

# Fragmented Sovereignty and the Limits of Substantive Democracy: Evidence from the Sahel

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**Abstract:** This article revisits the relationship between democracy and inclusive development by introducing *fragmented sovereignty* as a conditioning variable. While dominant approaches in political economy contend that inclusive institutions foster long-term development (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Sen, 1999), they rest on an implicit assumption: the existence of a unified state capable of enforcing rules, ensuring territorial coherence, and coordinating the allocation of resources. This assumption does not hold in conflict-affected contexts such as the Sahel. Drawing on a qualitative and comparative analysis of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, the article develops a systemic causal mechanism linking fragmentation of authority to institutional capture, the moral inversion of the state, the expansion of war economies, and the misallocation of public resources. It demonstrates that these processes are mutually reinforcing, producing a self-sustaining equilibrium that structurally obstructs inclusive development. The article contributes to the literature by reconceptualizing democracy as a conditional variable, whose effectiveness depends on the integration of sovereign functions. In doing so, it qualifies institutionalist theories of development and underscores the need to analyze development outcomes through configurations of power rather than through formal institutional design alone.

**Keywords:** *Fragmented Sovereignty; Democracy; Inclusive Development; Sahel; Institutional Capture; War Economy; State Capacity; Political Economy.*

**JEL Classification:** D72; O10; O17; H11; P16

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The countries of the central Sahel—Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—exhibit a structuring empirical paradox. Despite repeated sequences of political transitions, pluralist openings, and institutional formalization since the 1990s, their economic and social trajectories have been marked by persistent deterioration: rising poverty, widening territorial inequalities, weakening public services, and intensifying armed violence. The succession of coups d'état since 2020, the contraction of civic space, and the expansion of areas beyond effective state control have further reinforced this dynamic. This disjunction between democratic forms and socio-economic outcomes directly calls into question the empirical validity of the relationship between democratization and inclusive development.

The dominant literature in political economy offers a structured explanation of this relationship. Within the framework of inclusive institutions, the quality of political institutions—participation, transparency, and accountability—is identified as the central determinant of

long-term economic performance (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In a convergent manner, the capabilities approach posits that political freedoms and effective rights condition the expansion of economic and social opportunities (Sen, 1999). However, these approaches rest on a rarely articulated assumption: the existence of a state capable of monopolizing legitimate coercion, ensuring the coherence of rules, and implementing public policies.

This assumption is precisely undermined in contemporary Sahelian configurations. The observed dynamics cannot be reduced to mere institutional weakness; rather, they reflect a structural transformation of political authority. The state no longer constitutes a unified center of regulation but instead becomes one actor among others within a competitive arena shaped by armed, communal, and para-statal powers. In such a context, formal institutions persist, yet their capacity for effective action is profoundly diminished. Dominant analytical frameworks thus struggle to explain why democratic arrangements, even when formally consolidated, fail to generate the expected developmental outcomes.

This article addresses this limitation by introducing the concept of *fragmented sovereignty*, defined as a configuration in which the monopoly over coercion, regulation, and resource allocation is distributed across a plurality of actors, thereby preventing the emergence of a coherent institutional order. In such settings, democracy does not disappear as a formal structure; rather, it is structurally conditioned by power relations that constrain its effectiveness. The analysis therefore shifts from a normative conception of democracy to a conditional understanding of its effects.

The central argument advanced is that, in contexts of fragmented sovereignty, substantive democracy is neutralized by a system of power structured by violence, predation, and the authoritarian reconfiguration of the state. The fragmentation of sovereignty generates a pluralization of power centers, facilitates institutional capture, and sustains war economies. These dynamics lead to a systematic misallocation of public resources toward security and extractive functions, thereby obstructing the redistributive and inclusive mechanisms associated with democracy. This process is accompanied by a normative transformation of the state, in which security- and sovereignty-oriented registers tend to supplant principles of accountability and inclusion—a dynamic that recent scholarship conceptualizes as the moral inversion of public action.

The article contributes at three levels. First, it offers a critique of the dominant paradigm linking democracy and development in a linear manner by making explicit its implicit assumptions. Second, it introduces a systemic explanatory mechanism grounded in fragmented sovereignty, articulating institutional capture, war economy dynamics, and public resource misallocation. Third, it mobilizes the Sahel as an empirical laboratory, integrating interdependent dynamics—state withdrawal, militarization of power, and repression of civic space—to demonstrate how these configurations generate a structural blockage of inclusive development.

The article is structured as follows. Section 1 revisits the foundations and limitations of the dominant paradigm. Section 2 defines the concept of fragmented sovereignty. Section 3 develops the proposed causal mechanism. Section 4 provides an empirical validation based on the Sahelian case. Section 5 discusses the theoretical implications of the findings. The conclusion outlines avenues for future research on the conditions for reconstructing effective public sovereignty in fragile states.

## II. THE DOMINANT PARADIGM AND ITS LIMITS

### ➤ *Substantive Democracy and Inclusive Institutions: A Dominant Causal Model*

The political economy of development assigns a central role to political institutions in explaining economic trajectories. The distinction between electoral democracy and substantive democracy constitutes a foundational element of this framework. The former refers to formal procedures for selecting leaders, whereas the latter denotes the effective

functioning of mechanisms of participation, accountability, and rights protection (Dahl, 1971; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

This conceptual shift is systematized by the theory of inclusive institutions, which establishes a causal link between the distribution of political power and economic performance. Within this framework, inclusive growth results from a stabilized analytical sequence:

Political inclusion → constraints on the executive → protection of economic rights → investment and innovation → long-term growth (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

The capabilities approach extends this reasoning by positing that political freedoms and effective rights constitute necessary conditions for the expansion of economic opportunities (Sen, 1999). Despite their differences, these approaches converge on a common proposition: the quality of democratic institutions determines the capacity of societies to generate inclusive development.

### ➤ *A Structuring but Implicit Assumption: The Integrity of Sovereignty*

This model rests on a rarely articulated condition: the existence of a unified political order. More specifically, it presupposes three structural properties.

First, a relatively stabilized monopoly of legitimate violence, ensuring the primacy of formal rules. Second, the territorial continuity of public authority, enabling the uniform implementation of policies. Third, an effective administrative and fiscal capacity, which conditions redistribution and the provision of public goods.

In other words, the dominant paradigm concerns not only the quality of institutions, but also their embedding within an integrated space of sovereignty. It is this condition that makes it possible to translate political rules into economic outcomes.

### ➤ *An Analytical Limitation: The Inability to Account for the Fragmentation of Power*

This assumption becomes problematic in contexts where the unity of sovereignty is compromised. Dominant approaches struggle to account for configurations characterized by:

- The multiplication of centers of power, both state and non-state;
- Violence as an ordinary mode of regulation, rather than a disruption;
- The coexistence of competing normative regimes beyond central control.

In such configurations, formal institutions persist but cease to effectively structure behavior. Democracy does not necessarily disappear as a form, but it loses its capacity to organize power relations and to shape economic trajectories. The causal link between political inclusion and development thus becomes unstable, if not inoperative.

➤ *An Empirical Deadlock: The Sahel as a Critical Case*

Sahelian trajectories illustrate this limitation with particular clarity. Empirical studies have already demonstrated the absence of a systematic relationship between electoral democracy and economic performance in Africa (Van de Walle, 2001; Mkandawire, 2004). However, the Sahelian case reveals a deeper difficulty.

In these contexts, the deterioration of economic and social indicators coexists with institutional forms of democracy, and even with processes of political reorganization. The contraction of civic space, the militarization of power, and the authoritarian transformation of institutions—documented in recent studies—show that mechanisms of accountability and participation can be neutralized without the formal disappearance of democratic structures (Sissoko, 2025).

At the same time, non-state forms of governance—communal, armed, or hybrid—partially substitute for the state without generating dynamics of inclusive development (Clouet, 1996; Bourgeot, 1999). These observations reveal a central empirical contradiction:

The formal quality of institutions is insufficient to explain economic outcomes when political authority is structurally fragmented.

➤ *Toward a Shift in the Analytical Framework*

This contradiction calls for an analytical shift. Rather than treating democracy as an independent variable of development, it becomes necessary to interrogate the structural conditions of its effectiveness. The issue is no longer solely institutional, but configurational: it concerns how power is distributed, exercised, and contested. It is within this perspective that the concept of *fragmented sovereignty* is introduced as a structuring variable capable of explaining why the expected mechanisms of substantive democracy—accountability, redistribution, and inclusion—are neutralized in certain contexts. This shift makes it possible to reformulate the relationship between democracy and development in conditional rather than universal terms.

Figure 1 synthesizes the conceptual architecture developed in this article by formalizing the relationship between sovereignty fragmentation and the blockage of inclusive development in the Sahel. It organizes the analysis across four interconnected levels—structural conditions, power configuration, political economy, and socio-economic outcomes—while explicitly incorporating feedback mechanisms. This representation departs from linear institutional explanations by emphasizing the systemic and cumulative nature of state transformation in conflict-affected environments.

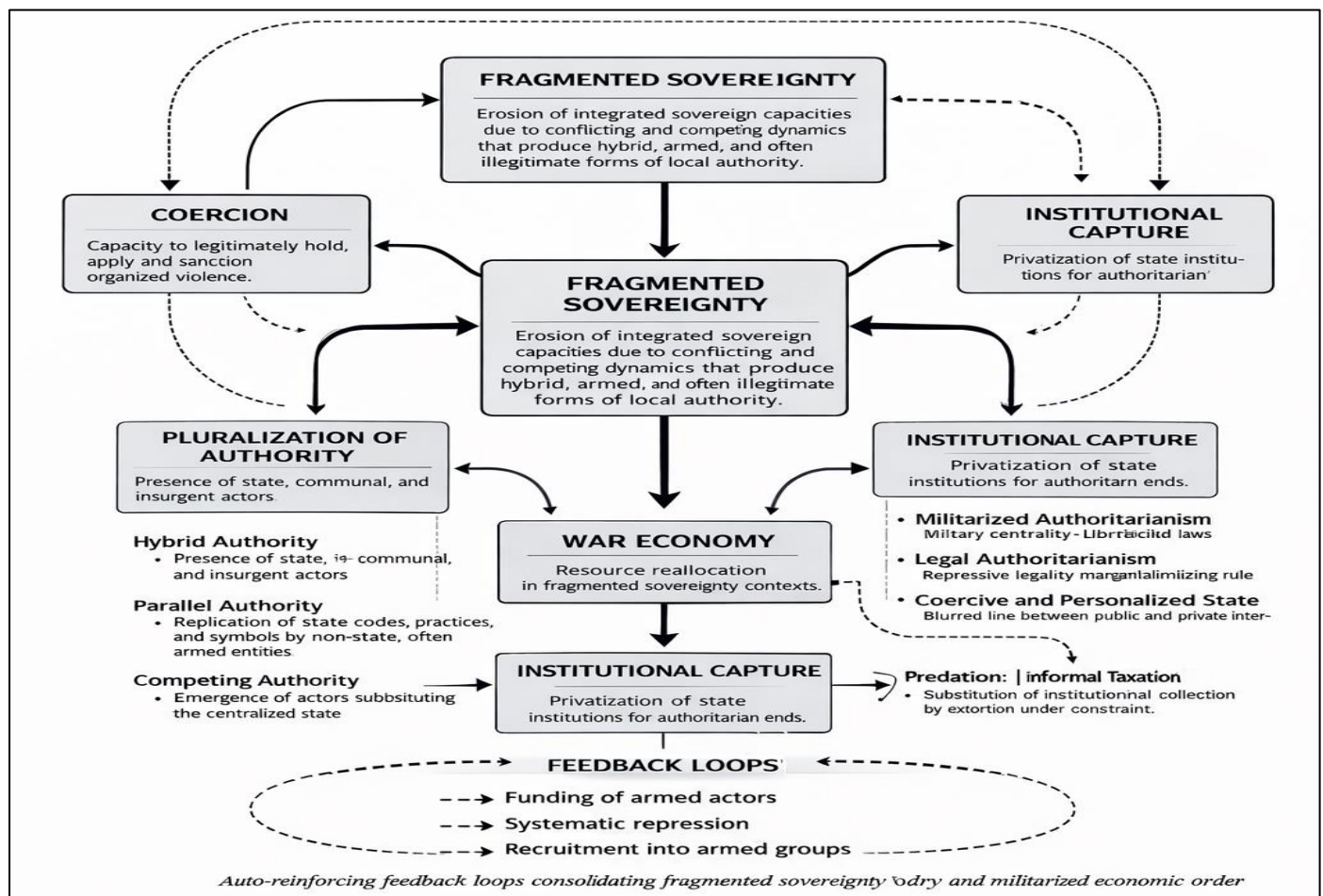


Fig 1 Fragmented Sovereignty and the Structural Blockage of Inclusive Development in the Sahel (2012–2025)

Source: Author, 2026

➤ *Systemic Causal Mechanism and Empirical Grounding*

The figure operationalizes the central argument of this article: the effectiveness of democracy is conditioned by the integration of sovereign functions. In the Sahel, this condition is undermined by processes of state withdrawal and territorial fragmentation, which redistribute authority among competing actors and reconfigure local governance structures.

This structural fragmentation leads to a transformation of political authority, characterized by institutional capture and the normalization of coercion. Rather than regulating power, institutions are reoriented toward its consolidation, while restrictions on civic space and dissent redefine the boundaries of political legitimacy.

At the economic level, these dynamics generate a mode of accumulation based on war, structured by predation, informal taxation, and parallel circuits. Resource allocation is consequently reconfigured in favor of security expenditures, to the detriment of redistributive functions, thereby exacerbating socio-economic inequalities.

The observed outcomes—poverty, inequality, and exclusion—are stabilized by feedback loops linking violence, repression, and economic marginalization. The figure thus demonstrates that the failure of inclusive development cannot be reduced to institutional weakness alone, but instead reflects a systemic configuration in which fragmented sovereignty constrains the functioning of both political and economic processes.

### III. FRAGMENTED SOVEREIGNTY: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *A Rigorous Definition: Sovereignty as an Infrastructure of Power*

In classical approaches to political science, sovereignty is generally understood as the supreme authority of the state over a given territory. This predominantly legal definition is useful for conceptualizing the formal recognition of the state, yet it remains insufficient for analyzing contemporary configurations of power in contexts of protracted crisis. From a political economy perspective, sovereignty must be conceived more concretely as an operational infrastructure of power—that is, as the capacity of a political center to impose coercion, produce legitimate rules, and direct the allocation of resources (Weber, 1978; Mann, 1984).

From this standpoint, sovereignty rests on three interdependent functions. The first is a coercive function: it refers to the capacity to enforce decisions and, ultimately, to exercise a monopoly over legitimate violence. The second is a regulatory function: it encompasses the production, interpretation, and enforcement of legal, social, and economic norms recognized as valid. The third is an allocative function: it concerns control over revenue extraction, public expenditure, and redistributive mechanisms—that is, the capacity to translate political authority into sustained economic orientation.

Within this framework, sovereignty is neither an abstract nor a binary attribute. It is effective when these three functions are sufficiently coordinated within a single political order. Conversely, it becomes fragmented when coercion, regulation, and allocation are no longer concentrated within a coherent center but are instead distributed among multiple actors pursuing competing logics. *Fragmented sovereignty* can thus be defined as a configuration in which control over violence, the production of norms, and the direction of resources are contested among state, para-statal, insurgent, communal, or private actors, such that the state is no longer able to organize the political and economic order in a unified manner.

This definition makes it possible to move beyond a purely deficit-based reading of the state. Fragmentation does not merely signify weakness; it indicates that the state operates within a space where other actors exercise, compete over, or capture sovereign functions. In Sahelian contexts, this configuration therefore reflects not a simple absence of the state, but a conflictual pluralization of power. It is consistent with findings from the literature on state withdrawal, armed governance, and authoritarian de-statization in the Sahelian region.

### IV. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

➤ *Analytical Strategy*

This article adopts a mechanism-based approach oriented toward theory building, with the aim of explaining the conditions under which democracy ceases to produce inclusive development. It does not follow a logic of testing universal hypotheses through statistical inference; rather, it engages in a process of causal specification, seeking to identify a structured sequence of transformations linking configurations of power to economic outcomes.

The analysis relies on a process-tracing approach, understood as the reconstruction of a causal process articulated through several interdependent sequences—fragmentation of sovereignty, pluralization of authority, institutional capture, the structuring of a war economy, and the misallocation of public resources. The objective is not to establish a linear relationship, but to highlight a cumulative causal system characterized by interactions and feedback loops among its various components.

➤ *Research Design: A critical case for theoretical inquiry*

The study employs a critical case design centered on the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad). This choice is grounded in a precise analytical rationale: the region constitutes a setting in which the implicit assumptions of institutionalist approaches—particularly the unity of sovereignty—are systematically invalidated.

The Sahel is thus mobilized not as an empirical anomaly, but as a theoretically strategic case that enables the testing of the conditions under which the relationship between democracy and development holds. This positioning follows a logic of analytical generalization: the objective is to identify

a mechanism that can be transposed to other contexts characterized by fragmented authority, rather than to produce statistical generalization.

➤ *Empirical Materials and Triangulation Strategy*

The empirical analysis is based on a systematic triangulation of heterogeneous sources, allowing observed dynamics to be examined across multiple levels:

- Data on conflict, violence, and territorial control (ACLED);
- Macroeconomic, fiscal, and social indicators (World Bank, IMF, OECD);
- Indicators of governance and restrictions on civic space (CIVICUS, Freedom House, ISS Africa);
- Recent academic literature on armed governance, state withdrawal, and war economies;
- The author's previous empirical work on authoritarian transformations, fiscal dynamics, and conflict economies in the Sahel.

This strategy makes it possible to identify convergent regularities across security, institutional, and economic domains, while avoiding reliance on a single source.

➤ *Mechanism Validation Strategy*

The article relies on a processual validation of causality rather than on statistical identification. Each sequence of the mechanism is assessed according to three cumulative criteria:

- Empirical observability: the existence of empirical indicators corresponding to each causal relationship (loss of territorial control, transformation of public expenditures, restriction of civic space, etc.);
- Cross-domain coherence: alignment of observed transformations across political, economic, and security spheres;
- Source convergence: corroboration of observations through independent data and analyses.

This approach enables a shift from descriptive correlation to structured causal explanation by identifying a chain of mechanisms rather than a single relationship.

➤ *Scope Conditions and Limitations*

The proposed model is subject to explicit scope conditions: it applies to configurations in which the functions of coercion, regulation, and allocation are durably fragmented among competing actors. It does not aim to explain all development trajectories, but specifically those characterized by the disintegration of sovereignty.

The analysis relies primarily on secondary data and does not incorporate original fieldwork. This limitation constrains the observation of micro-social dynamics, but is mitigated by the coherence and convergence of the sources employed.

Finally, the objective is not statistical generalization, but analytical generalization: to specify the conditions under which institutions cease to produce their expected effects and

to propose an explanatory framework transferable to other contexts of fragmented power.

## V. CAUSAL MECHANISM: A SYSTEM OF BLOCKAGE

The fragmentation of sovereignty does not merely affect the structure of political authority; it reconfigures the entire set of relationships between institutions, the economy, and society. The mechanism proposed here seeks to explain how this fragmentation translates into a blockage of inclusive development. In contrast to the linear schema of the dominant paradigm, this is a systemic process, characterized by interdependent causal sequences and feedback loops that ensure its reproduction.

➤ *Fragmentation of Sovereignty and the Pluralization of Power Centers*

The fragmentation of sovereignty first manifests as an effective pluralization of power centers. The erosion of the state's monopoly over violence creates a space in which armed actors, communal militias, and para-statal arrangements exercise functions of coercion, protection, and regulation.

This pluralization does not correspond to a mere institutional vacuum. On the contrary, it produces a reconfiguration of the political order in which multiple competing authorities exercise partial forms of sovereignty. Research on armed governance shows that these actors develop systems of taxation, justice, and territorial control that directly compete with the state (Raineri & Strazzari, 2019; Meagher, 2012). In the Sahel, this dynamic is reinforced by the entrenchment of armed actors capable of structuring localized forms of politico-economic domination.

The analytical implication is central: the state ceases to function as the unifying locus of power relations, thereby weakening the capacity of formal institutions to produce binding effects.

➤ *Pluralization and Institutional Capture*

The pluralization of power centers does not remain external to the state. It translates into a progressive capture of institutions, which cease to operate as impersonal mechanisms of regulation.

This capture relies on two complementary mechanisms. On the one hand, militarized authoritarianism, marked by the centrality of security apparatuses in political decision-making and the subordination of civilian institutions to wartime imperatives. On the other hand, legal authoritarianism, in which law is mobilized to legitimize restrictions on freedoms, neutralize opposition, and consolidate executive power (Scheppelle, 2013; Schedler, 2006).

In this context, institutions do not disappear; they change function. They become instruments for stabilizing power rather than mechanisms of accountability. Empirical analyses of the Sahel show that this hybridization between coercion and the legalization of arbitrariness is becoming an

increasingly structuring mode of governance (Sissoko, 2025a; 2025d).

➤ *Institutional Capture and the Moral Inversion of the State*

Institutional capture produces a deeper transformation: a normative reconfiguration of the state, conceptualized here as a moral inversion. This process entails a shift in the purposes of public action, whereby principles of accountability, inclusion, and rights protection are replaced by imperatives of security, sovereignty, or regime survival.

Within this configuration, coercion and repression cease to be deviations and instead become legitimate instruments of governance. The notion of the public good is redefined through a security-oriented logic, and restrictions on freedoms are presented as necessary for stability. This normative reversal stabilizes institutional capture by providing it with ideological justification (Sissoko, 2026a).

Moral inversion thus constitutes a central link in the mechanism: it transforms contestable practices into acceptable norms, thereby reducing the scope for internal contestation.

➤ *Moral Inversion and the Structuring of War Economies*

The normative transformation of the state creates the conditions for a structured war economy, in which violence becomes a vector of economic accumulation.

This economy is based on three main mechanisms: resource predation, informal taxation of economic activities, and the development of parallel financial circuits. These practices are not marginal; they are embedded in governance logics in which resource capture becomes a central objective of power (Small Arms Survey, 2020).

In the Sahelian case, several studies show that war economies are closely intertwined with political dynamics, transforming violence into an economic resource and security into a market (Sissoko, 2025b). This economic structuring reinforces the autonomy of the actors involved and reduces their dependence on formal institutional channels.

➤ *War Economies and the Misallocation of Public Resources*

The expansion of war economies profoundly alters the logic of resource allocation. Public expenditures are redirected toward security functions, while social and productive investments are marginalized.

This structural misallocation is reflected in increased military spending, a contraction of expenditures on education, health, and infrastructure, and the fragmentation of fiscal circuits. Research on public finance in fragile contexts shows that this dynamic results from political trade-offs favoring

regime security over the redistributive functions of the state (Sissoko, 2026b; 2024a).

Misallocation constitutes a decisive transformation point: it converts political capture into a durable economic imbalance.

➤ *Misallocation and the Blockage of Inclusive Development*

The misallocation of resources produces direct effects on development trajectories. The weakening of public services, combined with security and normative uncertainty, leads to a deterioration of socio-economic conditions.

Three main dynamics follow: an increase in poverty, a widening of territorial inequalities, and persistent economic exclusion. Private investment is constrained by instability, while local innovation capacities are weakened. Under these conditions, the mechanisms through which substantive democracy is expected to generate development—accountability, redistribution, and inclusion—are neutralized.

Development does not disappear; rather, it becomes fragmented, unstable, and non-inclusive, reflecting the very structure of sovereignty.

➤ *Feedback Loops: A Self-Reinforcing System*

The mechanism described should not be interpreted as a linear sequence. It operates as a system of cumulative feedback loops.

The relationship between violence and the economy is circular: war economies finance coercive capacities, which in turn secure the resources necessary for their reproduction. Similarly, the relationship between repression and institutional capture is self-reinforcing: restrictions on civic space weaken countervailing powers, thereby facilitating deeper capture (Sissoko, 2025e). Finally, the relationship between poverty and armed mobilization sustains a cycle in which marginalized populations become reservoirs of recruitment for violent actors (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004).

These feedback loops confer strong inertia on the system. They transform the mechanism into a blockage equilibrium, in which political, economic, and social dimensions mutually reinforce one another. In this context, substantive democracy cannot produce its expected effects—not because of its intrinsic limitations, but because it is embedded in a structural environment that neutralizes its mechanisms.

➤ *Empirical Validation Matrix*

- *Fragmentation → Pluralization of Power Centers*

Table 1 Fragmentation → Pluralization of Power Centers

Mechanism	Causal Relationship	Empirical Indicators	Type of Evidence	Sources
Territorial and coercive fragmentation	Loss of monopoly of violence → emergence of competing actors	Increase in armed groups; areas خارج state control; closure of public services	Quantitative + qualitative	ACLED (2024); Raineri & Strazzari (2019)

Functional substitution	State absence → local provision (justice, taxation)	Informal justice; taxation by armed groups; control of local markets	Qualitative	Boisvert (2015)
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Source: Author, 2026

• *Pluralization → Institutional Capture*

Table 2 Pluralization → Institutional Capture

Mechanism	Causal Relationship	Indicators	Evidence	Sources
Militarization of power	Multiplication of armed actors → military centrality	Coups (2020–2023); suspension of institutions; rule by decree	Institutional	ISS Africa (2024)
Legal authoritarianism	Political competition → instrumentalization of law	Repressive laws; military courts; party dissolution	Institutional	Scheppele (2013); Sissoko (2025d)

Source: Author, 2026

• *Capture → Moral Inversion*

Table 3 Capture → Moral Inversion

Mechanism	Causal Relationship	Indicators	Evidence	Sources
Normative reconfiguration	Capture → redefinition of public good	Security discourse; justification of repression	Discursive + institutional	Amnesty (2024)
Moral inversion	Legitimation of coercion → normalization	Acceptance of repression; priority to security	Conceptual + empirical	Sissoko (2026c)

Source: Author, 2026

• *Moral Inversion → War Economy*

Table 4 Moral Inversion → War Economy

Mechanism	Causal Relationship	Indicators	Evidence	Sources
Predatory economy	Legitimation of violence → resource capture	Informal mining; trafficking; looting	Quantitative + qualitative	Small Arms Survey (2020)
Parallel taxation	Regulatory absence → informal taxation	Zakat; checkpoints; route control	Qualitative	—
Security market	Privatization of violence	Wagner; militias; outsourcing	Institutional	—

Source: Author, 2026

• *War Economy → Public Misallocation*

Table 5 War Economy → Public Misallocation

Mechanism	Relationship	Indicators	Evidence	Sources
Security prioritization	War economy → budget shifts	Military spending >20%; social decline	Quantitative	—
Fiscal fragmentation	Parallel circuits → loss of control	Informal taxation; weak revenues	Quantitative	IMF (2024); World Bank (2025)
Budget capture	Militarized power → allocation bias	Low social investment	Analytical	Sissoko (2026b)

Source: Author, 2026

• *Misallocation → Development Blockage*

Table 6 Misallocation → Development Blockage

Mechanism	Relationship	Indicators	Evidence	Sources
Collapse of services	Underinvestment → human capital decline	School closures; failing health systems	Quantitative	—
Structural poverty	Misallocation → weak redistribution	Niger ~45%; Chad >35%	Quantitative	World Bank (2024)
Territorial inequality	Fragmentation → uneven development	Peripheral marginalization	Analytical	OECD (2024)

Source: Author, 2026

• *Feedback Loops (Systemic Validation)*

Table 7 Feedback Loops (Systemic Validation)

Loop	Relationship	Indicators	Type	Sources
Violence ↔ economy	Mutual reinforcement	Armed revenues; expansion	Systemic	—
Repression ↔ capture	Reduced opposition → consolidation	Civic closure; arrests	Institutional	—
Poverty ↔ recruitment	Marginalization → mobilization	Youth recruitment	Quantitative	Collier & Hoeffler (2004)
State withdrawal ↔ fragmentation	Withdrawal → alternative actors	Ungoverned areas	Systemic	—

Source: Author, 2026

**VI. EMPIRICAL VALIDATION: THE SAHEL AS A LABORATORY**

The mechanism proposed in the previous section implies that fragmented sovereignty generates a chain of political and economic transformations leading to the blockage of inclusive development. In this respect, the Sahel constitutes a critical case through which its empirical validity can be assessed. The dynamics observed in the region do not merely illustrate each stage of the model; they reveal their systemic articulation and their capacity for mutual reinforcement.

➤ *State Withdrawal and Territorial Fragmentation*

The fragmentation of sovereignty is empirically reflected in the loss of territorial control by the state. In several areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, public authority is either absent or severely degraded, as evidenced by the closure of thousands of schools, the withdrawal of administrative services, and the disorganization of health systems.

This phenomenon does not, however, correspond to an institutional vacuum. It is accompanied by a process of functional substitution by non-state actors who assume roles of coercion and regulation. In certain localities, armed groups control markets, arbitrate disputes, and impose rules governing access to resources. This configuration empirically confirms the first relationship in the mechanism: territorial fragmentation leads to an effective pluralization of power centers, in which the state is no longer capable of unifying the political order.

➤ *War Economies and the Structuring of Predation*

The pluralization of power translates into a transformation of economic logics. Areas characterized by fragmented sovereignty witness the emergence of war economies structured around the coercive capture of resources.

Available data indicate an expansion of informal extractive activities, particularly in the mining sector, as well as the development of transnational trafficking networks. At the same time, systems of informal taxation are imposed on populations and economic actors, taking the form of levies on trade and local production.

These practices confirm the transition toward a mode of accumulation based on violence. The economy ceases to be organized around production and investment and instead revolves around the control of resources and flows. This transformation empirically validates the stage of the mechanism in which fragmented power fosters the emergence of predatory economic systems.

➤ *Repression and the Closure of Civic Space*

The institutional capture and normative inversion identified in Section 4 are empirically reflected in the progressive closure of civic space. In several Sahelian countries, military transitions have been accompanied by measures aimed at neutralizing countervailing powers: suspension of political parties, restrictions on civil society organizations, increased control over the media, and the arrest of political opponents.

These developments do not merely reflect a conventional authoritarian turn. They are embedded in a process of legitimizing coercion, in which restrictions on freedoms are justified by security imperatives. This dynamic empirically confirms the mechanism of moral inversion: democratic principles are not formally abolished, but redefined and subordinated to logics of sovereignty and security.

➤ *Resource Misallocation and Economic Effects*

The political and economic transformations described above produce measurable effects on development trajectories. The rise in security expenditures observed across several countries is accompanied by a relative decline in investments in social sectors.

This misallocation translates concretely into deteriorating access to education and healthcare, as well as a weakening of human capital. Indicators of poverty and inequality further show that, when growth occurs, it does not diffuse in an inclusive manner. Peripheral regions—often those most affected by fragmented sovereignty—remain durably marginalized.

These findings confirm that the misallocation of public resources constitutes a central mechanism in the blockage of inclusive development: the redistributive capacity of the state

is weakened, while the investments necessary for long-term growth are undermined.

➤ *Empirical Synthesis: Validation of the Mechanism*

Taken together, these empirical elements confirm the coherence of the proposed mechanism. Territorial fragmentation produces a pluralization of power centers, which in turn fuels institutional capture and the authoritarian transformation of the state. This transformation legitimizes the expansion of war economies, which leads to the misallocation of public resources at the expense of social investment. Ultimately, this misallocation results in the blockage of inclusive development.

Beyond this sequence, the Sahelian case highlights the systemic nature of the process. Violence sustains parallel economic circuits, which reinforce the coercive capacities of armed actors. Repression limits the emergence of countervailing powers, facilitating the consolidation of institutional capture. Poverty and exclusion, in turn, fuel dynamics of armed mobilization. These interactions confer a strong capacity for self-reproduction upon the system.

The Sahel thus emerges not only as an empirical application of the model, but as a revealing case of the limits of the dominant paradigm. It demonstrates that, in contexts of fragmented sovereignty, democracy cannot produce its expected developmental outcomes—not because of its intrinsic shortcomings, but because it is embedded in a structural environment that neutralizes its mechanisms.

## VII. DISCUSSION: RECONFIGURING THE DEMOCRACY–DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

The empirical and analytical findings presented above call for a reconsideration of the relationship between democracy and development as formulated in the dominant literature. The issue is not to contest the relevance of approaches grounded in inclusive institutions or capabilities, but rather to identify their structural conditions of validity. The analysis of the Sahelian case shows that these approaches rest on an implicit assumption—the integrity of sovereignty—the erosion of which transforms the analytical status of democracy.

➤ *Democracy as a Conditional Variable*

The first analytical shift consists in reclassifying democracy as a conditional variable. Within the dominant paradigm, democracy is conceived as a relatively autonomous causal factor, capable of producing economic effects through mechanisms of accountability and redistribution. That autonomy, however, depends upon the existence of a stabilized political framework.

The analysis advanced here demonstrates that this condition is decisive. The mechanisms associated with substantive democracy—constraints on the executive, the protection of rights, and redistributive allocation—presuppose the existence of a political order capable of enforcing rules and coordinating behavior. In the absence of

this condition, these mechanisms do not formally disappear, but they cease to generate effects.

In contexts of fragmented sovereignty, democracy thus becomes a function of the structure of power. The pluralization of coercive centers, the competition among normative orders, and the capture of resources prevent institutions from structuring economic interactions. Democracy is therefore not ineffective in itself; rather, it is structurally prevented from operating. This shift makes it possible to move beyond the opposition between formal democracy and substantive democracy by showing that their effectiveness depends on an upstream variable: the integration of sovereignty.

➤ *The Limits of Institutional Developmentalism*

This result also clarifies the limits of institutional developmentalism. Dominant approaches tend to assume that improving formal rules—elections, transparency, and the rule of law—is sufficient to produce durable economic transformation. This assumption rests on an implicit vision of the state as a stabilized framework capable of ensuring the application of rules.

The Sahelian case shows that this assumption is empirically fragile. In contexts of fragmented power, institutional reforms may be neutralized, circumvented, or captured. Formal rules coexist with practices of domination that alter their effective scope. More importantly, they may themselves be mobilized as instruments of authoritarian consolidation, within configurations that the literature describes as authoritarian legalism (Scheppelle, 2013; Schedler, 2006).

The limitation of institutional developmentalism is therefore not normative, but analytical: it treats institutions as independent variables without incorporating the power relations that condition their functioning. The Sahelian case demonstrates that, in the absence of a transformation of sovereign structures, formal institutional reforms are insufficient to generate inclusive development.

➤ *Theoretical Implications: Toward a Political Economy of Sovereignty*

These findings call for a reconfiguration of the theoretical framework. The analysis of the relationship between democracy and development can no longer be centered exclusively on institutional quality. It must explicitly incorporate the structural conditions of institutional effectiveness.

• *Three Implications Follow:*

First, violence must be integrated as an endogenous variable. In contexts of fragmented sovereignty, it structures power relations and conditions access to resources. It is not an external disruption, but a constitutive element of political and economic systems.

Second, sovereignty must be treated as a central analytical variable. Its degree of integration determines the capacity of institutions to produce effects. The fragmentation

of sovereignty corresponds to a specific configuration of power, characterized by the dissociation of the functions of coercion, regulation, and allocation.

Third, the analysis must be situated within a political economy perspective attentive to the interactions among power, resources, and institutions. War economies, resource capture, and budgetary misallocation thus appear not as anomalies, but as coherent outcomes of fragmented configurations of power.

Taken together, these three dimensions converge toward what may be called a political economy of sovereignty, in which development depends on the capacity to coordinate the fundamental functions of political power.

➤ *Positioning within the Literature and Contribution*

In light of the existing literature, the contribution of this article is twofold.

At the theoretical level, it proposes a shift in the center of analytical gravity by introducing fragmented sovereignty as a structuring variable. Whereas dominant approaches focus on the quality of institutions, the present analysis shows that

their effectiveness depends on the configuration of power within which they are embedded. It therefore reformulates the relationship between democracy and development in conditional terms.

At the empirical level, the article mobilizes the Sahel as a critical case. Far from constituting a marginal exception, this case highlights the limits of a paradigm that presupposes the integration of sovereignty. It shows that, in contexts of durable fragmentation of power, the mechanisms associated with substantive democracy are systematically disrupted.

The contribution of this article does not consist in invalidating existing theories, but in restricting their domain of validity. It invites us to recognize that democracy cannot be analyzed independently of structures of sovereignty, and that inclusive development ultimately depends on the capacity to recompose a sufficiently integrated political order capable of coordinating coercion, regulation, and allocation.

The fragmentation of sovereignty neutralizes the effects of substantive democracy by disrupting the functions of coercion, regulation, and allocation, thereby blocking inclusive development.

Table 8 Validation of the Hypotheses

Hypothesis (H)	Causal Relationship Tested	Empirical Indicators (Operationalization)	Observed Results (Sahel)	Level of Validation*	Main Sources
<b>H1: Fragmentation → pluralization of power centers</b>	Loss of the monopoly of violence → emergence of competing authorities	Share of territory beyond state control; number/activity of armed groups (violent events, zones of influence); continuity of public services (schools, health care)	Expansion of areas beyond state control; armed actors providing security, justice, and taxation; closure of public infrastructure	Strong (convergent)	ACLED (2024); Raineri & Strazzari (2019)
<b>H2: Pluralization → institutional capture</b>	Competition among power holders → coercive centralization + instrumentalization of law	Coups d'état / constitutional suspensions; proportion of decrees relative to parliamentary laws; use of exceptional jurisdictions	Militarization of the executive; governance by decree; military courts for civilians; political restrictions	Strong (institutional)	Scheppele (2013); Schedler (2006); Sissoko (2025d)
<b>H3: Capture → moral inversion of the state</b>	Normative reconfiguration → legitimization of coercion	Official discourse (security/sovereignty); civil liberties indices (FH/CIVICUS); cases of criminalization of dissent	Justification of restrictions in the name of security; decline in liberties; assimilation of opponents to threats	Strong (discursive + institutional)	Amnesty (2024); CIVICUS (2025); Sissoko (2026c)
<b>H4: Inversion → war economy</b>	Legitimation of violence → economic capture of resources	Informal extractive activities (gold mining); non-state taxation (zakat, road tolls); revenues/control of trade routes	Expansion of violent rents; parallel taxation; control of economic flows by armed actors	Strong (qualitative + corroborated)	Small Arms Survey (2020); Sissoko (2025b)
<b>H5: War economy → public misallocation</b>	Security-oriented trade-offs → budgetary reorientation	Share of military expenditures (% of budget); education/health expenditures; effective vs. potential fiscal revenues	Increase in security budgets (e.g., Mali >20%); social underinvestment; fiscal fragmentation	Strong (quantitative)	IMF (2024); World Bank (2025); Sissoko (2026b)

Hypothesis (H)	Causal Relationship Tested	Empirical Indicators (Operationalization)	Observed Results (Sahel)	Level of Validation*	Main Sources
<b>H6: Misallocation → blockage of inclusive development</b>	Weak redistribution → poverty and inequalities	Extreme poverty rate; school enrollment/school closures; indicators of territorial inequalities	High poverty (e.g., Niger ~45%); massive school disengagement; marginalization of peripheral areas	Strong (quantitative + coherent)	World Bank (2024); OECD (2024)
<b>H7: Feedback loops → stabilization of the system</b>	Circular interactions among violence, economy, and institutions	Correlation between violence and resource control; intensity of repression; armed recruitment (poor areas)	Reproduction of conflict; authoritarian consolidation; poverty–recruitment cycles	Strong (systemic, multi-source)	Collier & Hoeffler (2004); Crisis Group (2022)

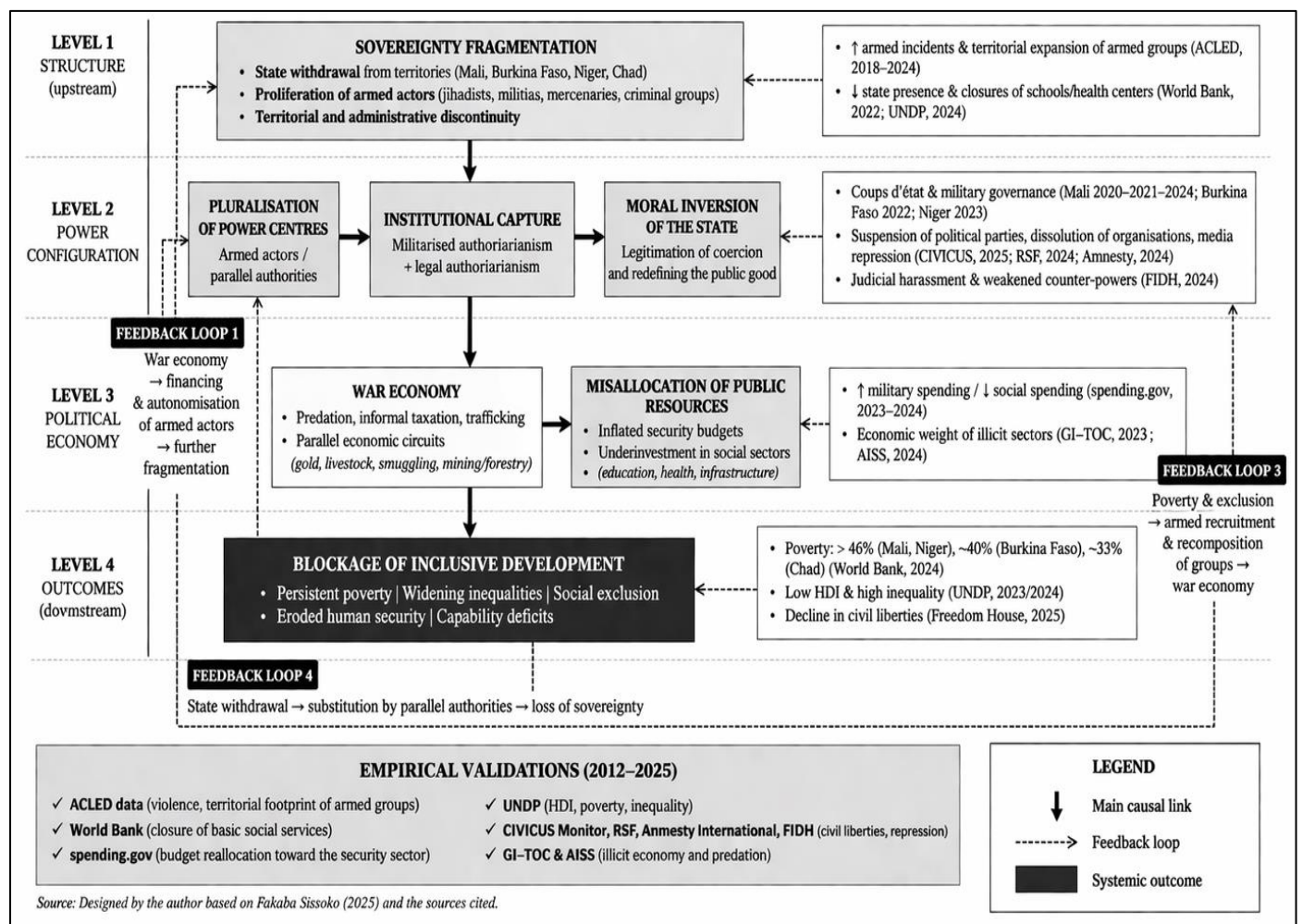
Source: Author, 2026

• *Level of Validation:*

- ✓ Strong (quantitative): convergent numerical indicators
- ✓ Strong (institutional/discursive): coherent legal and discursive evidence
- ✓ Strong (convergent): multi-source triangulation (quantitative + qualitative)

The table highlights a convergent validation of all intermediate hypotheses. Each causal relationship is corroborated by specific empirical indicators and independent

sources, and their articulation forms a coherent system. Fragmented sovereignty thus appears as the structuring variable conditioning the entire causal chain—from institutional capture to public misallocation—and, ultimately, the blockage of inclusive development. This empirical convergence strengthens the external validity of the proposed mechanism and confirms the status of the Sahel as a critical case for analyzing the democracy–development relationship.



Source: Designed by the author based on Fakaba Sissoko (2025) and the sources cited.

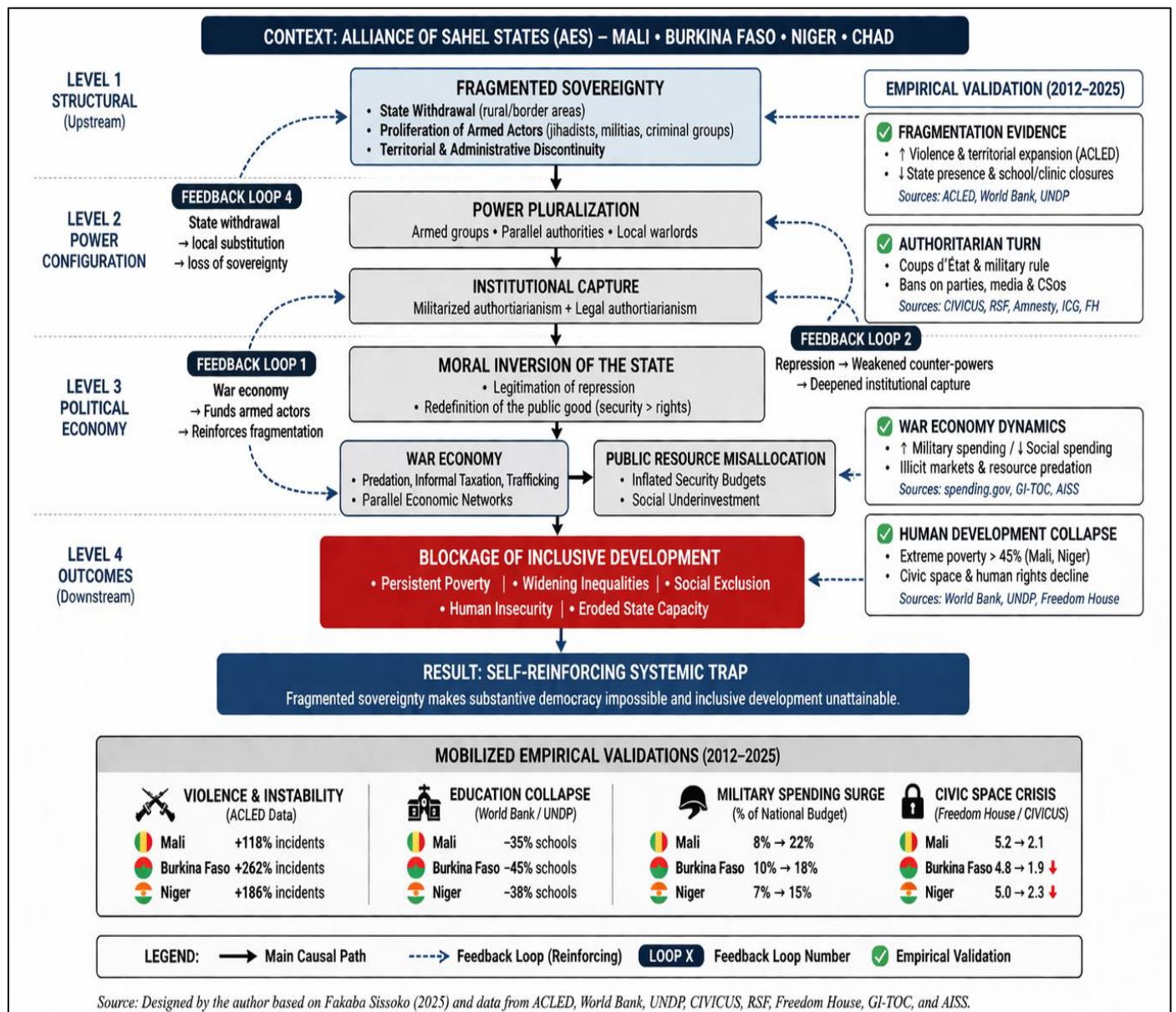


Fig 2 Fragmented Sovereignty and the Systemic Blockage of Inclusive Development in the Sahel (AES States) : A Causal Mechanism and Empirical Validation Framework

Figure 1 presents the systemic mechanism through which fragmented sovereignty conditions the relationship between democracy and inclusive development in the Sahel. It articulates four analytical levels—structural conditions, configuration of power, political economy, and socio-economic outcomes—while also integrating feedback loops that reinforce the overall dynamic. The model does not describe a linear sequence, but rather a cumulative process in which transformations of authority, institutions, and resource allocation are mutually constitutive.

The figure formalizes the central argument of this article: the relationship between democracy and inclusive development is mediated by the structure of sovereignty. Upstream, the fragmentation of sovereignty—resulting from state withdrawal, territorial discontinuity, and the proliferation of armed actors—weakens the state’s capacity to unify coercion, regulation, and the allocation of resources.

This dynamic is consistent with the observed configurations of state retreat and territorial disengagement in the Sahel.

This fragmentation produces a reconfiguration of power characterized by the pluralization of authority and the capture of institutions. Rather than disappearing, institutions are reoriented and incorporated into hybrid regimes combining militarized authoritarianism and legal authoritarianism. This transformation is accompanied by what the article conceptualizes as the moral inversion of the state, in which coercion and repression are redefined as legitimate instruments of public order. Empirical evidence drawn from recent Sahelian transitions shows that this process is closely linked to the systematic repression of civic actors and the erosion of countervailing powers.

At the level of political economy, these transformations generate war-economy dynamics structured around

predation, informal taxation, and parallel economic circuits. These mechanisms reconfigure the allocation of resources by privileging security expenditures over social investment, thereby producing a structural misallocation of public resources. This economic configuration is not contingent, but functionally linked to the underlying distribution of power, as recent analyses of armed sovereignties and conflict economies in the region have shown.

Downstream, these dynamics result in a persistent failure of inclusive development, observable in rising poverty, widening inequalities, and systemic exclusion. Crucially, the model demonstrates that these outcomes do not result from linear causality, but from self-reinforcing feedback loops. War economies finance armed actors and intensify fragmentation; repression consolidates institutional capture; and socio-economic exclusion fuels recruitment into violent networks. Together, these loops generate a self-sustaining equilibrium of instability.

The analytical contribution of the figure lies in its capacity to integrate these dimensions within a coherent system. It shows that the blockage of inclusive development does not result solely from institutional weakness, but from a broader configuration in which sovereignty is fragmented and contested. By making explicit both the causal chain and its feedback dynamics, the model offers a renewed analytical framework for understanding the relationship between democracy and development in contexts where the fundamental conditions of stateness are structurally altered.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The analysis developed in this article establishes a central result: in contexts of fragmented sovereignty, substantive democracy does not generate inclusive development—not because of its intrinsic limitations, but because the conditions required for its effectiveness are absent. The dissociation of the functions of coercion, regulation, and allocation prevents institutions from structuring economic and social behavior. In such configurations, democracy may persist as an institutional form, but it ceases to operate as a mechanism of economic transformation.

The contribution of this article lies in introducing fragmented sovereignty as a structuring variable in the relationship between democracy and development. This shift makes it possible to reformulate the analytical problem: rather than assessing the quality of institutions per se, the focus turns to identifying the conditions under which they produce effects. In this sense, democracy does not constitute an autonomous cause of development, but a mechanism conditioned by the effective integration of political power. This proposition does not invalidate theories of inclusive institutions; rather, it restricts their domain of validity to contexts in which the unity of sovereignty is ensured.

The analytical implications are direct. Approaches centered on the reform of formal rules—elections, transparency, and the rule of law—appear insufficient when

they are not accompanied by transformations in the configuration of power. In contexts of fragmentation, the primary analytical and policy challenge lies not merely in institutional consolidation, but in the recomposition of sovereign functions—that is, the capacity to rearticulate coercion, regulation, and allocation within a coherent order. Failing this, institutions remain vulnerable to capture and unable to generate inclusive dynamics.

This analysis opens two avenues for further research. First, it calls for extending the study of fragmented sovereignty to other contexts characterized by sustained conflict, in order to assess its comparative relevance. Second, it highlights the need to develop empirical instruments capable of measuring degrees of sovereignty integration and their effects on development trajectories. Together, these directions contribute to a broader research agenda aimed at rethinking the political economy of development through the lens of actual configurations of power.

The Sahelian case does not constitute a peripheral anomaly, but rather reveals the limits of a paradigm that presupposes the unity of the state. It demonstrates that inclusive development depends not only on institutions, but on their embedding within a political order capable of sustaining them. Where this condition is absent, democracy does not disappear; it becomes a form devoid of effective agency.

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