

Artificial Intelligence and Fragile Democracy in West Africa: Between Digital Repression and Citizen Mobilization

Etienne Fakaba Sissoko¹; Khalid Dembele²

¹Faculty of Economics and Management of Bamako (FSEGB)
University of Social Sciences and Management of Bamako (USSGB) – Mali
Center for Political, Economic and Social Research and Analysis (CRAPES ML)

²Faculty of Economics and Management of Bamako (FSEGB)
University of Social Sciences and Management of Bamako (USSGB) – Mali

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Abstract: This article explores the ambivalence of artificial intelligence (AI) in the fragile democracies of West Africa, based on a qualitative study involving 385 participants in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. It highlights a dual use of AI: as a tool of digital repression (surveillance, censorship, disinformation) and as a lever for citizen mobilization (fact-checking, mapping, diaspora activism). This tension confirms that AI can both reinforce authoritarianism and support democratic action. The article introduces two concepts: *contradicted algorithmic sovereignty*, referring to African states' structural dependence on foreign technologies; and *algorithmic vulnerability*, characterizing their increased exposure to digital manipulation. The study calls for an African regulatory framework on AI and for comparative, longitudinal research into its political uses in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence; Algorithmic Governance; Digital Repression; Citizen Mobilization; Diaspora; West Africa; Contradicted Algorithmic Sovereignty; Algorithmic Vulnerability.

JEL Codes: C80; F50; L86; O33; P48; Z18.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly asserting itself as one of the major drivers of transformation in social and political relations on a global scale. While its applications in sectors such as health, education, and industry raise hopes for modernization, its integration into governance mechanisms is generating growing concerns. AI is profoundly reshaping the modalities of power, the production of information, and the forms of citizen participation (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

In consolidated democracies, it is often seen as a tool for transparency and administrative efficiency. Conversely, in regimes marked by institutional instability, it tends to reinforce surveillance, censorship, and algorithmic manipulation. In West Africa, this ambivalence is particularly pronounced. The region, characterized by recurring coups, the erosion of checks and balances, and the resurgence of military regimes (Aning & Atuobi, 2023; CDD West Africa,

2025), provides a context in which AI is both instrumentalized by governments for social control—network restrictions, automated disinformation, digital surveillance—and appropriated by civil society and diasporas to promote transparency, produce counter-narratives, and document abuses (Hiebert, 2023; AfricTivistes, 2023; WATHI, 2024; Sissoko. EF, 2025).

This dynamic raises a central question: To what extent does AI simultaneously serve as an instrument of authoritarian consolidation and a lever for citizen mobilization in the fragile democracies of West Africa?

The working hypothesis is that AI intensifies the paradox of hybrid regimes: it strengthens the repressive capacities of states while also opening new possibilities for political action by social actors.

This study has a dual objective. On the empirical level, it draws on a qualitative investigation involving 385

participants from five categories (former elected officials and senior civil servants, NGO members, journalists, young activists, and diaspora members) in three countries emblematic of contemporary democratic fragility: Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. On the theoretical level, it proposes an original analytical framework based on two notions: *contradicted algorithmic sovereignty*, which denotes African states' structural dependence on global technological powers; and *algorithmic vulnerability*, describing hybrid regimes' increased exposure to digital manipulation (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Milan & Treré, 2019).

The originality of the article lies in its ability to bridge the literature on algorithmic governance with that on hybrid regimes and digital democracy in Africa. While most research focuses on stable and highly digitized contexts, this study

sheds light on the stakes of AI in political configurations marked by uncertainty, repression, and civic inventiveness.

The analysis is based on a rigorous protocol combining semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Data processing was carried out using thematic coding supported by NVivo software, enabling a cross-analysis of individual narratives and collective dynamics.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and literature review. Section 3 outlines the methodology and hypotheses. Section 4 analyzes the empirical findings. Section 5 offers a critical discussion. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main contributions of the study, its theoretical and practical implications, as well as its limitations and avenues for future research.



Fig 1 Map of the Study Area
Source: Fakaba SE, 2025

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Algorithmic Governance and Political Power*

Artificial intelligence (AI) refers to systems capable of performing tasks that involve human cognitive functions such as learning, prediction, or decision-making (Russell & Norvig, 2021). Its integration into public and political mechanisms has led to the emergence of a field of research structured around the notion of *algorithmic governance*, understood as the use of algorithms to guide, regulate, or automate public action and social behavior (Kitchin, 2017).

This governance unfolds along two main dimensions. The first concerns the optimization of decision-making processes through administrative rationalization and efficiency. The second—more concerning in authoritarian contexts—relates to the *massive collection of data* for the purposes of surveillance, prediction, and social control. In this perspective, Zuboff's (2019) work on *surveillance capitalism* highlights how personal data become a strategic raw material, consolidating the power of dominant actors. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2019) emphasize the ambivalence of AI: as a catalyst for innovation, it can also reinforce inequalities and dependency. On the informational level,

Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch (2020) show how recommendation algorithms directly shape public opinion, exposing individuals to targeted manipulation.

Finally, Floridi (2020) argues that the deployment of these technologies raises the issue of *digital sovereignty*, meaning the ability of states to control the infrastructures, standards, and flows of information produced and regulated by often foreign entities.

It is therefore clear that algorithmic governance constitutes a field of tension between *technocratic efficiency* and *freedom restriction*, with effects that vary depending on the degree of institutional consolidation.

➤ *Fragile Democracies and Hybrid Regimes in Africa*

The literature on *hybrid regimes* highlights the coexistence of formal electoral institutions and informal authoritarian practices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These configurations, frequent in West Africa, give rise to *fragile democracies* characterized by chronic political instability, weakened checks and balances, and incomplete transitions (Diamond, 2019; Sissoko. EF, 2025).

Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger exemplify these uncertain trajectories. The digital ecosystem plays an ambivalent role in them: it can promote electoral transparency and encourage citizen mobilization, but is also used for surveillance, censorship, and manipulation (Freedom House, 2023; Hiebert, 2023; Sissoko. EF, 2025). Digital tools—and AI even more so—thus become a *contested resource* in contexts where the balance between state authority and citizen participation remains precarious.

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024) notes that West Africa alone accounts for *nearly 43% of all information manipulation campaigns* on the continent, often orchestrated from abroad. This highlights a central paradox: digital technology can contribute to democratic consolidation while simultaneously increasing the fragility of regimes with low institutional capacity.

➤ *AI and Civil Society*

In contrast to repressive uses, part of African civil society is appropriating AI to enhance transparency, participation, and accountability. This *citizen technopolitics* (Milan & Tréré, 2019; Sissoko. EF, 2025) takes various forms: automated fact-checking applications, tools for mapping violence, or digital content designed to *mobilize diasporas*.

In Ghana, journalist coalitions use AI to detect fake news during election periods (CDD West Africa, 2025). In Nigeria, platforms aggregate and analyze reports of irregularities using real-time algorithms (Dubawa, 2024). In the Sahel, young activists use generative AI to create videos, songs, or visuals that denounce political abuses (Adjogla, 2025).

These examples show that although AI is developed in foreign technical environments, it is *locally reappropriated* to build new forms of digital citizenship—often in tension with dominant state logics.

➤ *Conceptual Proposal*

In light of this literature, two conceptual notions are proposed to better grasp the specific tensions of West African contexts:

- Contradicted algorithmic sovereignty refers to the situation in which states, while outwardly expressing a desire to regulate AI, remain dependent on the infrastructures, tools, and standards imposed by major global tech powers (GAFAM, BATX). This dependency reduces their strategic autonomy, particularly in areas such as cybersecurity, data protection, and information governance.
- Algorithmic vulnerability refers to the specific fragility of hybrid regimes in the face of AI, due to three combined factors:
 - ✓ The absence of robust legal frameworks,
 - ✓ The weakness of personal data protection systems, and
 - ✓ The political instrumentalization of digital technologies by ruling elites.

These two concepts aim to go beyond the simplistic dichotomy of "opportunity" versus "threat," by integrating the geopolitical, institutional, and social dimensions that shape the political uses of AI in fragile democracies.

III. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

➤ *Type of Study*

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, suitable for analyzing an emerging phenomenon in politically unstable contexts: the ambivalent uses of artificial intelligence in West African hybrid regimes. The approach is inductive and interpretive, aiming to let analytical categories emerge from the collected data, in line with the principles of grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

➤ *Population and Sample*

The study was conducted in three countries—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—selected for their political trajectories marked by institutional instability, unfinished transitions, and the growing use of digital technologies. The target population includes actors engaged in the public sphere: institutional officials, members of civil society, journalists, students, young activists, and diaspora members.

The sampling strategy follows a purposive non-probability method, aimed at ensuring a diversity of profiles and qualitative representativeness. The sample size ($n = 385$) was determined using Yamane's formula (1967), with a 5% margin of error and an estimated accessible population of 10,000 individuals. This threshold allows for theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Where:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

n = sample size,

N = estimated accessible population,

e = accepted margin of error (5%).

Table 1 Sample Distribution and Coding

Category of Actors	Number	Percentage	Code
Institutional officials	55	14.3%	RI
Civil society / NGO members	90	23.4%	SC
Journalists and media professionals	60	15.6%	JM
Students and young activists	100	26.0%	EA
Diaspora members	80	20.7%	DI
Total	385	100%	—

Source: Fakaba SE, 2025

The assigned codes (RI, SC, JM, EA, DI) were used to anonymize respondents in the citations and facilitate thematic processing.

➤ Data Collection Methods

Three complementary techniques were used:

- Semi-structured interviews ($n = 210$), conducted with institutional figures, journalists, activists, and diaspora members.
- Focus groups ($n = 25$), composed of 5 to 8 participants, mostly students and civil society organization members.
- Document analysis, including NGO reports (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, AfricTivistes), legislative texts, national digital strategies, and online content (posts, videos, deepfakes, disinformation campaigns).

Triangulation of these sources enabled the cross-validation of different analytical levels and strengthened the robustness of the findings.

➤ Data Analysis Methods

The data were processed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by NVivo 14 software. Three methodological components were implemented:

- Cross-coding: independent double coding was performed on a sub-sample to strengthen inter-coder reliability.
- Source triangulation: interviews, focus groups, and documents were jointly analyzed to enrich interpretation.
- Analytical saturation: data collection and coding were halted when no new analytical categories emerged ($n = 210$).

The validity of the study was enhanced by two feedback workshops held in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Dakar (Senegal), during which preliminary results were collectively discussed. The traceability of the process was ensured by maintaining a methodological journal.

➤ Research Hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework and the issues identified, four hypotheses structure the analysis:

- H1 – AI and Digital Repression: In fragile West African democracies, AI is primarily used by military or hybrid regimes as a tool for surveillance, censorship, and disinformation. (Kitchin (2017), Zuboff (2019), Freedom House (2023), Sissoko. EF 2025, Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024))
- H2 – AI and Citizen Mobilization: AI is also a tool for civil societies and diasporas, which use it to strengthen participation and democratic contestation. (Milan & Tréré (2019), AfricTivistes (2023), Sissoko. EF 2025, CDD West Africa (2025))
- H3 – Contradicted Algorithmic Sovereignty: West African states' dependency on foreign technological infrastructures limits their capacity to autonomously regulate AI. (Floridi (2020), Couldry & Mejias (2019), Hiebert (2023))
- H4 – Algorithmic Vulnerability: The lack of robust regulations and data protection mechanisms increases the vulnerability of hybrid regimes to digital manipulation. (Levitsky & Way (2010), Diamond (2019), African Union (2022), Forum on Information & Democracy (2024))

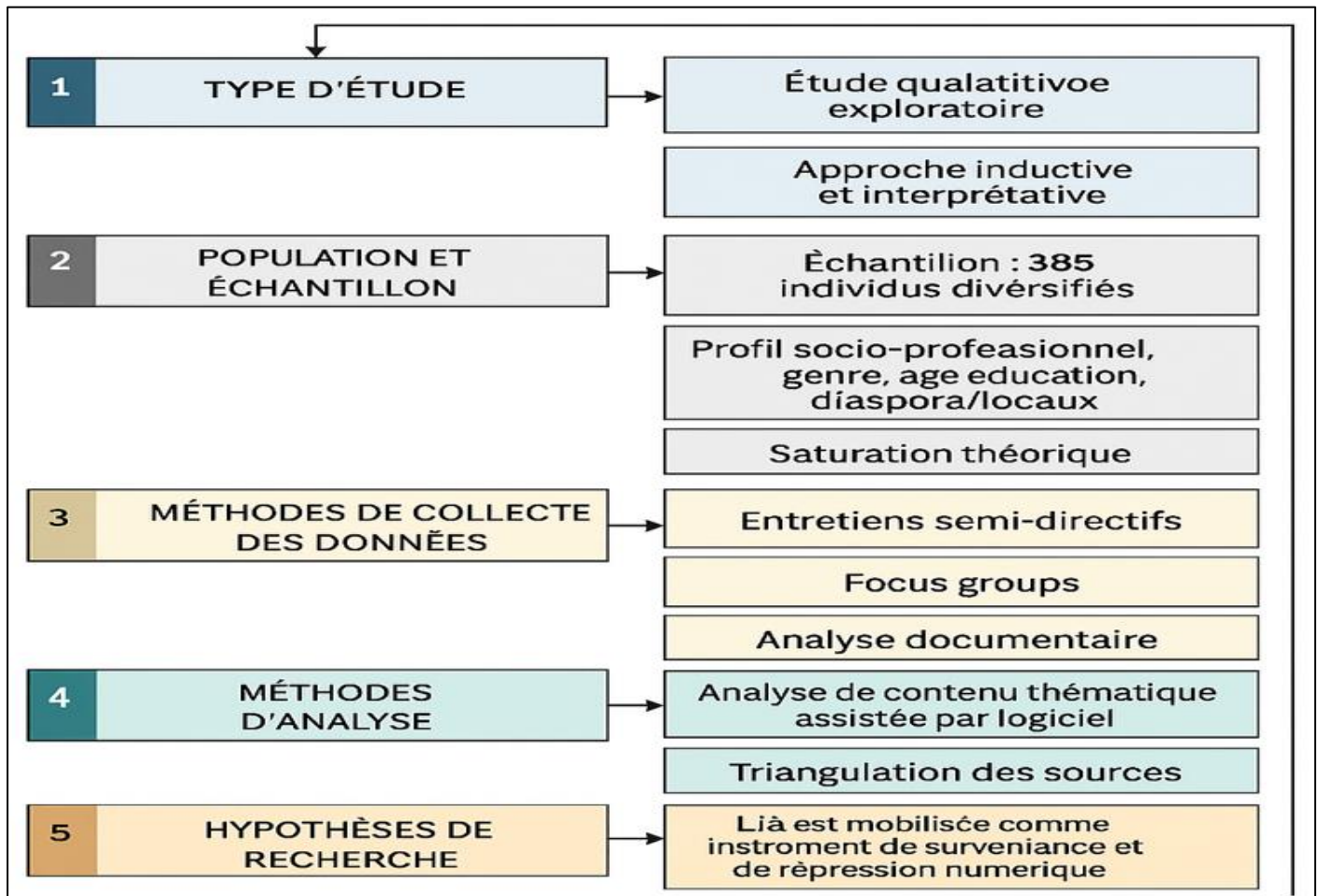


Fig 2 Methodological Flow Diagram
Source: Fakaba SE, 2025

IV. RESULTS

A. Exploratory Data Analysis: NVivo Word Cloud

The initial analysis of the data corpus—comprising 385 interviews, focus groups, and documents—was conducted using NVivo 14 software. Lexical processing produced a word cloud, a classic method in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify semantic recurrences and structure preliminary analytical themes.



Fig 3 Word Cloud (NVivo)
Source: Fakaba SE, 2025

The word cloud reveals a high concentration around terms such as surveillance, repression, freedom, diaspora, mobilization, censorship, truth, propaganda, justice, social networks, and fact-checking. These elements reflect the complexity of perceptions surrounding AI in West Africa. Three salient thematic clusters emerge:

➤ The Register of Digital Repression

Dominant occurrences such as *surveillance*, *repression*, *censorship*, *control*, and *propaganda* show a strong association between AI and authoritarian practices. These perceptions echo the literature on algorithmic governance (Kitchin, 2017) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), as well as the empirical alerts raised by Freedom House (2023) regarding the expansion of control technologies in non-democratic regimes.

➤ The Democratic and Normative Register

Words like *freedom*, *justice*, *truth*, and *democracy* express a persistent attachment to core normative values. This cluster reflects a tension inherent to hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2019), where formal institutions coexist with informal authoritarian practices. It also demonstrates the endurance of democratic expectations despite the shrinking civic space.

➤ *The Register of Citizen Mobilization*

Terms like *mobilization*, *social networks*, *fact-checking*, and *diaspora* highlight the existence of counter-uses of AI, led by civil society. This dynamic aligns with the concept of citizen technopolitics described by Milan and Tréré (2019), and is illustrated by initiatives such as those documented by AfricTivistes (2023) and CDD West Africa (2025), where AI is used to monitor abuses, produce counter-narratives, and strengthen political participation.

This lexical triptych—digital repression, democratic norms, civic mobilization—reveals the fundamental ambivalence that shapes representations of AI in the studied contexts. AI simultaneously appears as both a tool of domination and a resource for emancipation, a tension that justifies a deeper analysis of usage registers. The following sections further examine this duality through a cross-analysis of interviews and documents.

B. AI as an Instrument of Digital Repression

The analysis of interviews and focus groups reveals a widely shared perception: in West African hybrid regimes, artificial intelligence is primarily associated with the strengthening of digital repression mechanisms. Three main forms of usage were identified: mass surveillance, automated censorship, and algorithmic disinformation.

➤ *Surveillance and Population Control*

Several respondents emphasize that AI greatly enhances the ability of authorities to monitor, cross-reference, and interpret individual behaviors—often without a clear legal framework or independent oversight.

A Malian institutional official explains: *“What’s worrying isn’t just the data collection, it’s how everything is linked together. AI connects a phone call, a WhatsApp message, and a physical movement into a single surveillance file.”* (RI55)

This capacity for algorithmic interconnection echoes the concept of the digital panopticon described by Zuboff (2019), where surveillance becomes not only constant but also invisible and undetectable.

A Nigerien journalist adds: *“With software imported from China or Israel, the state no longer monitors suspects—it monitors the entire population. Self-censorship has become a routine survival strategy.”* (JM12)

Many young respondents confirm this sense of constant intrusion. As a Burkinabè student puts it: *“Even a private conversation can be intercepted and exploited. AI is not neutral—it serves the interests of those who control it.”* (EA101)

These comments align with Freedom House’s (2023) warnings about the rise of algorithmic surveillance in authoritarian states, where AI tools are proactively and systematically integrated into social control policies.

➤ *Censorship and the Restriction of Digital Space*

AI is also used to limit access to critical information and fragment the public sphere. Participants describe a type of censorship that is more targeted, faster, and less visible, made possible by algorithmic tools.

A Burkinabè activist notes: *“During every protest, the internet becomes unstable. It’s not a technical failure—it’s a filter. Certain hashtags disappear, some pages become inaccessible.”* (SC91)

A Malian diaspora member adds: *“Network blackouts are always justified by national security, but they’re really used to silence the opposition.”* (DI44)

Journalists highlight the damaging effect of automated moderation on critical content: *“Our videos get taken down without warning. Automated systems detect and delete them within minutes.”* (JM14)

These practices, often described as soft censorship, represent a strategic use of AI to algorithmically restrict civic space without resorting to physical repression. They echo the findings of the VIGINUM (2022) report, which emphasizes the growing role of automated moderation in the political regulation of public debate.

➤ *Disinformation and Automated Propaganda*

Finally, AI is perceived as a vector for spreading regime-friendly narratives, often through synthetic content and coordinated bot accounts.

A member of a Nigerien NGO reports: *“Deepfakes have become a political weapon. A fake video or audio of an opponent is generated. Even after it’s debunked, the doubt remains.”* (SC92)

A Burkinabè journalist refers to a viral musical campaign: *“Songs generated by AI imitating Beyoncé or Tupac are circulating to glorify the leader of the junta. It’s not trivial—it’s a form of algorithmic indoctrination.”* (JM13)

A Malian student comments: *“AI gives propaganda a professional, credible look. It’s no longer a clumsy message—it’s a smooth, persuasive, viral production.”* (EA110)

A Senegalese diaspora member also warns about the transnational reach of such campaigns:

“These automated networks cross borders. They also target diasporas to influence their perception from afar.” (DI47)

These observations confirm the findings of CDD West Africa (2025), which describes West Africa as an active laboratory for AI-assisted disinformation, often orchestrated or supported by foreign actors.

In the three countries studied, artificial intelligence is embedded in a repressive triptych:

- Mass surveillance, through the automated centralization of behavioral data
- Algorithmic censorship, via filtering, content takedowns, and targeted blackouts
- AI-generated disinformation, for propaganda and delegitimization of opposition

These practices are not perceived as exceptional but as everyday experiences, experienced by citizens as a gradual narrowing of their freedom of expression. In this context, AI is not merely a technology—it becomes a vector of power, reinforcing authoritarian dynamics in already fragile regimes.

These results fully confirm Hypothesis H1.

C. AI as a Lever for Citizen Mobilization

Despite its authoritarian instrumentalization, artificial intelligence is not perceived exclusively as a tool of repression. The study reveals a set of alternative uses of AI by civil society and diasporas, aimed at strengthening transparency, participation, and democratic resistance. Three main practices emerge: automated fact-checking, citizen digital monitoring, and transnational mobilization.

➤ Automated Fact-Checking and the Fight Against Disinformation

Several respondents point out that AI allows for faster responses to disinformation campaigns by automating fact-checking tasks that used to be time-consuming.

A Malian journalist explains: *“Fake videos circulate extremely fast. Thanks to AI, we can now authenticate a video or recording almost instantly. It changes our role: instead of reacting to rumors, we anticipate them.”* (JM12)

A Burkinabè activist involved in local governance notes: *“We’ve developed a tool that automatically compares official statements with budgetary data. It’s more than fact-checking—it’s a mechanism of accountability.”* (SC90)

A Nigerien student summarizes the impact of these tools on digital behavior:

“AI teaches us to verify before sharing. We’ve integrated platforms that can detect visual or textual manipulations in seconds.” (EA101)

These testimonies confirm the initiatives documented by AfricTivistes (2023) and CDD West Africa (2025), and echo the automated detection tools deployed in France by VIGINUM to safeguard electoral processes.

➤ Citizen Mapping and Digital Monitoring

AI is also used to produce alternative data on information restrictions, acts of repression, or algorithmic censorship.

A Burkinabè activist explains: *“We use mapping tools to report internet shutdowns, arbitrary arrests, and surveillance zones. It’s our own version of conflict maps.”* (SC91)

A Nigerien institutional official acknowledges the usefulness of these tools, while urging caution: *“These systems are useful, but they need to rely on reliable sources. Otherwise, they risk adding confusion instead of enhancing transparency.”* (RI55)

A Malian student emphasizes the preventive documentation function: *“With certain apps, we’re alerted in real time when social media is shut down. It allows us to capture, archive, and denounce.”* (EA102)

These tools, similar to social listening practices, mirror the automated digital monitoring described in the VIGINUM (2022) report, but here they are appropriated and reconfigured by citizens for activist purposes.

➤ Transnational Mobilization and the Digital Diaspora

The diaspora emerges as a key actor in AI-assisted mobilization. Whether in exile or abroad, it uses generative tools to amplify counter-narratives and reach audiences that are often marginalized.

A Senegalese diaspora member explains: *“We create impactful visuals and videos with AI. Within hours, a campaign can spread from Paris to Bamako via WhatsApp or TikTok. It’s a new way to build digital solidarity.”* (DI44)

A Burkinabè journalist in exile adds: *“We use automatic translation to spread our messages in national languages: Mooré, Bambara, Hausa. It breaks the Francophone elite barrier.”* (JM14)

A Nigerien student living abroad remarks: *“Voice AI lets us create capsules in local languages about civil rights and elections. It’s our way of countering digital illiteracy.”* (EA110)

These accounts confirm the emergence of a transnational counter-narrative ecosystem, often autonomous from state structures. Unlike the centralized model represented by VIGINUM in Europe, African uses of AI are rooted in community-based, multilingual, and decentralized practices.

These non-state uses of AI reveal a dynamic of technopolitical reappropriation driven by civil societies and diasporas. Three thematic domains shape this mobilization:

- Automated fact-checking, to anticipate disinformation and challenge official narratives
- Citizen monitoring, to map censorship, violence, and shutdowns
- Diaspora mobilization, to translate, amplify, and circulate protest messages

These practices confirm Hypothesis H2: in fragile West African democracies, AI also functions as a tool of democratic appropriation. It fosters forms of digital agency, often modest but strategic—even if their impact remains

constrained by technical, legal, and financial limitations of the context.

D. Contradicted Algorithmic Sovereignty

Beyond the specific uses of artificial intelligence (AI), the qualitative analysis reveals a major structural concern: the loss of control by West African states over the infrastructures and technologies they deploy. This concern—widely expressed in the interviews—feeds a feeling of algorithmic powerlessness and raises fundamental questions about digital sovereignty, which in this context appears increasingly constrained, or even fictitious. Three main dimensions emerge: technological dependency, limitations of African initiatives, and a diffuse sense of structural vulnerability.

➤ Structural Dependency on Technological Powers

Almost all respondents agree that the states studied (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) do not control either the tools they use or the data they exploit. Cloud infrastructure, facial recognition software, surveillance or moderation algorithms all come from foreign actors (GAFAM, BATX, Israeli or Russian firms).

A senior Nigerien official states: *“Our states don’t have sovereign servers. Everything goes through foreign clouds. The solutions we use extract data we can neither control nor locate.”* (RI55)

A Burkinabè journalist adds: *“By importing these tools, we’re also importing an authoritarian digital logic that escapes any local regulatory framework.”* (JM14)

These observations align with Hiebert’s (2023) analysis of the dependent transfer of security technologies to the Global South, and with the VIGINUM (2022) report, which notes that even in France, the state initially had to outsource its detection capabilities before developing a sovereign foundation.

➤ Limited and Fragmented African Initiatives

Despite the adoption of national digital strategies (e-government plans, cybersecurity, AI), respondents feel these efforts remain dispersed, often symbolic, and underfunded.

• A Malian NGO Member Points Out:

“There’s a lot of talk about digital sovereignty, but in practice, our equipment comes from China or the U.S. We rely on donors to train our engineers.” (SC91)

• A Burkinabè Student Confirms:

“Even in the data centers we’re building, the software, servers, and experts are foreign. We’re just plugging in technology designed elsewhere.” (EA110)

This situation contrasts sharply with the European experience, where efforts to build a sovereign digital foundation (e.g. *SecNumCloud*) involve standardization, resource pooling, and certification that strengthen member states’ technological autonomy (VIGINUM, 2022).

➤ A Sense of Algorithmic Vulnerability

Even more than material dependency, respondents express a strong feeling of exposure, tied to the perception that West Africa is being used as a testing ground for disinformation strategies or algorithmic interference.

A Senegalese diaspora member observes: *“We’re like a test lab. Manipulated videos, narratives made elsewhere circulate here with no filters. Our states don’t react—or don’t know how to.”* (DI44)

A Nigerien journalist adds: *“The real danger isn’t the AI our regimes use. It’s the one they don’t understand, the one that surpasses them and infiltrates invisibly.”* (JM12)

These perceptions reflect the literature on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), which describes how the information resources of the Global South are captured by digital powers, constituting a contemporary form of structural domination.

The analysis reveals a pattern of contradicted algorithmic sovereignty, shaped by three interlinked dimensions:

- A systemic technological dependency, on tools, infrastructures, and standards produced abroad
- Fragmented national initiatives, unable to guarantee technical, legal, or political autonomy
- A widespread sense of algorithmic vulnerability, fueled by growing exposure to manipulation and interference, with no real capacity for response

These findings fully confirm Hypothesis H3: in fragile West African democracies, digital sovereignty is more of an aspiration than a reality. Compared to the European experience, the West African situation reflects a deep structural asymmetry in technological power relations, severely limiting states’ actual ability to regulate political uses of AI.

V. DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the study’s findings in light of the hypotheses formulated and the theoretical frameworks used. It highlights the structural ambivalence of artificial intelligence (AI) in West African hybrid regimes: AI operates both as a state coercive instrument and as a resource for citizen appropriation.

➤ Hypothesis Validation

The empirical data confirm Hypothesis H1: AI is primarily mobilized by military and hybrid regimes as a tool of digital repression. Automated surveillance, targeted algorithmic censorship, and synthetic disinformation form a repressive triptych that is now structural. These results align with the work of Zuboff (2019) on surveillance capitalism and the recent findings of Freedom House (2023) and CDD West Africa (2025) on the proliferation of control technologies in Africa.

Hypothesis H2 is also validated: despite restrictive technopolitical environments, civil society and diasporas are using AI as a lever of democratic action. Automated fact-checking, citizen mapping, and multilingual content production contribute to a partial reconfiguration of the civic space. These dynamics echo the work of Milan and Tréré (2019) on citizen technopolitics and the potential for technological reappropriation in authoritarian contexts.

Hypothesis H3, concerning contradicted algorithmic sovereignty, is strongly supported by the discourse collected. The analysis shows that the states under study remain dependent on GAFAM, BATX, and external providers for their infrastructure and software, limiting their technological autonomy. This finding resonates with Floridi's (2020) reflections on digital sovereignty and with Couldry & Mejias's (2019) critique of data colonialism. The contrast with the European case (VIGINUM, 2022), where efforts to build sovereign infrastructures are ongoing, further highlights the asymmetry.

Lastly, Hypothesis H4 is also confirmed. The absence of robust regulations, combined with a weak culture of data protection, creates a situation of algorithmic vulnerability. This condition heightens the risks of data capture, manipulation, and exploitation in the absence of institutional safeguards, as also emphasized in the literature on hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2019).

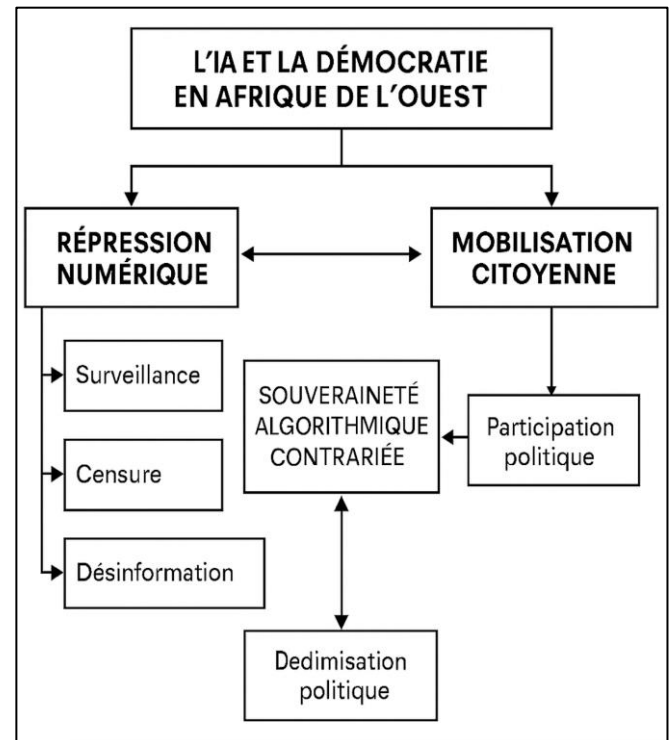


Fig 4 AI Ambivalence in Fragile Democracies in West Africa: Between Digital Repression, Citizen Mobilization, and Contradicted Algorithmic Sovereignty
Source : Fakaba SE, 2025

Table 2 Research Hypothesis Validation

Hypothesis	Findings	Validation	Key References
H1: AI = tool of repression	Surveillance, censorship, disinformation	Confirmed	Kitchin (2017); Zuboff (2019); Freedom House (2023); CDD West Africa (2025)
H2: AI = lever for mobilization	Fact-checking, mapping, digital diaspora	Confirmed	Milan & Tréré (2019); AfricTivistes (2023); CDD West Africa (2025)
H3: Dependency = contradicted sovereignty	Infrastructure and tools under foreign control	Confirmed	Floridi (2020); Couldry & Mejias (2019); Hiebert (2023); VIGINUM (2022)
H4: Lack of regulation = algorithmic vulnerability	Poor data protection, exposure to manipulation	Confirmed	Levitsky & Way (2010); Diamond (2019); African Union (2022); Forum on Information & Democracy (2024)

Source: Fakaba SE, 2025

➤ Theoretical Contributions and Extensions

The results of this study validate several established theoretical frameworks while calling for their contextual adaptation.

- Algorithmic governance (Kitchin, 2017) applies fully here, but in low-legitimacy electoral states, it reveals an explicitly coercive dimension that remains underexplored.
- Surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) focuses on data commodification. In the studied contexts, however, the primary objective is political, not commercial: to consolidate power, suppress opposition, and control information.
- Theories of hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Diamond, 2019) gain depth when integrated with a technological dimension. AI doesn't just accompany authoritarian drift; it accelerates and legitimizes it.

Finally, the two proposed notions—contradicted algorithmic sovereignty and algorithmic vulnerability—provide a situated interpretive framework tailored to the dynamics of the Global South, where access to technology is paired with an absence of strategic control.

➤ A Constitutive Paradox: Between Repression and Mobilization

The central takeaway of this research lies in the contradictory coexistence of two dynamics:

- On one side, AI is mobilized as a tool for tightening control: it systematizes surveillance, refines censorship, and lends credibility to propaganda. This authoritarian dynamic is perceived as a structural constraint in citizens' digital lives.
- On the other, AI is repurposed, appropriated, redeployed: to document abuses, amplify mobilizations, and bypass

shutdowns. This civic dynamic expresses itself through local, creative, transnational uses—often fragile but persistent.

This paradox shows that AI cannot be viewed merely as a technical tool. It is a deeply contested political apparatus, crystallizing the tension between digital authoritarianism and citizen resistance.

By confirming all four hypotheses, this discussion demonstrates that artificial intelligence actively contributes to the reconfiguration of the political landscape in fragile West African democracies. It consolidates authoritarian structures while simultaneously enabling new forms of social and technological resistance. The notions of contradicted algorithmic sovereignty and algorithmic vulnerability offer valuable analytical tools for understanding the digital governance of hybrid regimes in the Global South.

VI. IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

A. Theoretical Implications

This research makes a significant contribution to the literature on the political uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in fragile institutional contexts. It confirms the relevance of the frameworks of algorithmic governance (Kitchin, 2017) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), while emphasizing their specificity in West African hybrid regimes, where AI primarily serves to consolidate authoritarian state apparatuses.

➤ *The Study also Introduces Two Original Conceptual Contributions:*

- Algorithmic vulnerability, defined as the increased exposure of fragile democracies to technological manipulation, due to their structural dependency, lack of adequate regulation, and the political instrumentalization of digital tools.
- Contradicted algorithmic sovereignty, which enriches the debates on digital sovereignty (Floridi, 2020; Couldry & Mejias, 2019) by highlighting the gap between the sovereign ambitions of African states and the technological, economic, and geopolitical constraints that hinder their realization.

These two concepts help re-contextualize global theoretical debates on AI from a Global South perspective, particularly that of African hybrid regimes.

B. Practical Implications

The study's findings highlight several major operational challenges.

First, they underline the urgent need to build an African AI regulatory framework, adapted to the continent's realities. While the European Union is advancing toward the definition of normative standards, Africa remains largely excluded from international debates. Developing a pan-African framework, led by the African Union and regional economic communities (ECOWAS, UEMOA), appears to be

a necessary condition for regulating technological uses and protecting citizens from abuses and interference.

Second, the study demonstrates the transformative potential of civil societies and diasporas. The use of AI for fact-checking, violence mapping, or multilingual content dissemination reflects a real capacity for appropriation and innovation that deserves institutional support. Strengthening these capacities—through training, funding, and technical assistance—should be a strategic priority for donors, NGOs, and partner governments. Lastly, the growing mobilization of diasporas confirms the transnational nature of contemporary digital dynamics. In the face of cross-border information flows, only enhanced regional and international cooperation can help strike a balance between digital security and freedom of expression.

C. Study Limitations

Like any exploratory qualitative research, this study includes limitations that must be acknowledged.

- First, its exploratory nature prevents any statistical generalization. The investigation provides an in-depth understanding of social representations, but does not quantify the scale of the phenomena observed.
- Second, the limited geographic scope—restricted to three Sahelian countries (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger)—limits the comparative scope. Although emblematic of hybrid regimes, these states do not reflect the full political and technological diversity of the continent.
- Third, the lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to assess evolutions over time, especially during electoral periods or following coups. Future research could incorporate quantitative approaches, interregional comparisons (e.g. Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya), and medium-term monitoring of political and technological trajectories.

➤ *This Study Offers a Dual Contribution:*

- A theoretical one, by validating existing frameworks while adapting them to the West African context, and by introducing two original concepts—algorithmic vulnerability and contradicted algorithmic sovereignty.
- A practical one, by highlighting the need for African AI regulation and identifying the levers of action available to civil society, diasporas, and regional institutions.

The methodological limitations of the study—linked to its exploratory nature, its focus on three countries, and the absence of longitudinal data—open the door to new interdisciplinary, comparative, and time-sensitive research, which is essential for fully understanding the political uses of AI in fragile democracies.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research set out to analyze the political uses of artificial intelligence (AI) in fragile democracies in West Africa, based on one central question:

To what extent does AI serve both as a tool of authoritarian consolidation and as a lever for citizen mobilization in hybrid regimes?

The investigation, conducted with 385 participants through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, reveals a structural ambivalence:

- On the one hand, AI intensifies digital repression: mass surveillance, algorithmic censorship, and automated disinformation;
- On the other hand, it is appropriated as a resource for civic innovation through automated fact-checking, citizen mapping, and the transnational mobilization of diasporas.

These findings confirm that AI cannot be considered a neutral technology. It constitutes a contested political apparatus, used both by authoritarian regimes to consolidate power and by citizens to bypass censorship and assert their right to participation.

Two key concepts emerge from this analysis:

- Contradicted algorithmic sovereignty, which denotes the strategic dependency of African states on foreign technological infrastructures and their inability to autonomously control digital flows and standards.
- Algorithmic vulnerability, which describes the particular exposure of hybrid regimes to algorithmic manipulation, due to institutional fragility and the lack of appropriate regulation.

Beyond these contributions, the study opens up several directions for future research:

- Interregional comparisons (e.g. East Africa, Maghreb, Latin America) to test the transferability of the concepts and explore contextual variations;
- The integration of quantitative methods, to measure the scale and effectiveness of AI's technopolitical uses;
- Longitudinal analyses, to study how uses of AI evolve during elections, transitions, or crises.

In conclusion, artificial intelligence appears to be a powerful force reshaping the political field in fragile democracies:

- A tool of control for authoritarian regimes, and a lever of resistance for civil societies.

It is within this tension that much of the future of digital governance in Africa will be determined—along with the continent's ability to chart autonomous, inclusive, and resilient democratic paths.

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