sovereignty narratives circulate regionally, contributing to a shared “digital political grammar”. This abductive and iterative coding process moves between individual cases and the broader regional landscape, allowing themes to emerge relationally rather than through pre-determined hypotheses.

<sup>43</sup> David Karpf, *Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jacob Zenn and Abdulbasit Leber, “Digital Activism and Militant Messaging in Africa,” *African Affairs* 120, no. 480 (2021): 319–341.

<sup>44</sup> Ronald Deibert, “The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths about Social Media,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (2019): 25–39; Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

### 3.5 Comparative cartography and visual mapping

A distinctive methodological innovation of this study is the use of “comparative cartography”. Inspired by actor-network theory and critical cartographic traditions.<sup>45</sup> This approach constructs conceptual and visual mappings of relationships among actors, infrastructures, events, and discourses.

Analytical outputs include timelines illustrating the interplay between digital mobilisation and electoral cycles; cross-country matrices comparing legal and regulatory frameworks; and narrative syntheses contrasting youth innovation with mechanisms of state control. These cartographic representations serve not merely descriptive purposes but function as analytical devices that reveal structural linkages and emergent regional dynamics.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

As the names of individuals posting on social media constitute personal data, such information must be handled with particular care. Even when pseudonyms are used, account holders may still be identifiable. For this reason, the names and usernames associated with the analysed posts have not been disclosed. This precaution is especially important given the sensitive political context in the countries concerned, requiring additional caution to avoid exposing or enabling the identification of the authors.

### 3.7 Limitations

The digital data analysis through SentiOne presented several limitations. First, the tool only archives content for three years. Therefore, data before April 2023 have not been returned in the dataset. This limits the findings because the overall case study considers events that took place between 2015 and 2026. This means that the tool has not been able to analyse the movement of hashtags for roughly eight years of the research period and that campaign-specific hashtags that were used before April 2023 are not included in this analysis.

Focusing on youth specifically and how they have been able to mobilise is also difficult because social media listening tools do not identify users by age. An additional methodology for identifying youth accounts would have to be incorporated and the margin of error in identifying these accounts would need to be assessed to access more relevant data. Further, when selecting hashtags for tracking social media usage by the youth, the colloquial language and slang, and shortened versions of words that young people use must also be considered. In French contexts, wordplay is quite common and any youth groups or individuals trying to mobilise online may have unique words and references that they use, which requires a more local understanding.

While the more generic hashtags identified for this study allowed for useful cross-country analysis, it is likely that there are far more contextually rich posts that have not been returned in the dataset. The hashtags used also returned a disproportionate volume of content from accounts identifying themselves as news or media-related which may have obscured more grassroots youth-generated content in the dataset. More time and access to in-country experts could resolve these limitations, allowing for a deeper understanding of online activity.

<sup>45</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); J. Brian Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1–20.



## 4. Discussion and Comparative Analysis

Drawing on the literature discussed above, the following section employs a **qualitative methodology and the SentiOne tool to investigate digital activism, with a particular focus on, in seven Sahelian countries**. For each country, the frequency and content of social media posts are examined and linked to a sociopolitical event that occurred during that time period. Specific posts are then analysed for content and sentiment and, where possible, youth involvement in organisation and mobilisation is ascertained. This section tests the theoretical framework outlined above against the empirical evidence, examining where the proposed dynamics hold and where national contexts produce divergent outcomes.

## 4.1 Comparative thematic analysis across countries

A comparative thematic analysis of **Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Togo, Niger, Cameroon and Chad between April 2023 and February 2026** reveals both converging regional dynamics and important divergences in the nature, scale, and structure of digital activism. These patterns are shaped by three overarching factors: political governance trajectories, levels of digital infrastructure, and the configuration of civic space.

### 4.1.1. Military rule, political transition, and digital contestation

A central similarity across Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad lies in their experience of **military or transitional governance**, which profoundly structures online discourse. In Mali and Burkina Faso in particular, digital activism is closely intertwined with debates over prolonged military rule and delayed democratic transitions. In both cases, spikes in online engagement correspond to key political events—such as electoral delays, institutional reforms, or announcements extending transitional mandates—indicating that digital platforms function as reactive arenas of political contestation.

However, the tone and orientation of this contestation differ significantly. **In Mali and Burkina Faso, online discourse exhibits a dual dynamic of criticism and support, with substantial segments of users endorsing military authorities**. In Mali, support for the regime of Assimi Goïta and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) coexists with sharp criticism, producing highly polarised exchanges. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, pro-government narratives—particularly those framing Traoré as a symbol of anti-imperialist resistance—achieve high visibility and engagement, suggesting the consolidation of digital narratives aligned with state or nationalist positions.

By contrast, **Guinea and Chad display far weaker forms of digital contestation**. Although both countries are also governed by transitional or semi-authoritarian regimes, **online discourse is comparatively muted and less participatory**. In Guinea, discussions largely reflect elite or media-driven narratives rather than grassroots mobilisation, while in Chad, debates are often externally generated and focus on geopolitical issues rather than domestic civic engagement. This divergence highlights that political transition alone does not produce digital activism; rather, it must intersect with enabling structural and technological conditions.

**Togo** presents a contrasting model. While not under military rule, it **exhibits intense digital contestation driven by youth opposition to entrenched authoritarianism**. Here, online activism is explicitly antigovernment, framing constitutional reforms as illegitimate and mobilising protest narratives. Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso, where military regimes retain pockets of popular digital support, Togolese discourse is more uniformly critical, reflecting a clearer oppositional alignment.

### 4.1.2. Regionalism, sovereignty, and anti-external narratives

A second major thematic convergence is the prominence of **sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and regional realignment** across the Sahelian countries. In **Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, digital discourse frequently engages with the decline of Western influence**—particularly that of France—and the rise of alternative partnerships, notably with Russia. The formation of the AES emerges as a key focal point, widely discussed and often positively framed as a vehicle for regional autonomy.

This narrative is especially pronounced in Burkina Faso, where digital content elevates anticolonial rhetoric into a broader Pan-African ideological framework, resonating strongly with youth and diaspora audiences. Mali exhibits similar tendencies, with widespread support for withdrawal from ECOWAS and scepticism towards Western intervention. In Chad, although youth digital activism is limited, the same themes appear in hashtags (#francedégage, #sovereignty), suggesting a diffusion of regional narratives across borders, even where local engagement is weak.

**Guinea again as well as Cameroon** diverges from this pattern. While it is embedded in the same regional context, **their digital discourses shows less emphasis on sovereignty narratives and more focus on internal governance issues**, albeit with limited participation. **Togo also differs in that its activism is domestically oriented**, centred on regime change rather than geopolitical realignment.

### 4.1.3. The role of security crises in driving digital engagement

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**Security dynamics**, particularly jihadist insurgencies, **play a critical role in shaping digital activism in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso**. In both countries, spikes in online activity are strongly correlated with violent events, military operations, or shifts in security partnerships. For example, attacks attributed to extremist groups or developments following the withdrawal of international missions trigger intense online debate, as users seek information and express grievances.

This pattern underscores the function of social media as a real-time information ecosystem in conflict settings, where citizens engage in sense-making and narrative construction. In Mali, discussions around Azawad militias and northern insurgencies further demonstrate how unresolved territorial conflicts remain central to digital discourse.

In contrast, **security issues are less central in Togo and Guinea's digital activism**, where political governance and constitutional reform dominate. **Chad occupies an intermediate position**: while security and foreign military presence are discussed, these conversations are largely driven by external actors rather than domestic youth engagement.

### 4.1.4. Scale and structure of youth digital activism

One of the most notable differences across the five countries lies in the scale and visibility of youth participation:

- **High engagement** and visible youth activism: **Mali, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger and Togo**;
- **Low visibility** and limited youth-generated content: **Guinea and Chad**.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, youth are active participants but not necessarily agenda-setters. Digital activism is networked and mediated, with influential accounts (media, public figures) shaping narratives that are then amplified by broader youth audiences. This reflects a hybrid model of participation, where engagement is high but leadership is concentrated.

**Togo represents a distinct case of youth-led, decentralised digital mobilisation.** Here, young users not only participate but actively produce and disseminate political content, organise protests, and construct collective narratives. The use of hashtags, grassroots coordination, and cultural expression indicates a horizontal and participatory model of activism, aligned with contemporary theories of networked social movements.

By contrast, **Guinea and Chad exhibit structurally constrained digital activism.** Low internet penetration, limited digital infrastructure, and restrictive political environments reduce both the scale and visibility of youth engagement. In these contexts, activism may be latent or displaced, occurring through offline channels or diaspora networks rather than visible online platforms.

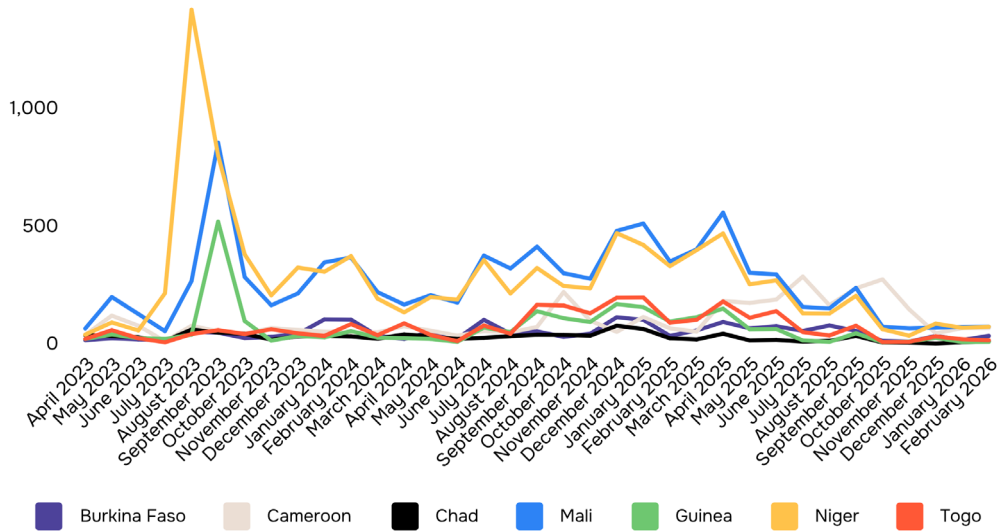
#### 4.1.5. Digital platforms as alternative public spheres under constraint

Across all cases, a shared pattern emerges: the migration of political discourse to digital platforms in contexts of restricted civic space. In Mali and Burkina Faso, where media and civil society face pressure, social media becomes a key arena for debate and mobilisation. Similarly, in Togo, digital platforms compensate for protest bans and repression, enabling coordination and visibility.

Yet, the effectiveness of this alternative public sphere varies. In highly connected environments (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Cameroon), digital platforms facilitate vibrant, though sometimes polarised, political engagement. In less connected contexts (Guinea, Chad), their role is more limited, reinforcing existing inequalities in political participation. The comparative analysis highlights a regional convergence around themes of political transition, sovereignty, and constrained civic space, alongside significant national divergences in digital capacity and activist structures. Mali and Burkina Faso exemplify high-engagement, polarised digital environments shaped by military rule and security crises. Togo illustrates the potential for youth-led, decentralised digital mobilisation in challenging entrenched authoritarianism. Meanwhile, Guinea and Chad reveal the limits of digital activism under conditions of infrastructural and political constraint.

These findings underscore that **digital activism in the region is not uniform** but deeply contingent on the intersection of political context, technological access, and social organisation, thereby producing varied forms of participation across the region.

Interestingly, monthly activity patterns are similar across all countries (see Figure 1). Qualitative analysis suggests this alignment stems from posts that reference one country, regional organisations (AES, ECOWAS), or foreign actors while tagging several, or all, Sahelian countries. This supports the hypothesis of cross-border activism addressing multiple national audiences simultaneously.



**Figure 1: Mentions of each country in hashtags between April 2023 and February 2026**

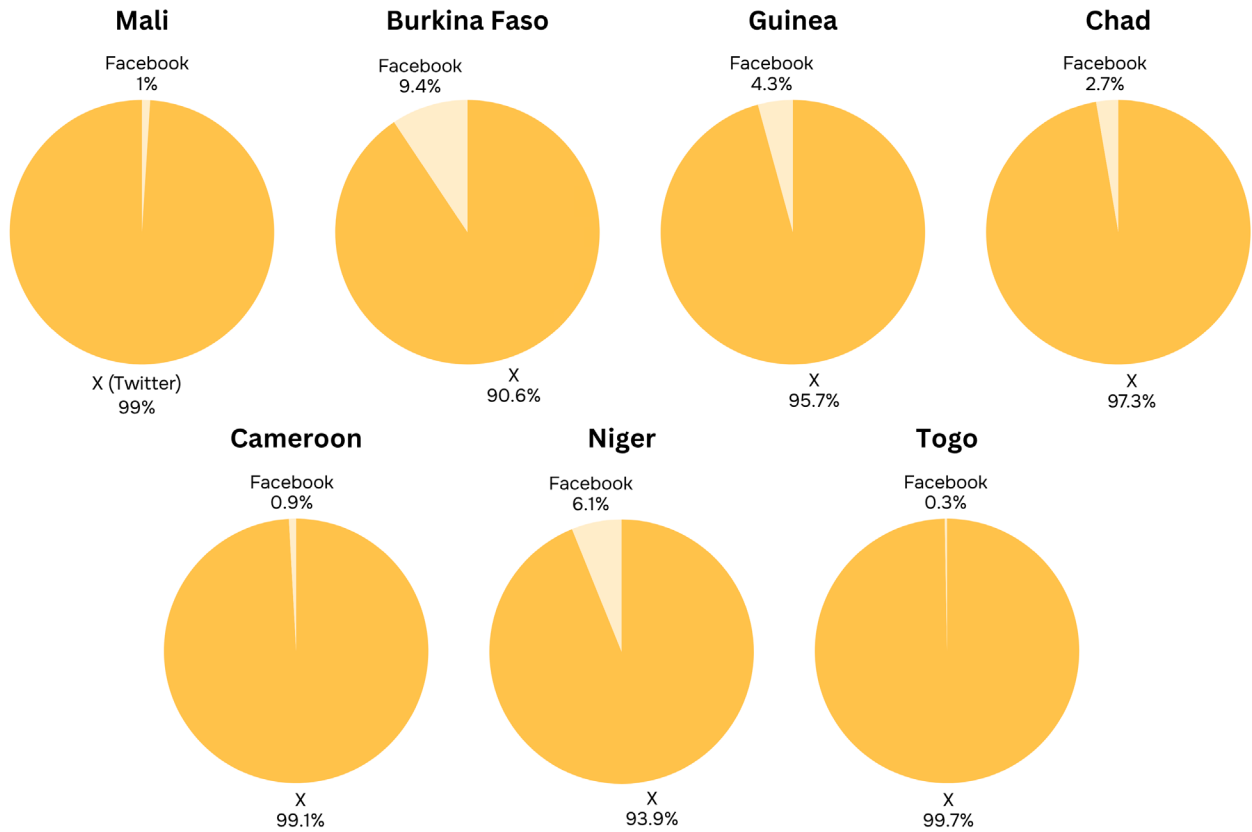
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In particular, a spike can be seen in September 2023 in posts tagging Mali, Guinea and Niger. This coincided with a regional political and security crisis following the coup d’état in Niger in July 2023, which led to the creation of the AES in September 2023. This event and the transition it brought about revived the online debate regarding security management in the Sahel and the various actors involved, notably France and ECOWAS—which faced widespread criticism—and the new AES alliance, which offered a glimmer of promise for local security management. A large number of posts tag several countries, with some tagging all four countries simultaneously.

Although no systematic accuracy assessment was conducted, some disinformation was identified, including false reports of President Biya’s death and an alleged French plan to bomb Niger through ECOWAS forces. These posts triggered strong reactions, though the presence of bot activity could not be determined.

Given the documented prevalence of disinformation in the region, particularly driven by Russia, further analysis could uncover additional cases of misinformation and foreign interference. The observed impact is nonetheless significant: one post about Biya’s alleged death generated 66 shares, 868 reactions, 141 comments, and over 30,000 views. Similarly, the claim that France intended to bomb Niger (August 2023) received 64 shares, 318 likes, and 129 comments, often reflecting anti-French sentiment, and more than 133,000 views. These results highlight how weak information integrity can inflame sensitive contexts and disrupt youth engagement by blurring fact and fiction.

Figure 2 displays the social media platforms used in posts tagging the study countries (2023–2026), broken down by country of origin, and shows that X is the dominant platform across all cases.



**Figure 2: Social media used for tagging countries by the country of origin**

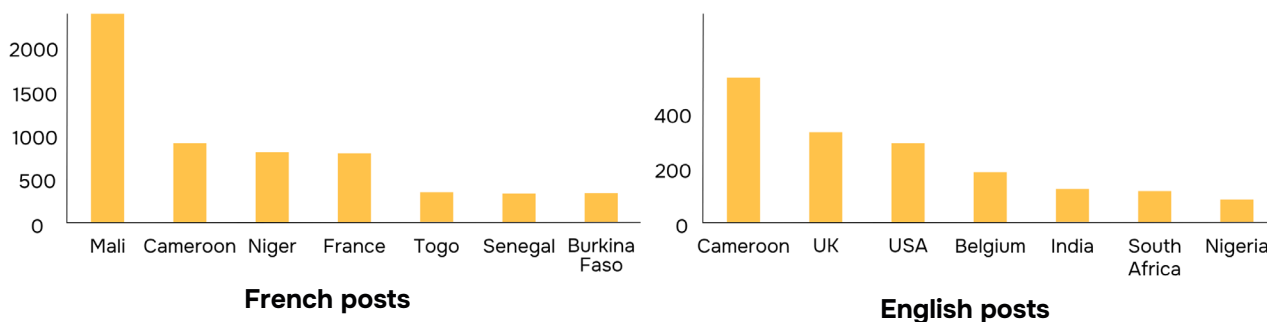
This prominence reflects X’s role as a real-time political communication tool used by journalists, activists, policymakers, and diasporas to debate governance, sovereignty, and security. Its accessibility to transnational audiences further reinforces its centrality. Facebook’s substantial share, while smaller, reflects its broader penetration among the general population and its continued role as a key channel for community discussion and information dissemination across West Africa.

Figure 3 displays the top seven countries of origin for posts in French and English tagging the countries studied.

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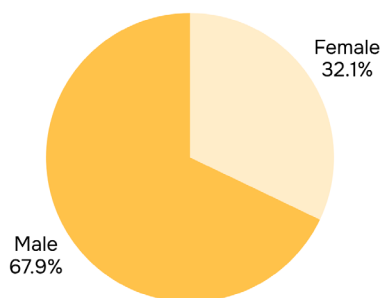
<sup>46</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.



**Figure 3: Top seven countries of origin for Tweets in French (left) and English (right) tagging the countries studied**

That many posts originate from countries outside the Sahel, and even outside Africa, suggests significant mobilisation within the African diaspora. While this may partly reflect the activity of foreign observers and media, the number of individual accounts analysed, along with their strong support for Pan-Africanism, indicates a genuine attachment to Africa. English-language posts are mainly produced outside the Sahel, as well as in Cameroon—an expected result given that, among the countries studied, only northern Cameroon is English-speaking. French-language posts, however, reveal a clearer ranking: Mali accounts for nearly half of the posts (42%) among the top seven countries, while Chad and Guinea do not appear. In contrast, Senegal and France emerge as countries outside the Sahel which are particularly vocal on Sahel-related issues. Finally, the data shows that online activism is predominantly driven by men (see Figure 4).<sup>47</sup>

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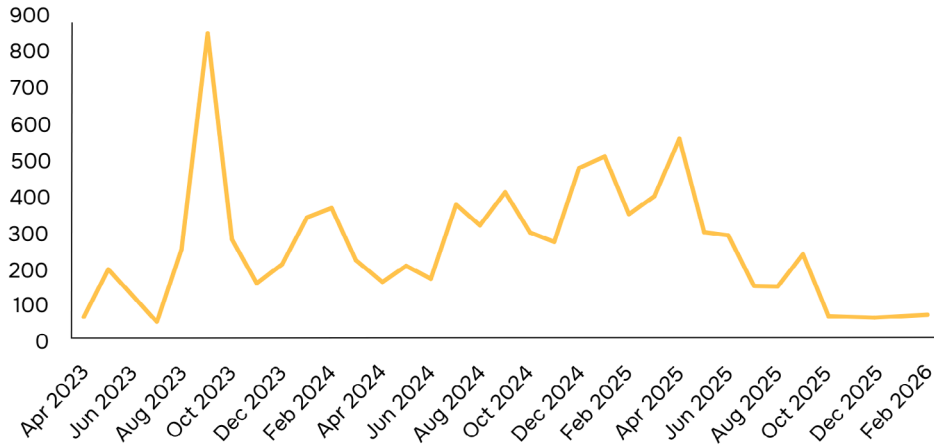
**Figure 4: Proportion of male and female authors**

<sup>47</sup> It is important to note, however, that these results are based on an algorithm that classifies authors using a database of names. The reliability of this technique is necessarily limited.

# Mali



During the period under analysis (April 2023 to February 2026), Mali underwent a **consolidation of military power**, marked by the postponement of democratic promises and a radical reorientation of its international alliances. Heightened overall activity in online discourse in the country between September 2023 and September 2025 can be situated within the broader political context of military rule, escalating insecurity in the Sahel, and ongoing debates around democratic transition (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Trends for Tweets tagging Mali being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

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An analysis of the number and content of posts shows that **young people in Mali tended to actively criticise the political situation in the country**. Although the posts concentrated were among a small number of authors (around 20 recorded), they attracted considerable commentary, sparking debates on the country’s political situation.

During the spike of September 2023, the posts demonstrated a strong support of the military and the AES (Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali) (see Figure 6).



Qui peut organiser un referendum constitutionnel doit pouvoir organiser une election présidentielle! L'attitude de la junta ne nous surprend pas! Mais qu'elle sache qu'elle est en train de créer les conditions de son eviction du pouvoir par la force. #Mali #Sahel



#VantageOnFirstpost: #Mali, #BurkinaFaso & #Niger have come together and formed the Alliance of #Sahel States. The security pact says the three nations will defend each other from foreign intervention & also armed rebellions & terrorist insurgencies. @palkisu tells you more.

**Figure 6: Examples of trending Tweets on X in September 2023<sup>48</sup>**

<sup>48</sup> Translation: ‘The junta’s behaviour comes as no surprise to us! But let them be aware that they are creating the conditions for their own removal from power by force. #Mali.’

In 2023, criticism was also directed at ECOWAS and interference by Western countries at the ECOWAS Summit. Some voices, however, argued against Mali's withdrawal from ECOWAS, leading to lively debate between those with differing views.

**Goïta's military regime was another contentious issue** raised over the period of analysis. This sparked mixed reactions ranging from criticism to support (see Figure 7). Posts criticising the regime attracted vitriolic comments from users defending the regime, showing the heightened sensitivity and polarisation on the issue of political leadership.



**#AssimiGoita**: “Ce combat là est le combat de la jeunesse. Il faut vous défendre. Il faut réclamer vos droits etc.”  
 Commentaire: Il a pourtant envoyé plusieurs jeunes en prison pour avoir exprimé leurs opinions. **##Mali #Burkina #Niger**

**Figure 7: Examples of critique of Assimi Goïta's regime**<sup>49</sup>

On 7 September 2023, coordinated attacks by militants linked to al-Qaeda targeted a civilian boat on the Niger River and a military base in northern Mali, killing dozens of civilians and soldiers. The attacks were claimed by the extremist coalition Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), highlighting the deteriorating security environment in the Sahel.<sup>50</sup> These events occurred amid the withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission MINUSMA and the reconfiguration of Mali's security partnerships, developments that sparked widespread online debate about governance, sovereignty, and the effectiveness of the military government (see Figure 8).<sup>51</sup> Such **moments of crisis frequently drive spikes in social media engagement** as citizens seek information, express grievances, and participate in political discourse.

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**@EmmanuelMacron** disait que l'avenir de la France 🇫🇷 et de l'Europe 🇪🇺 est dans le **#Sahel**. Raison pour laquelle ils s'y accrochent comme des pieuvres. Des mercenaires USA 🇺🇸 découverts au Mali 🇲🇱 ?  
**@JoeBiden** déclare qu'ils sont financés par les **#Arabes**. L'**#OTAN** entreprend de  
 1/2

**Figure 8: Comment on Mali's security partnerships after September 2023**<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Translation: 'The junta's behaviour comes as no surprise to us! But let them be aware that they are creating the conditions for their own removal from power by force. #Mali.'

<sup>50</sup> African Union, "Chairperson Condemns Terrorist Attacks in Mali on 7 September 2023," 2023; "Mali: Islamist Militants Kill Dozens in Attack on Boat and Base", Deutsche Welle, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> "Mali: Islamist Militants Kill Dozens", Deutsche Welle.

<sup>52</sup> Translation: '@EmmanuelMacron said that the future of France and Europe lies in the #Sahel. Which is why they're clinging on to it like octopuses. US mercenaries discovered in Mali @JoeBiden claims they are funded by the #Arabs. #NATO is undertaking 1/2'.

During the period under analysis, the **establishment of the AES was a topic that provoked a high level of engagement**, illustrating a heightened sense of regionalism. The deepening of this alliance represented a major geopolitical shift, particularly as the three military-led governments signalled their intention to distance themselves from ECOWAS and pursue alternative regional arrangements. The military junta's increased co-operation with Russia also attracted attention. Both developments were met with a generally positive response in the exchanges.

High online activity in 2024 can be interpreted within the broader context of political transition and uncertainty surrounding Mali's promised return to civilian rule. Following the coups of 2020 and 2021, the military authorities pledged to organise elections and oversee a transition to democratic governance. However, **delays in the electoral timeline and tensions with regional organisations such as ECOWAS generated intense public debate** throughout early 2024. Similarly, the spike observed in July 2024 coincides with significant regional political developments, including efforts by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to consolidate cooperation through the AES.

The prominence of references to Azawad militias in posts during July 2024 was significant within the broader context of Mali's renewed conflict in the north following the deterioration of the 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement. Azawad militias, largely composed of Tuareg-led armed groups advocating for autonomy or independence for the region they call Azawad, have historically been central actors in Mali's insurgencies. Tensions between these groups and the Malian state intensified after the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2023, which altered the security balance in northern Mali and triggered renewed clashes between separatist coalitions and the Malian armed forces.<sup>53</sup>

By mid-2024, confrontations and political rhetoric surrounding northern governance and territorial control had re-entered public debate, making the **Azawad militias a focal point of online discussion at the time**. The heightened presence of these actors in digital discourse therefore reflects the way in which evolving security dynamics and unresolved questions about autonomy, governance, and state authority in northern Mali continue to shape political narratives and civic engagement, including among youth on social media platforms (see Figure 9).



[#Russia](#) / [#Ukraine](#) / [#Mali](#) ([#Sahel](#)) 🇷🇺🇺🇦🇲🇱: Andriy Yusov (spokesman of Ukrainian Intel, [#GUR](#)) stated that information was provided to [#Tuareg](#) rebels to attack the [#Wagner](#) Group in [#Kidal](#).

Also [#Azawad](#) rebels released a photo with Ukrainian combatants —and Ukrainian Flag.

Group is armed with AK-103(-2) assault rifles, PKM / Type 80 machine guns, [#Romanian](#) 🇷🇴 PM md. 90 assault rifles and AKM / AKMS pattern rifles.

**Figure 9: Tweet on Azawad militias**

<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group, *Revisiting the Conflict in Northern Mali after the MINUSMA Withdrawal*, 2024; "Why UN Peacekeepers Are Leaving Mali", BBC News, 2023.

The increased online activity in September 2024 may also reflect the cyclical, recurrent seasonal intensification of political and security debates in Mali. For example, September has historically coincided with heightened security incidents and strategic announcements by the Malian authorities, including military operations against insurgent groups and developments in relations with neighbouring states. The posts from September 2024 were mainly informative and mostly reported events related to the military and how they were supplied with weapons from the United States, Türkiye, China and Russia.

In 2025, the junta initiated institutional reforms that would extend the mandate of transitional authorities and reshape the country's governance framework, developments that generated considerable controversy domestically and internationally. The spike recorded in April 2025 can be interpreted in relation to intensifying political debates about the trajectory of Mali's transition and the consolidation of military rule. On 29 April 2025, a national consultation organised by the transitional authorities in Mali recommended that Goïta become president of the republic for a five-year term without going through an election. This sparked debate following a post on X that received a 9/10 influence score. The proposal to extend the rule of the transitional leadership highlighted growing tensions between demands for democratic restoration and the consolidation of military authority.<sup>54</sup>

Other posts referred to Azawad militias, weapons supplies from third countries (Türkiye, USA, Russia, China), and the creation of the AES.

In such contexts, digital platforms serve not only as tools for activism but also as arenas for contestation between competing narratives, including state messaging, grassroots mobilisation, and disinformation campaigns.

**In Mali, digital platforms serve not only as tools for activism but also arenas for contestation between competing narratives, including state messaging, grassroots mobilisation, and disinformation campaigns.**

<sup>54</sup> "Mali Junta Extends Transitional Mandate," Associated Press, 2025.

# Guinea



In August 2023, **political discourse in Guinea remained shaped by the military-led transition** that followed the September 2021 coup led by Mamady Doumbouya. The country was governed by the military authorities of the Comité National du Rassemblement pour le Développement (CNRD), which had pledged a transition back to civilian rule but faced sustained criticism from opposition groups and civil society regarding delays to the electoral timetable. During this period, online political discourse frequently reflected tensions surrounding governance reforms, restrictions on political protests, and debates over the pace of the democratic transition.<sup>55</sup>

Au [#Burkina](#) le scénario [#Soudanais](#) se profile à l'horizon dans un avenir très proche. Une situation qui pourrait inspirer des velléités de positionnement au [#Mali](#) en [#Guinée](#) et au [#Niger](#). Un vent de fin de règne prématuré des putschistes du [#Sahel](#) souffle dans l'air.

**Figure 10: Post reflecting concerns on a regional spill-over of political trends, including in Guinea<sup>56</sup>**

The tweet in Figure 10 circulated in August 2023, and can be interpreted within this broader context of the contested political transition in the region. Posts referencing political leadership, governance, or state authority often served as expressions of support for critique of the military-led government, while also reflecting wider regional narratives about sovereignty, legitimacy, and democratic governance circulating across West African digital spaces. Such discourse illustrates how **digital platforms function as arenas where political narratives and public sentiments are negotiated across digital borders during periods of political uncertainty.**

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However, an important finding is that the study identified **very few posts in the dataset originating from youth-specific Guinean accounts.** The vast majority were posted by an account that appears to be a local news channel, with an overall engagement rate for all posts close to 0%. This suggests that online discussions related to Guinea's political situation are driven primarily by journalists, political commentators, diaspora actors, or institutional accounts rather than by organised youth-led digital movements or individual Guineans. Scholars of digital activism note that in politically sensitive environments, youth participation may remain diffuse and less visible, particularly when individuals perceive risks associated with openly expressing political views online.<sup>57</sup> In contexts where civic space is constrained, young people may engage more passively, through liking, sharing, or viewing content, rather than producing original posts or publicly identifying with activist accounts. This finding also points to the limited institutionalisation of youth digital activism in Guinea, where organised youth-led digital campaigns appear less prominent than in neighbouring Sahelian states.

<sup>55</sup> International Crisis Group, *Guinea: Transition Challenges after the Coup* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2023); Human Rights Watch, *Guinea: Events of 2023* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2023).

<sup>56</sup> Translation: 'In [#Burkina](#), the [#Sudanese](#) scenario is looming on the horizon in the very near future. This situation could prompt attempts to assert influence in [#Mali](#), [#Guinea](#) and [#Niger](#). There is a sense in the air that the premature reign of the coup leaders in the [#Sahel](#) is drawing to a close'.

<sup>57</sup> Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?*; Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

Furthermore, very few posts originated from Guinea (131) during the three-year period of analysis, and the overall number of posts tagging the country was among the lowest (see Figure 11).

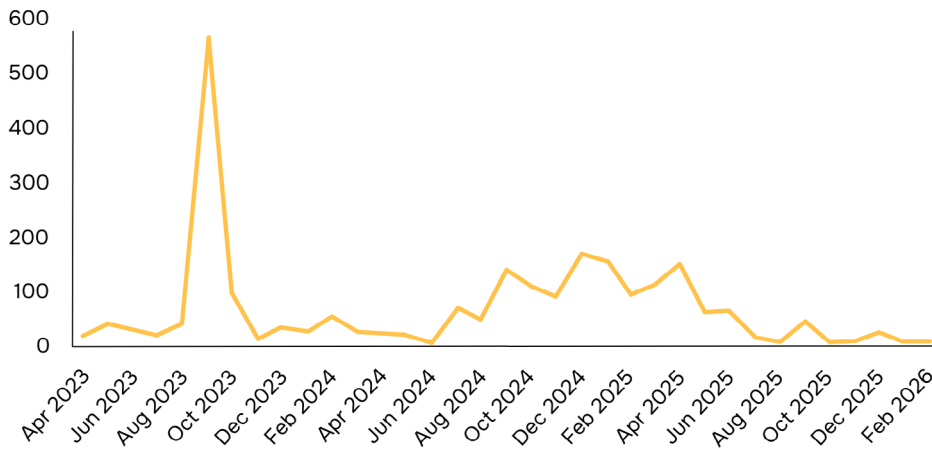


Figure 11: Trends for Tweets tagging Guinea being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026

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**Digital platforms may not function as widely accessible spaces for civic mobilisation compared with countries where internet access is more widespread.**

One explanation for this pattern relates to structural factors, including the country's population size and limited digital infrastructure. While Guinea is an important political actor in West Africa, it has comparatively **low internet penetration rates**, which restrict the number of citizens able to participate in online activism and political debate.<sup>58</sup> Limited connectivity reduces the visibility of grassroots activism and constrains the development of large online activist networks. As a result, digital platforms may not function as widely accessible spaces for civic mobilisation compared with countries where internet access is more widespread.

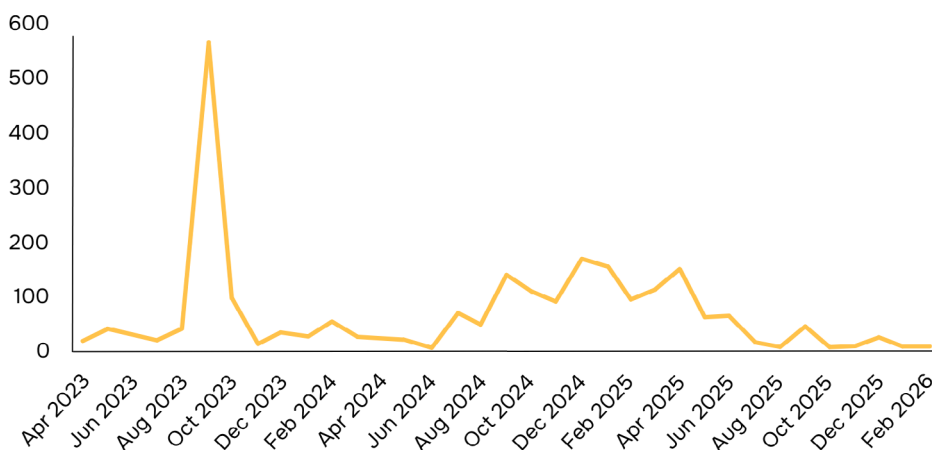
**Digital youth activism in Guinea appears relatively limited** in scale during the period under analysis. The low number of posts, the limited spikes in online engagement, and the absence of youth-originated accounts indicate that only a small proportion of young citizens are actively participating in digital political discourse. This does not necessarily imply an absence of youth political engagement; rather, it suggests that **activism may occur through alternative channels such as offline mobilisation, informal networks, or diaspora-led advocacy**. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the importance of considering structural factors such as connectivity, digital literacy, and political context when assessing patterns of digital activism across different countries in the Sahel and neighbouring regions. Guinea's limited digital activism may thus serve as an important negative case, confirming that digital infrastructure and the intersection of online and offline mobilisation are necessary for digital activism to achieve visibility.

<sup>58</sup> International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring Digital Development: ICT Statistics* (Geneva: ITU, 2023); DataReportal, *Digital 2024: Guinea*, 2024, <https://datareportal.com>.

# Burkina Faso



Between April 2023 and February 2026, Burkina Faso underwent a radical transformation under Traoré, in power since the October 2022 coup. This period was marked by the **rupture with Western alliances, the suspension of party-based democracy, the creation of the AES** in September 2023, and a total military mobilisation. In January 2024, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso withdrew from ECOWAS, a decision widely discussed on social media and reflected in the spike on Figure 12.



**Figure 12: Trends for Tweets tagging Burkina Faso being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

34

This move was generally well received on social media, where ECOWAS faced sharp criticism from younger users (see Figure 13).



#AES État du Burkina Faso 🇸🇳  
 #SORTIE\_DE\_LA\_CEDEAO @ecowas\_cedeao

🔴 Le Capitaine Président Ibrahim TRAORE, Chef de l'#AES État du Burkina Faso 🇸🇳 donne des détails sur le retrait des États de l'#AES de la #CEDEAO @ecowas\_cedeao qui est devenue un outil dans les mains de forces obscurantistes étrangères.

Les chaînes 🗑️ d'esclavage seront brisés à jamais. La souveraineté économique, monétaire, énergétique, socio-culturelle et politique ne sont pas à marchander dans l'#AES.

#AES pour un Sahel des peuples, un Sahel de paix, un Sahel libre, souverain et prospère. 🤝🇸🇳🇲🇱🇳🇪

**Figure 13: Tweet on Burkina Faso’s withdrawal from ECOWAS<sup>59</sup>**

<sup>59</sup> Translation: ‘#AES State of Burkina Faso #WITHDRAWAL\_FROM\_ECOWAS @ecowas\_cedeao Captain President Ibrahim TRAORE, Head of the #AES State of Burkina Faso provides details on the withdrawal of #AES states from #ECOWAS @ecowas\_cedeao, which has become a tool in the hands of foreign obscurantist forces. The chains of slavery will be broken forever. Economic, monetary, energy, socio-cultural and political sovereignty are not up for negotiation within the #AES. #AES for a Sahel of the people, a Sahel of peace, a free, sovereign and prosperous Sahel’.



More broadly, such engagement illustrates how **digital platforms function as key arenas for youth political expression in contexts of constrained civic space**. Under military rule in Burkina Faso, traditional political participation and independent media have faced increasing pressure, prompting many citizens, particularly young people, to turn to social media platforms to discuss national and regional developments.

Security developments during 2025 continued to dominate public discourse, with military authorities emphasising national mobilisation against insurgent groups and strengthening cooperation with regional partners such as AES. Burkina Faso has experienced persistent attacks by jihadist groups linked to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, resulting in large-scale displacement and heightened political tensions.

Finally, the finding that the five most engaged accounts were not youth-led is significant. While youth are central participants in online debates, the most influential actors tend to be media outlets, public figures or political commentators.

36

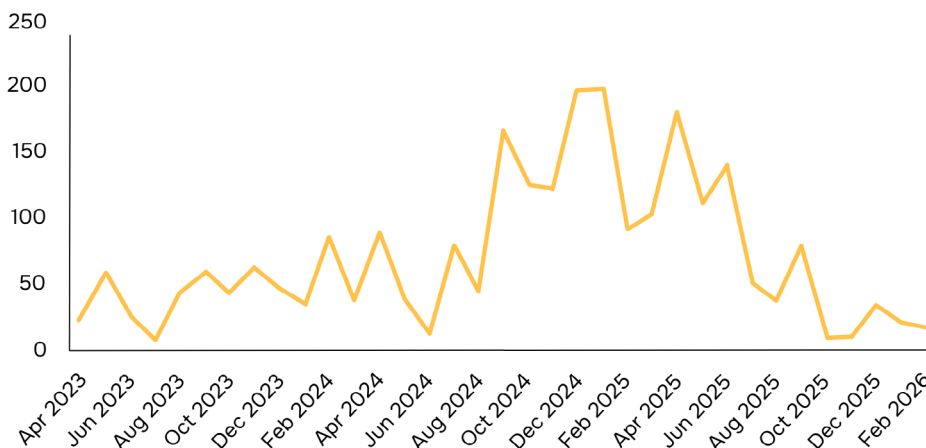
**Youth activism in the digital sphere may be diffuse and participatory rather than institutionally organised, with young users amplifying narratives generated by more prominent accounts through likes, retweets, and comments.**

In the Burkinabè context, this dynamic may reflect the broader constraints on organised civic activism under military rule, where formal youth-led advocacy structures face political pressure. Consequently, **youth participation may occur indirectly**, through engagement with influential commentators and media actors **rather than through visible youth-led digital organisations**. This highlights an important feature of digital activism in politically constrained environments: influence and agenda-setting may be concentrated among a few prominent actors, even when broader engagement is driven by large numbers of young users.

# Togo



In countries where political competition is tightly controlled, digital media may provide one of the few accessible arenas for civic engagement and mobilisation. The case of **Togo illustrates how youth-led digital networks can become central to political contestation**, particularly during periods of constitutional change and perceived democratic backsliding.



**Figure 15: Trends for Tweets tagging Togo being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

38

The analysis of online activity relating to Togo reveals notable activity from September 2024 to June 2025 (Figure 15). In June 2025, 130 posts were recorded from youth-based accounts discussing political developments in the country. This was the first case among the seven countries analysed in which youth accounts generated a significant volume of political commentary within a short timeframe (see an example of a post in Figure 16).



Tomorrow protests resume against dictator [@FEGnassingbe](#) in [#Togo](#) who has ruled for 20 years following the 38 years rule of his father. Last May, dictator Gnassingbé appointed himself president of council of minister after suppressing presidential elections from our constitution. Despite the ban, the intimidation and efforts by the regime to discourage the masses, the Togolese have conquered their fear and are fighting for their freedom. What makes this particular wave of protests particular is that it was launched by political parties but rather by bloggers, activists and influencers. Through social media, they are rallying students, trade unions, students, religious leaders, traditional leaders, artists and the regime is worried. [#FaureMustGo](#) [#TogoDebout](#)

**Figure 16: Online civic mobilisation discussed by youth on X**

The posts were overwhelmingly **critical of the long-standing rule of President Faure Gnassingbé and framed ongoing protests as a generational struggle against dynastic authoritarianism**. In particular, users emphasised that the Gnassingbé family has ruled the country since 1967, initially under Gnassingbé Eyadéma and subsequently under his son, thereby portraying the political system as entrenched and resistant to democratic alternation.

In French posts, Togo is mainly tagged in posts discussing the broader Sahel region's dynamics. A key contributor to conversation during July 2025 in the French dataset was a political analyst and youth activist. At the time, this activist referred to Faure Gnassingbé as the “Chef NAZI” (head Nazi) and to his supporters as “NAZILLIONS”. His supporters fervently criticised efforts by the European Union to suppress his voice and in a post on 3 July 2025 encouraged people to join the resistance on WhatsApp.

A central narrative across the tweets concerned constitutional reforms that allegedly eliminated presidential elections and allowed the incumbent to consolidate executive authority under a newly created position of President of the Council of Ministers. Youth accounts framed these developments as a “parliamentary coup”, arguing that the reforms were designed to entrench the ruling elite and circumvent electoral accountability.

Such framing reflects broader patterns identified in the literature on digital activism, where social media platforms enable activists to rapidly circulate counter-narratives that challenge official political discourse.<sup>63</sup> In the Togolese case, **digital content frequently depicted the constitutional changes as illegitimate** and mobilised users around hashtags such as #FaureMustGo, #FreeTogo, and #TogoDebout, which functioned as symbolic rallying points for online dissent.

Figure 17 demonstrates an even stronger response, with an engagement rate of 12.64% and the same high influence score of 9/10 indicating a particularly strong level of audience participation. High engagement at this level typically reflects a combination of retweets, replies, and likes that amplify the visibility of the message within algorithmic timelines.



The dictator of #Togo @FEGnassingbe has banned protests for the past 7 years. He grew so confident in his repressive apparatus after arresting and detaining over 140 activists and forcing many more into exile that he went as far as removing presidential elections from our Constitution without a referendum and appointed himself head of state under a title he invented: “President of the Council of Ministers.”

Under his custom made constitution, we no longer have presidential elections in #Togo. His current 4th term ended in February 2025 and last month on May 6th, he started a 5th term after ruling Togo for 20 years, following the 38-year reign of his father, Eyadéma Gnassingbé. Barely a month into this sham, Togolese youth are rising against his nonsense. We are not his slaves and we will not bow to his tyranny any longer.

What makes this current wave of protests unique is that it was neither initiated nor led by opposition parties. Instead, communities are organizing in a decentralized way, with no central leadership. The regime no longer has a single point of failure to exploit.

Neighborhood by neighborhood, citizens are gathering, erecting barricades to block police trucks, and protesting. The regime is used to calling opposition leaders to negotiate its way out of crisis. But this time, politicians have been sidelined. They hold zero control over this uprising. The youth of #Togo have decided to make the country ungovernable for Faure Gnassingbé until he leaves power. After 58 years of dictatorship by the same family, enough is enough.

**Figure 17: Tweet from a user identifying with the youth-led protests in Togo**

<sup>63</sup> Deen Freelon, Alice Marwick, and Daniel Kreiss, “False Equivalencies: Online Activism from Left to Right”, *Science* 369, no. 6508 (2020): 1197–1201.

Another significant theme in the posts was the **decentralised nature of the protest mobilisation**. Users identifying with the youth-led protests repeatedly emphasised that the new wave of demonstrations was not initiated by formal opposition parties but rather by bloggers, influencers, and grassroots activists operating through social media networks. This framing suggests a shift in the architecture of political mobilisation, where digital platforms facilitate horizontal coordination rather than hierarchical organisation.

Such decentralised mobilisation structures have been widely documented in contemporary protest movements, where online networks reduce reliance on traditional political intermediaries and enable rapid diffusion of protest messages. The tweets describe neighbourhood-level organisation, the construction of barricades, and the mobilisation of diverse social actors, including students, artists, religious leaders, and trade unions, indicating how digital communication can help bridge multiple social constituencies.<sup>64</sup>

Collectively, these engagement patterns indicate that youth-generated political content in Togo during June 2025 achieved significant visibility and interaction within online spaces. High engagement rates relative to reach imply that users were not merely passive consumers of political information but were actively interacting with and amplifying protest-related content. This aligns with broader findings in the literature on digital activism, which emphasise the role of social media in facilitating participatory political communication and enabling citizens to coproduce political narratives.<sup>65</sup>

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Importantly, the content of the tweets also highlights the symbolic and cultural dimensions of youth digital mobilisation. Several posts emphasised the **participation of artists and cultural figures who used their platforms to denounce corruption, economic hardship, and political repression**. Cultural production, including music, visual media, and performance, is often central to digital activism, helping to translate political grievances into emotionally resonant messages that can circulate widely across social networks. In the Togolese context, such participation suggests that youth mobilisation extended beyond purely political actors and encompassed broader cultural communities that leveraged digital platforms to articulate dissent.<sup>66</sup>

At the same time, the Togolese case must be situated within the wider context of shrinking civic space and digital repression in West Africa. Governments in the region have increasingly adopted legal and technological measures to control online expression, including specific legislation initiatives such as Togo's Law on Cybersecurity and the Fight against Cybercrime, which criminalises a broad range of online activities, and provisions within the Togolese Press and Communications Code (2013) that extend regulatory oversight to digital content.<sup>67</sup> Togo itself has experienced **repeated protest bans and arrests of activists in previous years**, often grounded in the application of the Right to the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly law, contributing to a political environment in which **digital platforms become particularly significant for mobilising and coordinating dissent**.<sup>68</sup>

The spike in youth-generated political content in June 2025 illustrates how **digital platforms have become critical arenas for political contestation in Togo**. The narratives circulating within youth networks frame the protests as a generational challenge to entrenched authoritarian rule, while the decentralised structure of mobilisation highlights the growing importance of digitally mediated activism. These dynamics underscore the broader regional pattern in which young citizens increasingly rely on social media to shape political discourse, coordinate protest activity, and challenge perceived democratic erosion.

<sup>64</sup> Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas*.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Nanjala Nyabola, *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics: How the Internet Era Is Transforming Politics in Kenya* (2018).

<sup>67</sup> [Law No. 2018-026](#) on Cybersecurity and the Fight against Cybercrime.

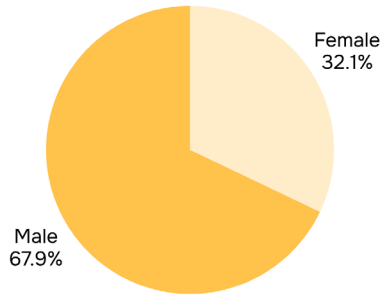
<sup>68</sup> [Law No. 2019-010](#) (modified from 2011-010) - Right to the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly.

# Chad



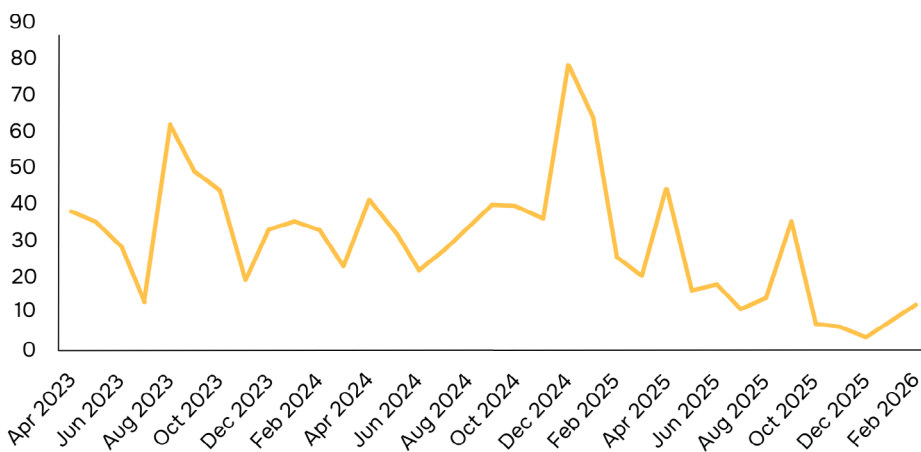


Compared to the other countries studied, the hashtag #Chad was the least frequently mentioned in posts, representing 3 percent of the overall sample (Figure 18).



**Figure 18: Percentage of hashtags mentioning each country**

Trends of posts tagging Chad per month are reflected in Figure 19.



**Figure 19: Trends for Tweets tagging Chad being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

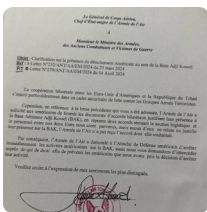
Posts containing the hashtag generally discussed the overall security and political situation in the Sahel countries. Among the topics raised, there was **strong criticism of the French presence throughout the period under review** using hashtags such as #francedégage (France, get out) or #macrondémission (Macron, resign). The government of Mahamat Idriss Déby was accused of being supported by France, before later calling for the withdrawal of French forces in September 2024 (Figure 20).

Situation au Tchad : Des tirs d'armes automatiques signalés, le régime pro-français de Mahamat Déby - Succès Masra sous pression Des tirs d'armes automatiques ont été entendus au Tchad depuis ce matin, suscitant des inquiétudes croissantes quant à la situation sécuritaire dans le pays. Le régime de Mahamat Déby - Succès Masra, vivement critiqué par de nombreux citoyens en raison de son alignement sur la politique française et de la présence des bases militaires françaises. Restez informé pour plus de détails sur Afrique Résurrection.

Figure 20: Example of Tweet criticising the regime’s co-operation with France<sup>69</sup>

**Call for sovereignty and self-determination for the Sahel countries are highly prominent and reflects the region’s struggle against colonialism.** Posts called upon the younger generation to fight against foreign interference, particularly from France. Another frequently voiced criticism concerned the actions of ECOWAS, particularly Chad’s participation in an operation in Niger and its application to join the organisation. Conversely, the creation of the AES is hailed as a credible alternative to ECOWAS for restoring stability in the region, associated with the prevalence of hashtags such as #sovereignty and #pan-Africanism.

The tweet circulating the most in April 2024 concerning Chad reflected broader geopolitical debates surrounding foreign military presence and shifting alliances in the Sahel. The post referred to a letter reportedly requesting justification for the presence of United States military personnel in the country’s capital, N’Djamena, and situated this development within a narrative of declining Western influence and expanding Russian engagement in the region. During 2024, Chad was undergoing a sensitive political transition following the death of former president Idriss Déby in 2021 and the subsequent rise of his son, Mahamat, who initially led a military transitional council before overseeing elections in 2024 (Figure 21).



Chad's letter notifies the defense attaché in N'Djamena to provide a justification for the US troop presence in the country and suspends ongoing activities. With the entire #Sahel region falling into Russia's sphere of influence, this development signals a significant shift, highlighting a trend of waning Western power and influence in the area.

Figure 21: Tweet captured from April 2024 by a user tagging Chad

<sup>69</sup> Translation: ‘Situation in Chad: Reports of automatic gunfire; the pro-French regime of Mahamat Déby-Succès Masra under pressure Automatic gunfire has been heard in Chad since this morning, raising growing concerns about the security situation in the country. The regime of Mahamat Déby - Succès Masra, heavily criticised by many citizens due to its alignment with French policy and the presence of French military bases. Stay tuned for more details on Afrique Résurrection. #Chad #MahamatDéby #SuccèsMasra #France #MilitaryBases #Security #Crisis #AfriqueResurrection #Pan-Africanism #AES #Françafrique #Coup’

In this context, debates around foreign military partnerships and geopolitical alignment became prominent topics of discussion both domestically and internationally. The framing of the Sahel as **“falling into Russia’s sphere of influence”** reflects narratives increasingly circulating in regional political discourse, particularly following the strengthening of security partnerships between Sahelian military governments and actors linked to Russia.<sup>70</sup> As a result, media-generated posts discussing foreign troop presence and geopolitical realignment gained traction in online discussions, explaining why such a tweet could appear among the top mentions during this period (Figure 22).

As a result, media-generated posts discussing foreign troop presence and geopolitical realignment gained traction in online discussions, explaining why such a tweet could appear among the top mentions during this period (Figure 22).



Donc selon eux si le Sénégal et le Tchad décident de ne plus avoir de base militaire sur leur sol c'est par ce que ce sont des pro Russe 🇷🇺  
#souveraineté

Figure 22: Reference to France’s accusation of Chad and Senegal being pro-Russian<sup>71</sup>

44

A notable finding in the dataset is that **few posts relating to Chad originated from Chadian youth accounts**, despite the country having a large youth population. An examination of accounts using the #Chad hashtag indicates that **the vast majority of posters hailed from neighbouring countries**. This may entail that the content analysis primarily reflects how Chad is discussed within the broader regional digital ecosystem, rather than documenting domestic youth-led activism. This pattern may reflect structural and political constraints affecting digital participation. Chad has a relatively large population, estimated at over eighteen million people, but the country’s digital infrastructure remains underdeveloped, limiting widespread participation in online activism.<sup>72</sup> **Internet penetration rates remain comparatively low**, and access to reliable digital connectivity is uneven, particularly outside urban centres.

This environment is further shaped by a developing but restrictive legislative framework governing digital space. Key instruments include **Law No. 007/PR/2015 on Cybersecurity and Cybercrime, which regulates online conduct and provides broad state powers to monitor and sanction digital activity**, and provisions within media and communications laws that extend state oversight of online publishing and digital journalism.<sup>73</sup> While such legislation is often justified on the grounds of national security and public order, its broadly framed offences, particularly those relating to the dissemination of false information or threats to state authority, create conditions conducive to self-censorship among users.

<sup>70</sup> International Crisis Group, *Chad’s Transition and Regional Security Challenges* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2024); “Why Global Powers Are Competing for Influence in the Sahel,” BBC News, 2024.

<sup>71</sup> Translation: ‘...according to them, if Senegal and Chad decide to no longer host military bases on their soil, it’s because they’re pro-Russian #sovereignty.’

<sup>72</sup> World Bank, *Digital Development Overview: Chad* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023).

<sup>73</sup> DataGuidance, “Chad Law No. 007/PR/2015 on the Protection of Personal Data”, n.d., <https://www.dataguidance.com/jurisdictions/chad>.

Regulatory oversight is exercised through state institutions such as the Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et des Postes, which supervises telecommunications and digital infrastructure, although Chad lacks a fully independent data protection authority comparable to South Africa's Information Regulator. Consequently, the combination of infrastructural limitations, political constraints, and an expansive legal framework contributes to an environment in which online discussions about geopolitical developments are more likely to originate from media outlets, journalists, or international commentators than youth-led accounts.

The low number of results from Chad closely mirrors the patterns observed in Guinea, suggesting a correlation between structural digital access constraints and the scale of observable digital activism. Although Chad's population is larger than Guinea's, in both countries internet penetration remains relatively limited compared with other states in the Sahel and West Africa, which restricts the number of users actively producing political content online.<sup>74</sup> **Infrastructural limitations reduce the likelihood that youth-led digital activism will emerge at the same scale observed in more connected environments.** Furthermore, as mentioned, where online participation is limited, discourse tends to be dominated by institutional actors such as media organisations rather than grassroots activist networks.

The combination of low internet penetration, infrastructural barriers, and a politically sensitive civic environment may discourage widespread youth engagement on digital platforms. As with Guinea, **the limited volume of online content does not necessarily indicate a lack of youth political interest;** rather, it highlights structural barriers that constrain the translation of youth political engagement into visible digital activism. Consequently, the low number of posts and the absence of youth-generated content should be interpreted as indicators of broader inequalities in digital access and participation within the Sahelian information ecosystem.

**Taken together, the findings suggest that digital youth activism in Chad remains relatively limited and underrepresented in the available online data.**

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# Cameroon

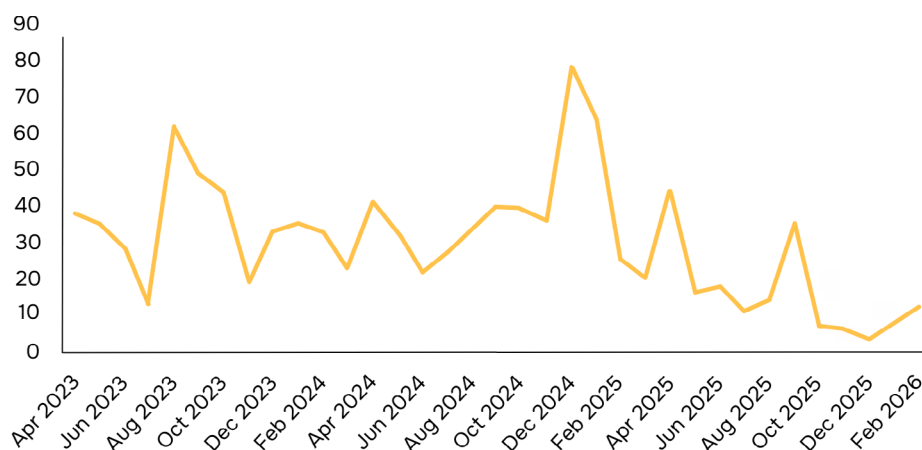


In **Cameroon has been governed by Biya since 1982** in what has become one of the longest-running presidencies in the world. It has a 42% internet penetration rate and heavily constrained formal channels of dissent, digital platforms have become significant sites of political expression. Numerous **posts in the dataset criticise his long tenure in office, his advanced age**, and the failure of his successive terms to improve the standard of living of Cameroonians (Figure 23).

Paul Biya veut briguer un 8e mandat à plus de 90 ans. Le Cameroun est un pays jeune, mais dirigé par un homme qui refuse de passer le flambeau depuis 1982. Ce n'est plus de la stabilité, c'est une prise d'otage politique. L'alternance, c'est vital. Le peuple mérite mieux  
#PaulBiya

**Figure 23: Example of Tweet criticising Paul Biya's bid for an eighth term**<sup>75</sup>

Social media activity in Cameroon is clustered around moments of acute uncertainty and political crisis, with the figure of Biya himself serving as the persistent focal point.



47

**Figure 24: Trends in Cameroon being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

The SentiOne trend data reveals two distinct surges in Cameroon-related social media activity, both occurring in October (2024 and 2025) and both centred overwhelmingly on Biya.

Biya's X account was the most active and the influential account in French language posts. While many comments from Cameroon's youth engaged supportively with his content, a substantial number of comments—particularly from youth—called for him to step down, including messages such as “free our country” and “we, the youth, have been too passive”. A number of posts made reference to his advanced age, with messages like “Step down from power—you're too old!”.

An increase in activity on the president's X account also partly explains the spike observed from April 2025 onwards. This activity was quickly picked up by the media, who suspected that Biya was preparing a new campaign for his re-election.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> Translation: ‘Paul Biya wants to run for an eighth term at the age of over 90. Cameroon is a young country, yet it has been led by a man who has refused to hand over power since 1982. This is no longer stability; it is political hostage-taking. A change of leadership is vital. The people deserve better.’

<sup>76</sup> Télé Asu, “Réseaux sociaux : Paul Biya dans une série de posts qui intriguent”, April 16, 2025, <https://teleasu.tv/reseaux-sociaux-paul-biya-dans-une-serie-de-posts-qui-intriguent/>.

The first significant spike in activity, in October 2024, coincides with a major disinformation campaign around Biya's whereabouts and health. Biya had not been seen in public since attending a China-Africa summit in Beijing in early September 2024, and on 7 October, the African Broadcasting Service released a video that circulated rapidly on social media, citing unnamed sources claiming that he had died (Figure 25).<sup>77</sup> Interior Minister Paul Atanga Nji responded by banning the media from discussing the president's health, declaring it a matter of national security.<sup>78</sup> **The government's attempt to suppress debate arguably had the opposite effect online**, with the information vacuum fuelling intense speculation across platforms. Biya ultimately returned to Yaoundé on 21 October after spending almost fifty days outside the country. The social media spike thus reflects a moment when **digital platforms became the primary arena for debate that the state had forbidden in mainstream media**, which is a dynamic particularly significant for youth, for whom social media is often the first resort for political expression.

Shocking News 🇨🇲 : Paul Biya, Cameroon's President, Has Passed Away!  
 #PaulBiya #Cameroon #BreakingNews #Legacy #Leadership  
 #EndOfAnEra #bankyceo

**Figure 25: Tweet responding to disinformation on Biya's health and whereabouts in October 2024**

A second and larger spike in online activity occurred from about May 2025 in the context of the presidential election held on 12 October. In the run-up to the election, a particularly high-profile event was the handover of 40 million CFA francs by a delegation of young people in July 2025 to support Biya's candidacy. This show of support, which baffled young people opposed to the regime, was sharply criticised (Figure 25).

48



43 years in power, 8th term in sight...And some "youths" offer him 40 million to encourage him.  
 Welcome to the continent 🇨🇲

**Figure 26: Tweet reflecting on youth support for Biya<sup>79</sup>**

The election resulted in a victory for Biya with 53.7% of the vote according to official results and opposition candidate Issa Tchiroma finishing second.<sup>80</sup> The results were highly contested. The Constitutional Council – composed of individuals appointed by Biya and accused by opposition figures of being embedded in the ruling establishment – nevertheless dismissed all complaints. Biya's decision to seek another term angered the youth and the opposition and sparked protests in multiple cities.<sup>81</sup>

Together, the two spikes suggest **a pattern of reactive rather than proactive digital mobilisation**: online activity intensified in response to crises rather than through sustained campaign-style organising.

<sup>77</sup> N. Akua, "Schrodinger's President," *Columbia Journalism Review*, October 11, 2024, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/schrodingers-president-journalists-in-cameroon-struggle-to-report-on-alleged-death-of-paul-biya.php>.

<sup>78</sup> Al Jazeera, "Cameroon Bans Media from Talking about President Biya's Health", October 11, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/11/cameroon-bans-media-from-talking-about-missing-presidents-health>.

<sup>79</sup> Translation: "43 years in power, an eighth term on the horizon... And some "young people" are offering him 40 million to cheer him on. Welcome to the continent #Cameroon #Paulbiya #presidentialelections".

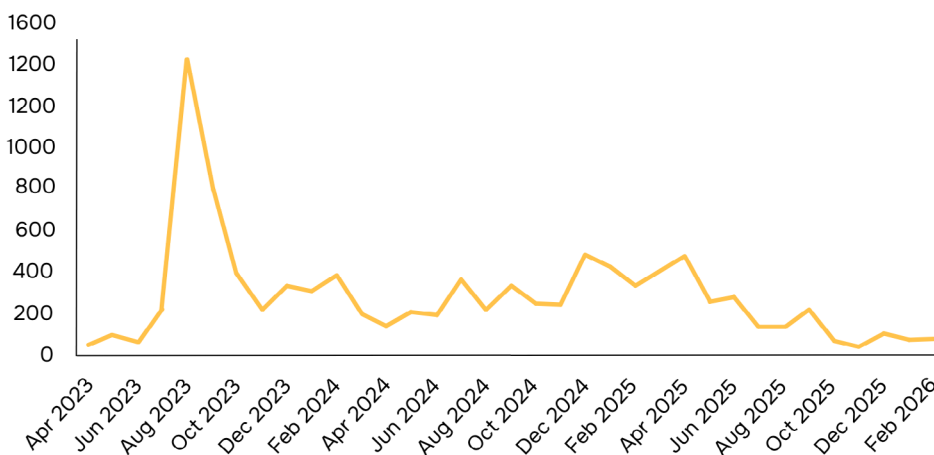
<sup>80</sup> Njie, P. 2025. "As it happened: Anger, protests and calls for calm as Paul Biya wins again". BBC News, 27 October. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/cx2k4w58w91t> [12 March 2026].

<sup>81</sup> PBS. 2025. "At 92, the world's oldest president wins Cameroon's election again". PBS News, 27 October. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/at-92-worlds-oldest-president-wins-camerouns-election-again> [12 March 2026].

# Niger



The SentiOne trend data for Niger shows social media engagement was dominated by a single, significant surge between July and August 2023 (nearly four times the volume of any other point along the trend line) (Figure 26). The overwhelming weight of the evidence points to one cause: the military coup of 26 July 2023 in which Presidential Guard commander General Abdourahamane Tchiani ousted President Mohamed Bazoum and proclaimed himself head of a new junta, triggering the most significant regional political crisis in West Africa in years.<sup>82</sup>



**Figure 27: Trends in Niger being mentioned from April 2023 to February 2026**

**50** Four posts from an X news media account with 3.8 million followers drove the spike in French-language conversations. This spike does not simply represent online activity in response to the coup itself, but is also the result of the cascading sequence of events that unfolded through August. These include an ultimatum issued by ECOWAS to the junta which was not adhered to, the formal activation of the regional standby force, mass protests outside the French military base in Niamey, and the formation of a mutual defence pact between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso and the creation of the AES (Figure 28).

La communauté régionale a annoncé, le jeudi 10 août, retenir l’option militaire pour garantir le retour à l’ordre constitutionnel à Niamey. Une telle opération serait-elle légale ? Décryptage. #Niger

**Figure 28: Example of Tweet published after the coup<sup>83</sup>**

The content of posts within this window reflects a volatile and fragmented information environment. Social media content during this period was characterised not only by genuine political expression but by a high volume of disinformation, manipulated audio clips, and misleading video content circulating alongside more grounded commentary (Figure 29).

<sup>82</sup> Olaoluwa, A and N. Ogbonna. 2025. “Niger coup leader sworn in as president for five years”. BBC News, 26 March. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c241e1151610> [13 March 2026].

<sup>83</sup> Translation: ‘On Thursday 10 August, the regional community announced that it had opted for military action to ensure a return to constitutional order in Niamey. Would such an operation be legal? An analysis. #Niger #ECOWAS’.

Anti-French sentiment was a particularly powerful organising thread, with online discourse coalescing around calls for the withdrawal of French troops, the rejection of ECOWAS's threatened intervention (perceived as a French-backed project) and expressions of solidarity with the other military-led governments in Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>84</sup>



**#Sahel:** "La France et la CEDEAO envisageraient des bombardements simultanés au Niger, au Mali et au Burkina Faso dans le cadre de la libération de Mohamed BAZOUM", apprend-on le samedi soir.

**Figure 29: Example of misinformation on military threat from France and ECOWAS<sup>85</sup>**

While the surge in social media engagement cannot be attributed only to youth digital activism, there are important links here. Across the Sahel, anti-French sentiment has been documented as a generational phenomenon as much as a political one, with younger cohorts expressing particular disillusionment with the post-colonial order and with the French-supported electoral systems that the military coups dismantled (Figure 30).<sup>86</sup> Young people in this region have no living memory of independence and have been formed politically in an era of jihadist insurgency, severe unemployment, and governance failure.<sup>87</sup>

...The militarization that accompanied Western approaches in a post-9/11 world empowered the same military leaders in **#Niger** and the **#Sahel** who are now spurning Washington and turning toward Moscow.  
[thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-202...](https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-202...)

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**Figure 30: Tweet on foreign influence from August 2023**

Posts tagging “Niger” declined noticeably in 2026, a shift that may be due to the political instability that took place in the country in 2023. Following these events, it was reported that Niger had become a hotspot for disinformation in the Sahel region with the communications minister calling for greater regulation of social media groups used for business, politics, and activism. However, such regulations have not yet come into effect, possibly due to a lack of technical capacity.

<sup>84</sup> AFP. 2023. “Niger becomes hotbed of disinformation after July 26 coup”. Al Jazeera, 18 August. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/18/niger-becomes-hotbed-of-disinformation-after-july-26-coup> [13 March 2026].

<sup>85</sup> #VeryUrgent #Sahel: ‘France and ECOWAS are reportedly considering simultaneous air strikes in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso as part of the operation to free Mohamed BAZOUM’, it was reported on Saturday evening. Source: Croissance Afrique-Officiel.

<sup>86</sup> D. M. Ndjerareou, “Are African Youth Disrupting French Foreign Policy in the Sahel?”, Diplomatic Courier, May 16, 2024, <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/are-african-youth-disrupting-french-foreign-policy-in-the-sahel/>.

<sup>87</sup> Pedro Stropasolas, “‘I hate France, but I speak French’: Youth lead the fight against neocolonialism in the Sahel region,” Brasil de Fato, April 17, 2025, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2025/04/17/i-hate-france-but-i-speak-french-youth-lead-the-fight-against-neocolonialism-in-the-sahel-region/>.



## 5. Policy and legislative landscape impacting youth digital

**Youth digital activism in the Sahel**, particularly in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali, **has expanded significantly in recent years in response to democratic backsliding, contested electoral processes, and periods of political transition.**

This expansion has occurred within an evolving yet uneven legislative and policy environment governing digital rights, including frameworks related to data protection, cybersecurity, and freedom of expression online. Understanding this landscape requires closer attention to the legislative architecture that structures digital governance across these states, including the statutory instruments, regulatory authorities, and enforcement mechanisms that shape digital civic space.

This analysis examines these national legal and policy regimes in relation to continental normative instruments, notably the African Union's (AU) African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. It further considers the extent to which emerging AU instruments, specifically the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection, have the potential to expand or restructure digital youth activism by harmonising legal standards on cybersecurity, data governance and digital rights across Member States. The analysis seeks to identify areas of coherence and divergence, while highlighting emerging good practices in digital youth activism across the region.

Across the Sahelian countries examined in this study, **digital civic space is shaped by a combination of cybercrime legislation, media regulation laws, national security provisions, and, in some cases, emergency decrees.** Key legislative instruments include national cybercrime laws such as those in Niger,<sup>88</sup> Burkina Faso,<sup>89</sup> and Cameroon.<sup>90</sup> These are complemented by data protection statutes, such as the laws on the protection of personal data in Mali<sup>91</sup> and Togo.<sup>92</sup> In parallel, media and communication laws, often administered by national broadcasting or communications authorities, intersect with digital regulation by extending existing content controls into online spaces.

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Similar dynamics are evident in Guinea and Chad, where legal frameworks governing digital space combine cybersecurity, data protection, and criminal law provisions. In Guinea, Law No. L/2016/037/AN on cybersecurity and personal data protection establishes a comprehensive regime covering cybercrime, data governance, and the protection of information systems, alongside implementing decrees that assign responsibilities to state institutions.<sup>93</sup> However, gaps in enforcement capacity and the incomplete operationalisation of oversight bodies continue to shape how these laws affect digital civic engagement in practice.<sup>94</sup>

In Chad, the regulatory environment is similarly structured around a set of interlinked laws, including the 2015 Law on Cybersecurity and the Fight Against Cybercrime, provisions within the Criminal Code, and data protection legislation (Law No. 007/PR/2015) governing the processing of personal data.<sup>95</sup> These are supported by institutional mechanisms such as the National Agency for Computer Security and Electronic Certification, which oversees cybersecurity policy and enforcement.<sup>96</sup> Together, these frameworks illustrate how digital civic space across the Sahel is regulated through overlapping legal regimes that both enable and constrain youth digital activism.

<sup>88</sup> [Law No. 2019-33](#): On the Suppression of Cybercrime.

<sup>89</sup> [Law No. 061-2008/AN](#): General Regulation of Electronic Communications Networks and Services.

<sup>90</sup> [Law No. 2010/012](#): On Cybersecurity and Cybercriminality.

<sup>91</sup> [Law No. 2013-015](#): On the Protection of Personal Data.

<sup>92</sup> [Law No. 2019-014](#): On the Protection of Personal Data.

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.ssatp.org/sites/default/files/document/Appendix%20-%20Policy%20Matrix.pdf>.

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.dlapiperdataprotection.com/index.html?c=GN&t=world-map&utm\\_](https://www.dlapiperdataprotection.com/index.html?c=GN&t=world-map&utm_).

<sup>95</sup> [https://www.coe.int/en/web/octopus/country-wiki-ap/-/asset\\_publisher/CmDb7M4RGb4Z/content/chad?](https://www.coe.int/en/web/octopus/country-wiki-ap/-/asset_publisher/CmDb7M4RGb4Z/content/chad?)

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

Regulatory oversight of digital space in these countries is typically fragmented across multiple institutions, including ministries of communication, national telecommunications regulators, and specialised data protection authorities. In several jurisdictions, data protection bodies analogous to South Africa’s Information Regulator (widely regarded as the continental benchmark for independent data governance) have been established, such as the Commission on Technology and Freedom in Burkina Faso,<sup>97</sup> the Personal Information Protection Authority in Mali,<sup>98</sup> and similar entities in Niger and Togo. However, unlike their South African counterparts, these institutions frequently lack constitutional independence, financial autonomy, and enforcement capacity, thereby limiting their effectiveness in safeguarding digital rights. In some cases, regulatory mandates overlap or remain unclear, contributing to inconsistent enforcement and legal uncertainty.

**Youth digital activism in the Sahel is a constrained form of civic action operating at the boundaries of legality, while simultaneously influencing political discourse on a cross-national level.**

These legal instruments provide the basis for state actions such as internet shutdowns, content regulation, surveillance, and the criminalisation of online expression. While the scope and enforcement of these laws vary across countries, a common pattern emerges in which broadly defined provisions related to national security, disinformation, or public order are used to regulate digital political activity, particularly during periods of crisis.

This legislative architecture is particularly relevant to three core policy areas: data governance and privacy, cybersecurity and online harms, and freedom of expression and civic participation. Each of these domains is shaped by distinct yet overlapping regulatory initiatives that collectively define the operational environment for youth digital activism.

Governments, regional organisations, and digital platforms must therefore act in greater alignment to strengthen the democratic potential of these digital spaces, particularly within the three identified policy domains.

## 5.1 Continental normative framework on digital rights

Although the **African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance** and the **African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights** do not explicitly articulate digital rights, their provisions establish a normative foundation that extends to the digital sphere. The latter, particularly **Article 9, guarantees the right to receive and disseminate information, a principle increasingly interpreted to encompass online spaces.**<sup>99</sup> Similarly, the former underscores the importance of citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in democratic governance, all of which are intrinsically linked to digital communication technologies in contemporary contexts.

<sup>97</sup> [Commission de l’Informatique et des Libertés](#) - Burkina Faso.

<sup>98</sup> [Autorité de Protection des Données à caractère Personnel](#) du Mali.

<sup>99</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights*, 1981, art. 9

In addition to these binding instruments, frameworks such as the **African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms and the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection** (Malabo Convention) reinforce emerging norms relating to privacy, data protection, and responsible internet governance. The Malabo Convention is particularly significant in its potential to standardise national approaches to cybersecurity and data protection, thereby creating an enabling environment for cross-border digital activism.<sup>100</sup>

The Malabo Convention is designed to **harmonise how African states regulate cybersecurity, data protection, and digital governance.**<sup>101</sup> That standardisation matters because, in its absence, activists operating across borders face fragmented legal environments; what is permissible in one country may be criminalised or technically restricted in another.

By aligning national laws, the Convention can reduce these inconsistencies. This creates a more predictable legal environment in which youth activists can share content, organise campaigns, and collaborate across countries without constantly navigating conflicting rules or risks. It also helps establish common protections for personal data and digital rights, which are essential for activists who rely on online platforms but may be vulnerable to surveillance or reprisals.

In addition, standardisation can facilitate cooperation between states on issues like cybercrime enforcement. While that can have restrictive implications if misused, it can also support safer digital spaces by addressing harms such as harassment or hacking that disproportionately affect activists. When implemented with strong rights safeguards, this shared framework lowers barriers to cross-border engagement and enables digital activism to scale regionally rather than remain confined within national silos.

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However, despite their normative progressiveness, **implementation of these instruments remains uneven across Member States**, resulting in a fragmented digital rights landscape, particularly with respect to evolving issues such as data sovereignty, algorithmic governance, and the protection of personal information.

## 5.2 National legislative and policy frameworks

Across the seven countries studied, legislative developments demonstrate a degree of convergence in the formal adoption of digital governance frameworks. **Most states have enacted data protection laws, reflecting broader continental trends towards alignment with international and regional standards on privacy and personal data protection.** These frameworks generally recognise the right to privacy and establish regulatory bodies tasked with oversight, although, as noted above, the structure, independence, and effectiveness of these bodies vary significantly across jurisdictions.

<sup>100</sup> Khan, M.N.I., 2025. Cross-border data privacy and legal support: a systematic review of international compliance standards and cyber law practices.

<sup>101</sup> Allison, A., 2025. Role Of International Law in Combating Cross-Border Cybercrime: Addressing Jurisdictional and Enforcement Challenges.

Notwithstanding these formal advances, **significant challenges persist in implementation and enforcement.** Data protection authorities often lack institutional independence, adequate resources, and technical capacity, thereby limiting their effectiveness. Moreover, these frameworks rarely incorporate advanced data rights, such as the right to data portability or protections against algorithmic discrimination. This constrains their relevance in rapidly evolving digital ecosystems.<sup>102</sup>

Cybersecurity and cybercrime legislation across the region similarly reflects a pattern of convergence, albeit one that prioritises state security considerations over the protection of civil liberties. Legal provisions frequently criminalise the dissemination of false information, threats to public order, or offences against state authority, often defined in vague or overly broad terms. Such ambiguity creates opportunities for selective enforcement and has, in practice, been used to target journalists, activists, and political opponents. This trend represents a significant divergence from the protections afforded under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, particularly regarding freedom of expression.<sup>103</sup>

**The governance of internet access further illustrates the tension between national practices and continental norms.** Several countries in the region have resorted to internet shutdowns or bandwidth throttling during electoral periods or episodes of political unrest, as observed in Guinea and Cameroon. These measures directly undermine the right to access information and impede civic participation, standing in contradiction to continental commitments to transparency and inclusivity.<sup>104</sup>

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**Regulatory measures affecting civic space have increasingly extended into the digital domain.**

Governments have imposed restrictions on civil society organisations, limited online mobilisation, and exercised control over digital platforms through licensing regimes and content moderation requirements. These practices contribute to an environment of legal uncertainty and self-censorship, particularly among youth activists who rely heavily on digital tools for organisation and advocacy.

### 5.3 Areas of coherence and divergence

An assessment of the regional landscape reveals a pattern of formal alignment with continental norms alongside substantive divergence in practice. The adoption of data protection legislation and participation in regional digital governance initiatives suggest a degree of normative convergence with frameworks promoted by the AU. However, implementation frequently deviates from intended objectives, particularly in the areas of enforcement, judicial oversight, and institutional independence.

<sup>102</sup> Graham Greenleaf, *Asian Data Privacy Laws: Trade and Human Rights Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>103</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, 1981, art. 19.

<sup>104</sup> Access Now, *Internet Shutdowns in Africa: Trends and Impacts*, 2021.

**The criminalisation of online dissent, the strategic use of internet shutdowns, and the weak enforcement of privacy protections collectively undermine the rights enshrined in continental instruments.** Moreover, the politicised application of digital laws and restrictions on youth participation in digital spaces exacerbate these divergences. This disjuncture reflects a broader governance challenge: legislative frameworks are often instrumentalised to reinforce state control rather than to safeguard fundamental rights.<sup>105</sup>

## 5.4 Digital youth activism: Emerging good practices

Networked forms of activism that transcend national boundaries have emerged, facilitated by regional initiatives such as the Digitalise Youth Project, which enable collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective advocacy.

**Digital platforms have been effectively utilised to enhance electoral accountability,** with youth activists leveraging social media to monitor electoral processes, document irregularities, and disseminate real-time information. In contexts where traditional media is constrained, these interventions promote transparency and counter official narratives. An example of this is the hashtag driven campaign #IAMSahel or #JESUISSAHEL.<sup>106</sup>

**Despite operating within restrictive legal and political environments, youth-led digital activism in the region demonstrates notable resilience and innovation.**

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Activists have also placed growing emphasis on digital security and resilience, with activists adopting encryption tools, secure communication channels, and risk mitigation strategies in response to surveillance. These practices contribute to the sustainability of digital movements in restrictive environments.

**Efforts to counter disinformation represent another important area of innovation.** Youth-led organisations have engaged in fact-checking initiatives, media literacy campaigns, and community-based verification processes to address the spread of false information, thereby strengthening the integrity of digital information ecosystems.

The strategic use of regional legal mechanisms has become increasingly prominent. This is seen through the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, for example. By engaging with supranational institutions, activists have sought to challenge violations of digital rights and hold governments accountable beyond national jurisdictions, underscoring the potential of regional governance frameworks to provide avenues for redress where domestic remedies remain limited.

<sup>105</sup> Ronald Deibert, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Cyberspace under Siege," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 64–78.

<sup>106</sup> #IAMSahel | Sahel Explainer - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGbLmNaTvc>.

## 5.5 Overview of key regulatory tools

Table 1: Key regulatory tools by country

Country	Key regulatory tools	Observed impact on digital activism
Chad	Cybercrime legislation; national security laws; surveillance frameworks	Digital expression is shaped in part by cybercrime and security legislation that has historically enabled restrictions on online communication and surveillance practices during periods of political tension. <sup>107</sup>
Togo	Cybercrime legislation; protest restrictions	Strong youth-led digital mobilisation despite constraints. Recent cybercrime and digital communication laws have expanded the state's ability to monitor and regulate online expression, raising concerns among civil society about their potential use to limit dissent. <sup>108</sup>
Niger	Cybercrime law (notably provisions on "false information"); antiterrorism legislation	Legal provisions criminalising online "misinformation" have been used to prosecute bloggers and activists, contributing to a climate of caution in digital spaces. While activism persists, it is often moderated by concerns over legal repercussions. <sup>109</sup>
Mali	Cybersecurity and data protection laws; criminal defamation provisions	Ongoing political instability has reinforced the use of security-based legal frameworks to regulate online expression. Digital activism continues but is increasingly shaped by uncertainty, periodic restrictions, and concerns over state surveillance. <sup>110</sup>
Guinea	Cybersecurity and data protection laws; criminal defamation provisions	Authorities have used legal instruments to restrict online dissent, including arrests of bloggers and journalists. These measures have contributed to a constrained digital civic space, although activism remains present, particularly among urban youth. <sup>111</sup>
Burkina Faso	Cybercrime laws; antiterrorism legislation; emergency measures	The security context has led to expanded state control over information flows, including restrictions on reporting related to security operations. Digital activism persists but operates under significant pressure, with risks of sanction for critical expression. <sup>112</sup>
Cameroon	Media and communications regulations, national security laws	Media and communications regulations, alongside national security provisions, have been used to restrict public debate and justify restrictions on reporting and online discussion, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as elections. <sup>113</sup>

<sup>107</sup> See 'Special Institutions' section under <https://www.coe.int/en/web/octopus/-/chad>.

<sup>108</sup> Council of Europe, "Togo: Cybercrime Policies/Strategies," <https://www.coe.int/en/web/octopus/-/togo>.

<sup>109</sup> Human Rights Watch, World Report 2022 (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2022); Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023*.

<sup>110</sup> Reporters Without Borders, 2023 World Press Freedom Index, 2023; Amnesty International, Amnesty International Report 2022/23: The State of the World's Human Rights, 2023.

<sup>111</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Guinea: Events of 2023*; CIVICUS Monitor, *People Power Under Attack 2023*, 2023.

<sup>112</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2023*; Reporters Without Borders, 2023 World Press Freedom Index.

<sup>113</sup> Obateru, T.C., 2025. Navigating Journalistic Imperative with Responsibility in Media Coverage of Security Issues in West Africa and the Sahel. In *Media, Conflicts and the National Security Question: Communicating (In) security in Nigeria, West Africa and the Sahel* (pp. 337-352). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

The legislative and policy environment governing digital rights in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Niger, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali is characterised by a dual dynamic of convergence and divergence. While there is clear evidence of formal alignment with continental frameworks through the adoption of relevant legislation and participation in regional initiatives, **the practical application of these frameworks often falls short of their normative aspirations.** Practices such as internet shutdowns, restrictions on civic space, and the criminalisation of online expression highlight significant gaps between legal commitments and implementation.

Within this constrained environment, digital youth activism has emerged as a critical force for democratic engagement and accountability. Through innovative use of technology, regional collaboration, and strategic adaptation to risk, young activists continue to navigate and challenge restrictive systems. Strengthening alignment with continental norms will require not only legal reform but also a commitment to institutional independence, the protection of civic space, and the recognition of digital rights as integral to democratic governance.

## 5.6 The role of digital civic space

In contexts where formal political space remains constrained, digital environments have increasingly emerged as alternative arenas for civic participation across Burkina Faso, Guinea, Togo, Mali, Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Social media platforms have enabled youth and civil society actors to mobilise, disseminate information and engage in political discourse in ways that circumvent traditional institutional limitations. However, **the expansion of digital civic space has been met with significant regulatory and coercive responses from governments,** particularly during electoral periods and political crises.

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Current legislative frameworks across the region reveal a tension between formal commitments to freedom of expression and restrictive practices in implementation. While most of these states are parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which guarantee rights to expression, information and participation, domestic laws, particularly cybercrime and national security legislation, often provide governments with broad discretionary powers to restrict online activity. As noted above, provisions criminalising the dissemination of "false information" or threats to public order are frequently framed in vague terms, enabling their use against activists, journalists, and opposition voices.<sup>114</sup>

Moreover, the use of **internet shutdowns and network disruptions has become a recurrent feature of political governance in the region.** Such measures, observed during elections and protests in countries such as Guinea and Cameroon, directly undermine the rights to access information and participate in public affairs. These practices are inconsistent with regional human rights standards and have been widely criticised for eroding democratic accountability and transparency.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Roadmap for the African Union, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/05/12/2025-human-rights-roadmap-african-union>.

<sup>115</sup> African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information", 2025, <https://achpr.au.int/sw/node/4281>.

In this regard, **strengthening the protection of digital civic space requires not only formal legal guarantees but also meaningful constraints on executive power.** Governments should establish clear legal thresholds governing the use of internet restrictions, ensuring that any such measures are lawful, necessary, proportionate, and subject to independent judicial oversight. Aligning national legislation with continental standards promoted by the AU would require revising cybercrime and digital security laws to prevent their misuse in criminalising legitimate civic expression. Additionally, regional bodies such as ECOWAS can play a critical role in reinforcing norms that discourage politically motivated internet shutdowns and promote accountability in digital governance.

## 5.7 Enhancing platform transparency in political events

The rapid dissemination of digital narratives during elections, coups, and security crises has significantly reshaped political communication in the region. Social media platforms have become central to the construction of political legitimacy, as information circulates quickly and often uncontrollably among users. However, this environment also creates vulnerabilities, particularly in relation to disinformation, coordinated information campaigns, and algorithmic amplification, which can distort public discourse and influence political outcomes.

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**The regulatory response in many of the focus countries has prioritised control over content rather than transparency.**

Cybersecurity and media laws often impose obligations on users and, in some cases, platforms, to refrain from disseminating content deemed harmful to public order or state security. However, these measures rarely address the structural dynamics of digital platforms, such as algorithmic bias or opaque content moderation practices. As a result, there remains a significant gap between national regulatory frameworks and the evolving challenges of platform governance.

This gap highlights a divergence from emerging continental and global standards that emphasise transparency, accountability, and the protection of digital rights. While instruments associated with the AU increasingly recognise the importance of combating disinformation, they also underscore the need to safeguard freedom of expression and avoid disproportionate restrictions. In practice, however, national legislation in the region often leans towards restrictive approaches that risk undermining these principles.

Enhancing platform transparency during politically sensitive periods therefore requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Social media companies should be encouraged, or where appropriate required, to provide greater transparency regarding algorithmic amplification, clearly label coordinated information campaigns, and collaborate with independent fact-checking organisations. At the same time, governments and regional institutions should promote the adoption of election integrity frameworks that prioritise accurate information while minimising the spread of disinformation. Such frameworks must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing state control over online discourse and instead foster an open and pluralistic digital environment.

## 5.8 Funding digital civic innovation by young people

Despite representing the largest demographic group in online spaces, **young people in the region do not consistently dominate digital political discourse.** Evidence suggests that youth engagement is often mediated through content produced by journalists, media organisations, or diaspora networks, rather than originating directly from youth-led initiatives. This pattern reflects both structural and regulatory constraints, including limited access to resources, digital literacy gaps, and restrictive legal environments that may discourage direct participation.

**Despite representing the largest demographic group in online spaces, young people in the region do not consistently dominate digital political discourse.**

Existing legislative frameworks, while recognising the importance of digital transformation, rarely prioritise youth participation in digital governance. **National policies on information and communication technologies tend to focus on infrastructure development and cybersecurity, with limited attention to fostering inclusive digital civic engagement.** Furthermore, restrictive laws governing online expression can have a chilling effect on youth activism, discouraging experimentation and innovation in digital civic spaces.

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Addressing these challenges requires targeted investment in youth-led digital civic innovation. Governments, civil society organisations, and international partners should support initiatives that enhance digital literacy, promote civic technology development, and provide training in community-based digital media production. Such interventions would not only empower young people to engage more actively in public discourse but also strengthen their resilience to disinformation and manipulation.

At the regional level, frameworks associated with the AU and ECOWAS offer important opportunities to facilitate cross-border collaboration among youth civic networks. By supporting knowledge exchange, capacity-building programmes, and regional funding mechanisms, these institutions can help to amplify youth voices and foster a more inclusive digital public sphere. Strengthening legal protections for youth participation in digital spaces, while simultaneously investing in their capacities, will be essential to ensuring that digital activism contributes meaningfully to democratic governance in the region.

## 5.9 Policy recommendations

- **National governments** should undertake comprehensive legal reform to align domestic cybercrime, data protection, and media legislation with the normative standards articulated in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. They should ensure that provisions relating to disinformation, public order, and national security are narrowly defined, clearly interpreted, and consistently applied in a manner that safeguards freedom of expression and civic participation.
- **Member States** should prioritise the ratification and effective domestication of the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection in order to harmonise legal standards on data governance, cybersecurity, and privacy protection, thereby creating a more coherent and enabling regulatory environment for cross-border digital youth activism.
- **Governments** should strengthen the institutional independence, financial autonomy, and technical capacity of national data protection authorities, to ensure effective oversight of personal data processing, meaningful enforcement of privacy rights, and accountability in both public and private sector digital practices.
- **Regulatory frameworks** governing cybersecurity and cybercrime should be revised to incorporate explicit safeguards for human rights, including judicial oversight, due process protections, and proportionality requirements, in order to prevent the misuse of such legislation for the criminalisation of legitimate online expression and political dissent.
- **Governments** should establish clear, transparent, and legally binding thresholds governing the use of internet shutdowns and network disruptions, ensuring that any restrictions on connectivity are lawful, necessary, proportionate, time-bound, and subject to independent judicial review in accordance with regional and international human rights standards.
- **Regional organisations**, including ECOWAS, should play a more proactive role in monitoring and enforcing compliance with digital rights norms, particularly by developing accountability mechanisms that discourage politically motivated internet shutdowns and promote adherence to democratic principles in digital governance.
- **National and regional policymakers** should promote greater coherence and coordination among regulatory institutions, including telecommunications authorities, ministries of communication, and data protection bodies, in order to reduce fragmentation, clarify mandates, and enhance the consistency and predictability of digital governance frameworks.
- **Governments and regulatory authorities** should adopt policy frameworks that prioritise platform accountability and transparency, including requirements for social media companies to disclose information on content moderation practices, algorithmic amplification, and coordinated information campaigns, particularly during elections and periods of political instability.

- A multi-stakeholder approach involving **governments, civil society, and technology companies** should be institutionalised to address disinformation, with an emphasis on supporting independent fact-checking initiatives, promoting media literacy, and ensuring that regulatory responses do not unduly restrict freedom of expression or enable state overreach.
- Targeted **public investment and donor support** should be directed towards youth-led digital civic innovation, including programmes that enhance digital literacy, support civic technology development, and build capacity for secure and effective online mobilisation, thereby enabling young people to participate more meaningfully in digital political discourse.
- **Legal and policy frameworks** should explicitly recognise and protect the role of youth in digital civic space by incorporating provisions that safeguard online participation, encourage inclusive digital governance, and mitigate the chilling effects of restrictive legislation on youth activism.
- **Regional and continental institutions** should expand funding mechanisms and capacity-building initiatives that facilitate cross-border collaboration among youth activists, leveraging platforms such as AU-led programmes to strengthen transnational networks, share best practices, and amplify youth voices in digital governance processes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine what youth digital activism in the Sahel looks like and how its narratives seek to produce political effects across different contexts. Across the case studies examined, the data confirms that, **in countries with sufficient internet penetration, digital platforms and social media have become important arenas for political expression** in contexts where formal channels of dissent are constrained or foreclosed. In other countries such as Chad, the use of social media for political expression is limited. Rather than suppressing contention, the narrowing of civic space documented across the region has consistently driven political debate onto social media, where it takes on forms that are faster, more transnational, and considerably harder for states to control.

Several findings emerge across the cases. Social media usage spikes in the Sahel are triggered not by sustained organisational campaigns but by acute moments of institutional crisis, including coups, disputed elections, constitutional manipulations, or sudden ruptures in the information environment such as a decree or piece of legislation that outlaws the use of social media and the internet. This confirms that **digital activism in the region remains predominantly reactive rather than proactively programmatic and geared towards organisation and mobilisation**. It also means that the most significant moments of online mobilisation are simultaneously moments of discourse contestation and heightened disinformation.

**Youth digital activism does not constitute a uniform pro-democracy force.** It is context or crisis-specific, and oscillates between demands for institutional accountability and the legitimisation of military intervention as a corrective to corruption or foreign dominance. The rapid regional diffusion of sovereigntist narratives has reshaped domestic political debates in ways that complicate any simple alignment between youth digital engagement and democratic outcomes. The transnational public sphere that social media platforms have produced is a political reality that cannot be analysed within national boundaries alone.

What the data cannot yet fully resolve is the question of youth authorship itself. Across all cases, the circumstantial evidence of platform demographics, content styles, and the generational resonance of dominant themes points towards young people as potential drivers of digital political activity. Yet definitively establishing this link remains a methodological challenge that future research must address.

The policy landscape across the Sahel and West African regions highlights both the potential and the limitations of current legal and regulatory frameworks for digital governance. While **national governments have made formal commitments through cybercrime, data protection, and media legislation, significant gaps remain in implementation, coherence, and alignment with continental norms.** These shortcomings are often compounded by limited enforcement mechanisms and insufficient coordination among regulatory bodies, which undermines the effectiveness of existing frameworks. Strengthening digital rights therefore requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal reform, institutional capacity-building, and targeted support for youth-led civic innovation.

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Harmonising domestic legislation with instruments such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection will provide a clearer, more predictable legal environment for digital participation. Concurrently, enhancing the independence and enforcement capacity of regulatory bodies, clarifying mandates across fragmented institutions, and establishing transparent thresholds for interventions such as internet shutdowns are essential to safeguard freedom of expression and civic engagement.

Equally critical is the adoption of multi-stakeholder mechanisms that promote accountability, platform transparency, and responsible management of information flows, particularly during elections or periods of political tension. Finally, **investment in youth-led digital activism, regional coordination, and cross-border collaboration** will ensure that young people are not only participants but also drivers of inclusive and resilient digital civic spaces. Taken together, these measures can transform digital governance from a restrictive and fragmented system into a coherent, rights-based framework that empowers citizens, strengthens democratic accountability, and fosters a vibrant, participatory digital sphere.

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