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Popular Justice: Erosion of the State and Parallel Governance in the DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon and the CAR

CORRESPONDENCE

AUTHORS & AFFILIATIONS

Jocky Bahiga Bashangwa *

ABSTRACT

This study, conducted in five fragile African states (DRC, Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, CAR), shows that in several fragile African states, the weakening of state authority stems from precarious governance, corruption, extractive institutions, and resource-related conflicts. Faced with the state's inability to ensure security and justice, parallel customary, religious, militia, or popular systems develop, sometimes gaining more legitimacy than official institutions. These alternatives address immediate needs but generate violence, territorial fragmentation, and the erosion of the rule of law. Popular justice arises from distrust of the state, judicial inefficiency, and the influence of community norms. Mixed-methods, multi-site approach combines local qualitative analysis with quantitative generalization, reinforced by triangulation and tools such as NVivo. The results show that popular justice emerges as a response to state dysfunction characterized by insecurity, corruption, judicial absence or delays, poverty, and territorial fragmentation, with specific forms depending on local contexts (witchcraft in the DRC, security struggles in Nigeria, the role of the Dozos in Mali and the CAR). The multi-site model reveals common factors (state weakness, breakdown of trust, parallel governance) and contextual variations, shedding light on the development of alternative justice system. The study proposes a polycentric governance model integrating the state, local actors, and traditional mechanisms to restore state authority and reduce vigilante justice. The proposed solutions are based on inclusive governance, combating corruption, institutional strengthening, and integrating traditional mechanisms within a reformed legal framework.

Index Terms: Justice and Society • Governance and State • Geopolitical Context • Conflict Dynamics

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Jocky Bahiga Bashangwa*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Popular Justice: Erosion of the State and Parallel Governance in the DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon and the CAR

Jocky Bahiga Bashangwa*

Abstract

This study, conducted in five fragile African states (DRC, Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, CAR), shows that in several fragile African states, the weakening of state authority stems from precarious governance, corruption, extractive institutions, and resource-related conflicts. Faced with the state's inability to ensure security and justice, parallel customary, religious, militia, or popular systems develop, sometimes gaining more legitimacy than official institutions. These alternatives address immediate needs but generate violence, territorial fragmentation, and the erosion of the rule of law. Popular justice arises from distrust of the state, judicial inefficiency, and the influence of community norms. Mixed-methods, multi-site approach combines local qualitative analysis with quantitative generalization, reinforced by triangulation and tools such as NVivo. The results show that popular justice emerges as a response to state dysfunction characterized by insecurity, corruption, judicial absence or delays, poverty, and territorial fragmentation, with specific forms depending on local contexts (witchcraft in the DRC, security struggles in Nigeria, the role of the Dozos in Mali and the CAR). The multi-site model reveals common factors (state weakness, breakdown of trust, parallel governance) and contextual variations, shedding light on the development of alternative justice system. The study proposes a polycentric governance model integrating the state, local actors, and traditional mechanisms to restore state authority and reduce vigilante justice. The proposed solutions are based on inclusive governance, combating corruption, institutional strengthening, and integrating traditional mechanisms within a reformed legal framework.

Keywords: *Justice and Society, Governance and State, Geopolitical Context, Conflict Dynamics*

Correspondence: Jocky Bahiga Bashangwa

1 Introduction

In countries like the DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the CAR, state authority is weakening in remote areas due to poor governance, corruption, ethnic divisions, and the exploitation of natural resources. This leads to conflict, the emergence of violent non-state groups, and humanitarian emergencies. States remain deficient in terms of security and the provision of public services. Some authors argue that this situation, coupled with the inadequacy of postcolonial institutions, stems from the self-interest of elites. According to Claude Ake (1996), published by Brookings Institution Press (p. 45), African states often suffer from weak governance. Predatory in nature, elites use state power for their personal enrichment (clientelism, neo-patrimonialism) rather than for the public good, thus hindering the delivery of services. While this situation could be rectified through inclusive governance, a reorganization of resource management, and a fight against corruption, it is complicated by foreign intervention and shortcomings in leadership. For Ake, the culture of repression, alienation, harassment and intimidation that prevailed during the colonial era has continued in most African countries after their independence.

The aim of this article is to study the different forms of parallel justice, their origins (state failures, grievances), their repercussions (influence on the population, balance), and the paths forward (measures, public policies). The main objectives include examining key elements (insecurity, corruption), describing alternative systems (neighborhood courts, self-defense groups, Sharia law), assessing their effects (service provision and human rights violations), and proposing reforms to restore governmental legitimacy and public trust, while offering practical guidance for leadership.

The problems of legitimacy in the DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and CAR are manifested by a weak state presence in the territories, particularly border areas. "The elites in these African states are more interested in their political survival than in the development of their countries' regions, in relation to structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed on them from the outside, and the conditions of their survival have generally been incompatible with the latter," Ake (2003: 96). Competition for resources such as cobalt and gold generates conflicts, fueled by armed groups and elites involved in illicit mining. Corruption, a lack of accountability, and inefficient public services erode citizens' trust. The abundance of natural resources (such as minerals) has become a "curse" for these countries, sometimes driving conflict, corruption, and poor governance by creating lucrative opportunities for elites and armed groups to control revenues, often through illegal extraction, rather than fostering inclusive development.

According to Philippe Le Billon (2005), ethnic and regional tensions are worsening due to the priorities of the elites, leading to rebellions. But also the "rich economies" resources fuel conflict by inciting rebellion (rebels can finance themselves with minerals) and state predation (elites use resources to buy loyalty and suppress dissent), which leads to weak institutions and a lack of public trust (Paul Collier, 2002/2004). One example is the recent agreements between the United States and the DRC, focused on a strategic partnership in the mining sector. The objective is to ensure the American supply of essential minerals (cobalt,

copper), while supporting local processing and the development of Congolese infrastructure (Lobito Corridor, Grand Inga).

Ukwandu and Jarbandhan (2016) highlight and emphasize how elites manipulate institutions and public services for their own enrichment, exchanging resources/favors for loyalty, which erodes public trust and perpetuates bad governance, making it difficult to solve problems such as resource management.

Finally, the inability of states like the DRC, CAR, Mali, Nigeria, and Cameroon to protect their citizens from violence fosters vigilante justice and the formation of self-police groups. These groups, by exploiting state weakness, create cycles of violence and a hybrid security governance system. According to researchers such as David Pratten and Atreyee Sen (2009), vigilantism replaces failing security institutions, leading to a rise in tyranny, revenge, and instability.

This loss of stability in some African countries is justified by several factors. First, postcolonial legacies include weak institutions and persistent economic dependence. Second, elites exploit resources for their own benefit, neglecting the public interest. Third, violent non-state actors, such as extremist militias, exploit grievances to gain support by offering violent alternatives. Finally, external interference, such as that of Russia, exacerbates instability by supporting specific factions and making resource deals. According to Claude Ake, the fundamental problem in Africa is not the failure of regional development itself, nor the lack of effective institutions to deliver fair justice, nor the equitable allocation of resources to their populations, but rather the fact that these issues were not on the agenda of the political leaders who succeeded the colonial powers. Rather, the culture of repression, alienation, harassment and intimidation that prevailed during the colonial era has persisted in most African countries after their independence (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2006).

It is at this level that the increase in conflicts leads to cycles of violence, civil wars, and humanitarian crises. Violent extremist groups like Boko Haram in Mali are expanding their power and influence. This also results in the economic exclusion of communities, hindering their development, as well as a democratic backslide, with military coups and weakened governance. According to Palmer and Parsons (1977), the expropriation of land by the wealthy has severely deteriorated the living conditions of the majority of the population, cutting them off from formal economic growth.

The authors propose several solutions to improve governance in the countries studied. Adopting inclusive policies, combating corruption, and strengthening state institutions are essential. Transparent management of natural resources is necessary to benefit everyone, not just the elites. Regional organizations such as the AU and RECs must address governance crises. In countries like Nigeria, inclusive federalism must balance diverse interests. Finally, it will be necessary to tackle root causes such as economic inequality and social disparities. According to Mesfin (2021), economic exclusion is a factor of fragility and national conflicts, and ethnic prejudices and marginalization fuel conflicts and hinder growth (Ilorah, 2009).

1.1 Theoretical reading of extractive governance crises and judicial collapse

State failure theory (Jackson, 1990): the vulnerability of African states stems from territorial control lacking impact and legitimacy, due to historical contexts and failing institutions. Studies such as Maclin et al. (2017) and Bashwira & van der Haar (2020) show that regulations like the Dodd-Frank Act have had the opposite effect in the DRC, reducing the incomes of small-scale miners without stopping conflicts. Taylor & Francis link mineral abundance to unrest, where VNSA and elites profit from resources, highlighting their role in instability. Drawing on governance theories, elite corruption and their disconnect from citizens cause revolts, advocating for greater accountability and better governance (ResearchGate, 2023).

In 2026, DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon and CAR face legitimacy crises in remote areas, marked by an ”absence of state” where the central authority fails to provide security and services, leaving room for non-governmental actors.

2 Major issues and origins of delegitimization

Institutional vulnerability stems from a failure to establish accountable institutions and the rule of law, neglecting peripheral regions. In Cameroon and Nigeria, the inability to provide essential services (health, education, infrastructure) equitably erodes public trust. In Cameroon, Anglophone separatism arises from a deficit of social cohesion. Tim Allen notes the emergence of parallel local justice systems due to broken cohesion and state incapacity. In Nigeria, ethnic tensions and resource disputes undermine federal legitimacy. These failing governance structures and fragmented social contracts favor non-state justice actors, especially in conflict zones (Shaw & Reitano, 2015).

3 Separatist Identity and Aspirations

3.1 Emergence of another form of governance

In Mali and Nigeria, violent non-state actors (NSAs), such as jihadists and criminal gangs, impose local governance (justice, protection) perceived as more legitimate than the distant state. An oppressive colonial legacy, ill-suited to local communities, causes a persistent crisis of legitimacy. UNDP/World Bank reports (e.g., CAR 2012) link the rise of vigilante groups (anti-balaka) to a lack of cohesion, exclusion, and distrust of corrupt or absent institutions. These protracted conflicts fragment the state in CAR, DRC, Mali, and Nigeria, creating semi-independent zones and rival powers.

3.2 Recurrence of military coups

In Mali, dissatisfaction with governance shortcomings fuels military coups perceived as more legitimate than the failing democracy. Humanitarian crises, displacement, and violence result from a lack of accountability for human rights violations. Proposals: build a state ”from the bottom up” that includes credible traditional leaders; hold inclusive peace dialogues in the DRC to address ethnic tensions and development; implement economic reforms to reduce debt and prioritize social over military needs; and strengthen African peacekeeping missions (AU, SADC) to replace the UN.

4 Our Arguments Justifying Our Proposals

African states are 'legal' but not 'empirical': internationally recognized but lacking internal control (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). Their fragility stems from artificial colonial borders that do not reflect ethnic realities (Englebert, 2000-2009). Declining leadership encourages support for coups through corruption and the unequal distribution of resources (Okechukwu, 2023). 'Relational' legitimacy in Africa makes certain coups acceptable if they avoid systemic failure (Scientific Perspective, 2025).

In the DRC (South Kivu, Kalehe/Kabare), state collapse due to insecurity, corruption, weak infrastructure, land conflicts, and exploitation by armed groups has created a predatory state (Vlassenroot & Verweijen, 2017; Henn et al., 2023; Huggins, 2010), resulting in an inability to provide services, privatization, and displacement. Causes include historical plundering, entrenched corruption, identity conflicts, and the strategic use of armed forces, which weakens authority. The ”politics of

the belly" (clientelism, corruption) creates ungoverned spaces where informal justice thrives, leading to violence and a blurring of the lines between public and private power (Bayart, 1993).

Popular justice in the DRC and the settling of scores have challenged official courts due to state failure, corruption, slow procedures and cultural resonance, as demonstrated by Johnsse and Van der Wilt (2016) who highlight the community's trust in traditional mechanisms compared to distrust of the state.

Power in some African states operates through charismatic figures and spectacular violence, suggesting that the "power" of the postcolonial state often manifests itself through arbitrary domination and "necropolitics," where informal justice systems become tools of control and reprisal, often targeting marginalized groups (Achille Mbembe, 2001). Such thinking can only lead to governance failures, creating power vacuums filled by militias and elites (IPIS, 2006; LES, 2006). This is one of the reasons why African states, in several territories of their countries, display an inability or refusal to ensure security and justice, which renders official mechanisms ineffective. In localities like Kabare (DRC), this failure is amplified by widespread insecurity, forcing populations to fend for themselves.

In Mali, in the Mopti and Ségou regions; in Cameroon, in the Northwest, Southwest, and Far North regions, displacements due to conflict are occurring. In the Central African Republic, regions such as Ouaka, Haute-Kotto, Bambari, Alindao, and Ippy are affected. In eastern DRC, millions of people are fleeing violence in North Kivu, Ituri, and neighboring provinces. Nigeria is affected by insecurity caused by Boko Haram and other armed groups, particularly in the northeast.

In this case, we observe that the loss of legitimacy by the state in these countries under study allows the population to resort to vigilante justice. This shows that the state has truly lost its claim to be the sole legitimate provider of justice; citizens do not believe that the state can or wants to render fair decisions. The same applies to the corruption and inefficiency denounced by the World Bank in its 2016 report, which shows that the formal system is often perceived as corrupt (police/judges accepting bribes) or too slow (endless trials), leading people to believe that vigilante justice offers faster, albeit brutal, "justice." Protest and social control are an unacknowledged expression of the population, demonstrating that crowd actions are seen both as a form of social protest against state inaction and as a primitive form of community social control when official authorities fail.

John Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), already proposed that individuals conditionally transfer certain rights to a government whose main mission is to protect natural rights (life, liberty, property); if the state fails, citizens have the right to revolution, directly justifying resistance. In the context of the territories of these countries under study, and more specifically those of Kalehe and Kabare in the DRC, the erosion of the rule of law occurs when regular procedures are circumvented (presumption of innocence, fair trial). This means that vigilante justice directly undermines the rule of law, creating a parallel and violent system that threatens everyone, not just the accused.

For a very long time, Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* (1651) argued that humans in a "state of nature" face chaos and therefore relinquish all their rights to an absolute ruler for their safety, rendering rebellion generally unjustified, since chaos is worse than tyranny. In several African countries, such as Mali, Cameroon, the DRC, Nigeria, and the Central African Republic, the history of colonial exploitation and post-independence political incompetence has led to a "state bourgeoisie" that institutionalizes theft and corruption, destroying the economy and the social fabric. This elite has diverted resources, undermining formal governance and creating a dependence on informal networks, thus weakening the state's capacity from the outset. Consequently, the collapse of the state leads to the privatization of public services (education, healthcare), and officials demand bribes, transforming the administration into a predatory system for personal gain.

According to Jacquemot (2010), certain fragile African states (Nigeria, CAR, DRC, Mali and Cameroon) perfectly illustrate the resistance to good governance practices. The constant presence of politicians creating networks of political parties with unacknowledged affinities in all institutional bodies is at the root of the increase in embezzlement and vigilante justice (Otemikongo, 2009). The population of the Kalehe and Kabare territories resorts to theories establishing a direct link between a failing state and potential disorder, thus justifying Locke's right to revolt. Despite the enormous wealth found in the soil of these countries, the population experiences Karl Marx's theory of alienation, according to which individuals are separated and alienated from their work, their fields, and the world around them, from their human nature and from themselves. Alienation results from the division of labor in a capitalist society, where human life unfolds like a cog in the machine of a social class. As examples, we can cite self-defense groups like the OPC/Bakassi Boys in Nigeria or the "Witdoeke" in South Africa. Based on reprisals stemming from the absence of the state in certain territories, crises of legitimacy have arisen, rooted in slow, corrupt, expensive, or inaccessible formal courts, which have eroded public trust and forced citizens to seek faster, even violent, local solutions.

In Nigeria, the primary cause of recourse to vigilante justice is the police's inability to protect citizens, leading communities to form their own defense systems. Vigilante groups stem from a need for security; the failure of the state and the inherent structural flaws of vigilantes (lack of training, human rights violations) transform them into agents of alienation, distancing people from normal life and humanity (Osakwe and Audu, 2020). This failure of the Nigerian state (the incapacity of the police) leads to the emergence of self-defense groups to ensure security (Adzimah-Alade et al., 2020).

In Cameroon, heading north, researchers explain how the domination of one ethnic group over the state system led to violent repression (Fonkoué, 2019; Okereke, 2018). And today, to say goodbye to a deceased family member, regardless of who you are, you must first make arrangements. Consider calling the rebels to pay over 300,000 CFA francs to ensure the funeral ceremony goes smoothly; otherwise, beware the consequences. The author even mentions that government officials comply with this rule without complaint, a kind of people's justice.

In Mali, rebel groups like JNIM and ISGS instrumentalize "popular justice" (customary/Islamic courts) not only to legitimize themselves but also as a source of revenue and a control mechanism. They impose fines, seize property, and tax disputes (e.g., livestock, land) to finance their operations, pay their fighters, and provide services that the state cannot provide, thus creating dependency (Marie-Joëlle Zahar, 2021). For Berthé (2020), this is simply a pragmatic strategy for governance and resource acquisition in ungoverned areas, replacing state functions with their own adapted, often harsh, legal systems. This justice goes further in Mali, with the armed group Ansar Dine/JNIM imposing Zakat (alms) and levying taxes on local trade and resources (e.g., water points, livestock farmers).

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Kalehe territory, the administrator, Thomas Ziramwabagabo, was violently attacked by angry mobsters who accused him of embezzling aid intended for flood victims in Bushushu and Nyamukubi. He was beaten and stripped naked in front of his office and forcibly taken to an unknown location. Mwami Shosho, having been informed of the attack, intervened while all state services (intelligence, police, and army) carried out their duties. He went to the mob to explain that the administrator had only changed the distribution

schedule and had not embezzled any funds. The Mwami is highly respected in African administrative and traditional structures. Despite his intervention, some tried to understand, while others went to his car and vandalized it. Nothing stopped the intervention of the Mwami, young but gruff with wisdom; he managed to wrest justice from the hands of a population seeking popular justice in the absence of the state. The incident sparked widespread condemnation from civil society and authorities, and the provincial government announced investigations, with arrests of suspects shortly after the events. Today, the administrator lives in Kinshasa without assistance from his government, as does the Mwami (Excerpt from Thomas Z., 2025; Mwami S., 2025).

The example of Mali is striking when one realizes that the rebels, by offering accessible, swift justice that is often aligned with the cultural context (Islamic/customary law), gain local acceptance, recruit fighters, and ally themselves with traditional leaders. This fills a governance void, giving them the appearance of legitimate authorities rather than mere foreign fighters, and thus encouraging community support. According to J. Terrence Lyons (2005) in *Democracy and the Politics of Information*, rebel groups in Sierra Leone have used local justice and communication to gain ground. This is often the case when the state fails to maintain order against the opposing side; rebels can capitalize on local grievances and offer a basic order, thereby attracting new recruits (Paul Collier, 2000). In this case, we can see that the actors in the conflict mix political, criminal, and social elements, using local norms for control (Mark Duffield, 2001).

In the Central African Republic, Sharia courts for Muslim rebels (or their local equivalents) offer swift justice to the population under their control while the country is experiencing rebellions, in order to build loyalty and recruit, often in parallel with or in opposition to state/customary systems to legitimize themselves (Alexi-Massei & Wouter van der Weide, 2020).

However, when legal systems appear to fail (for example, ineffective protection as in Kabare and Kalehe), people may invoke Lockean ideas (or Hobbesian/Rousseauian justifications concerning survival/fundamental will) to feel justified in taking matters into their own hands, leading to acts of private justice or extrajudicial actions, because the fundamental promise of the state (protection) is perceived as unfulfilled. The connection to Hobbesian ideas is justified by the fact that the Wazalendo (local army, now called the reserve army in the DRC) or the Raia Mutomboki in Bunyakiri in the Kalehe area, as self-defense militias and community councils, are active in acts of popular justice to prevent a return to chaos when the state fails, prioritizing immediate security over rights. In contrast, Rousseau justifies community justice through the ”general will,” where local populations collectively decide on rules and apply them for their mutual benefit, thus recovering the sovereignty abandoned by the failing state and promoting local autonomy and shared responsibility.

Significantly, clientelism and power dynamics show that community-led conflict resolution (e.g., informal courts, councils of elders) surpasses state courts in terms of speed, cost, and perceived fairness, particularly in rural/conflict areas, although it also fuels impunity and vigilante violence (Jean-François Bayart, 2000). Why do they replace official systems? Some authors suggest it is due to the weakness and absence of the state; the state struggles to reach remote areas or manage widespread crises (conflicts, poverty) through its formal systems, creating gaps that are filled by community institutions. Beyond this shortcoming, mistrust and corruption arise, leading citizens to view state courts as biased, corrupt, slow, and inaccessible (and expensive), preferring local leaders (elders, chiefs, religious figures) perceived as impartial or concerned with community harmony. This is further reinforced by cultural legitimacy, whereby traditional justice (restorative, mediation-based) aligns better with community values than accusatorial state law, prioritizing reconciliation over punitive justice. Finally, it can be observed that, through speed and accessibility, local justice offers rapid solutions (days/weeks), unlike state courts which can take months or years, which is crucial for the immediate resolution of conflicts.

Johnsse and Van der Wilt (2016) assert that traditional/popular justice offers more tangible justice (reconciliation, restoration) than abstract state law; communities place more trust in elders/chiefs than in often predatory state agents who focus on ”belly politics” and clientelism. Intermediaries of local power (chiefs, militias) often co-opt or compete with formal justice, using informal power for control and blurring boundaries (Jean-François Bayart, 2000s). According to UN and World Bank Reports (2015, 2021), often in post-conflict contexts, we observe a rapid growth of local justice mechanisms (community courts, self-defense groups) that fill the security and conflict resolution gaps left by collapsed states. The case of the DRC, where Community Courts/Councils in the eastern provinces (for example, North Kivu, Ituri) handle land disputes, petty theft, and family matters, is an example where local/traditional chiefs often obtain faster redress than official courts. Then, ”People's Justice” (Vigilante groups or ”people's courts”) delivers swift (often brutal) justice to alleged criminals, bypassing the state entirely due to perceived impunity. In rural areas, elders, acting as mediators, resolve inheritance, marital, or boundary disputes through restorative practices, thus maintaining social cohesion where state law fails.What, then, is the role of vigilante justice in settling scores?

4.1 The ”settling of scores” aspect

This relates to the dark side insofar as informal justice morphs into personalized vengeance or factional control, as is often seen in militias or self-defense groups that use ”justice” as a pretext to seize power, eliminate rivals, or impose local dominance (for example, the Mai-Mai or Wazalendo groups in the DRC, which use customary law justifications). In essence, popular justice thrives where the state weakens, offering culturally relevant, accessible, and faster, but often inconsistent, justice, while settling scores can emerge as a violent and personalized form of exercising power within these informal systems.

5 Literature Review

A systematic analysis of the erosion of state authority, popular justice, and settling of scores in Africa likely concludes that state institutions (police, courts) are weakened by corruption, underfunding, and politicization, leading populations to bypass them in favor of informal justice (traditional courts or self-defense groups) for faster and culturally appropriate solutions. However, this system fuels cycles of violence and tribalism, and undermines the rule of law, leaving gaps in understanding the dynamics between the state and the community, as well as in addressing root causes such as inequality. Authors like Fox (2000) highlight the shortcomings of the judicial system, while others point to the failures of postcolonial states. Further analysis of the role of technology, the effective integration of traditional justice, and the building of inclusive and trustworthy state systems are still needed to prevent insecurity and foster development. Authors like Fox (2000) argue that formal courts often fail to deliver justice due to their inherent shortcomings (inefficiency, politicization), thus justifying the use of alternative systems as a practical response to unmet needs.

5.1 General (implicit) consensus

Our African states face challenges in legitimacy and capacity following independence, resulting in weak governance, corruption, and failures in public services (police, justice), creating voids filled by informal justice. Bereketeab (2020), Englebert (2009), Jackson (1977) and Salisbury (2018)

highlight hollow states and leader-centric power, while Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) link success to inclusive institutions, contrasting with the extractive models often seen in Africa, which lead to corruption and poor services. This situation is justified by widespread social discontent and obvious institutional failures.

5.2 African Notions of Justice

The authors contrast punitive Western models with African values of reconciliation, restoration, and compromise, suggesting that traditional mechanisms offer a more holistic and community-oriented justice, thus justifying their continued existence. Authors like Omale (2006) argue that restorative justice is far more effective in 21st-century Africa than Western judicial systems, which often exacerbate problems. He makes his case by saying that restorative justice reduces dependence on external aid, strengthens local participation, and promotes better conflict resolution, thus contributing to healing and the restoration of relationships between victims, perpetrators, and the community.

Omale continues his idea by saying that, in contrast to Western models, the conflictual and punitive nature of Western justice often isolates offenders and fails to heal the wounds of communities. Other authors believe that traditional African systems focus on redressing harm through restitution, compensation, and apologies, with the aim of restoring community harmony, unlike Western punitive systems that divide (Maregere, 2019). For Africans, regardless of Western criticisms of their model, the vision is based on the priority to holistic healing, since these African models address the needs of victims, perpetrators, and the community, aiming for full restoration rather than mere punishment. African justice aims to restore the social fabric, reintegrate individuals, and build consensus, unlike Western models that focus on judgment and punishment (Wahyudi et al., 2022).

Our approach is often community-focused in the sense that these systems empower local communities and involve them in conflict resolution, thereby strengthening social cohesion. This is also true of their historical and cultural relevance, with some authors advocating for the restoration of these pre-colonial systems because they are deeply rooted in African cultures and values, making them more suitable for fostering lasting peace and development.

5.3 Weak Institutions

Several authors have argued that unemployment, poor education, and weak governance are root causes, making citizens vulnerable and distrustful of the state, and thus pushing them to seek alternatives. According to Robert Putnam (2000) in his works such as *Bowling Alone* (2000), the decline in social trust and civic engagement (often linked to economic shifts and governance problems) weakens communities, making people less resilient and more prone to isolation or conflict when institutions fail. Francis Fukuyama in his work *The Origins of Political Order* (2011) and *State Building* stresses that strong, competent and legitimate states are essential for development and that weak governance (corruption, absence of the rule of law) breeds mistrust, instability, and state fragility.

5.4 Development and conflicts in territories experiencing a loss of legitimacy

According to Paul Collier and Steven Radelet, the scarcity of resources, unemployment (especially among young people) and the poor quality of public services in fragile states create fertile ground for insurgency, crime and political upheaval, justifying this with empirical data on the factors of conflict.

The analyses of Paul Collier (2007) and Steven Radelet (2010) resonate particularly strongly in the context of fragile states in Central and West Africa. Collier shows that resource scarcity, when combined with weak governance, fosters predatory economies that become drivers of conflict. This dynamic is observable in Nigeria, where competition for oil resources in the Niger Delta has fueled insurgent movements, and in the Central African Republic, where the weakness of the state in the face of armed groups is compounded by an economy largely dependent on poorly controlled natural resources. Radelet also emphasizes that the state's inability to provide essential public services—such as education, healthcare, and security—weakens the social contract and paves the way for entrepreneurs of violence. This observation applies to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where chronic deficits in public infrastructure in the east of the country have allowed the proliferation of armed groups exploiting the absence of state authority to seize mineral resources and establish their territorial control.

These findings are reinforced by the work of authors such as Fearon and Laitin (2003), Urdal (2006), and Stewart (2008), who highlight the importance of demographic and socioeconomic factors in the emergence of conflicts. Massive youth unemployment, for example, is a major driver of instability, as evidenced by the rapid recruitment by jihadist groups in Mali and by Boko Haram in Nigeria and Cameroon. Urdal shows that "youth peaks" combined with limited economic opportunities generate increased competition for resources, which can lead to a rise in violence. Stewart, for his part, emphasizes horizontal inequalities which, in the DRC and the CAR, fuel deeply entrenched perceptions of exclusion between communities, reinforcing cycles of armed reprisals. Thus, the dynamics described by these authors confirm that in contexts where states remain weak, the combination of economic scarcity, marginalization of young people and failure of public services constitutes a powerful catalyst for insurrections, organized crime and persistent political upheaval.

6 Theories of "Failed States"

Failed state theories, as formulated by Zartman (1995), demonstrate that the collapse of state authority occurs when institutions are no longer able to fulfill essential sovereign functions, including security, justice, education, and employment. This incapacity fosters the alienation of citizens, who turn to parallel structures—informal networks, armed groups, and the illegal economy—to fill the institutional void. Putnam's work (2000) expands on this interpretation, emphasizing that the decline of social capital, fueled by weak governance and socioeconomic transformations, weakens communities by reducing trust and social cohesion. Similarly, Francis F. (2001) stresses that weak governance, characterized by corruption and the absence of the rule of law, fosters widespread distrust of institutions, thereby exacerbating the risks of political instability. These analyses converge on the idea that state fragility is self-perpetuating: the structural incapacity of the state weakens society, which in turn becomes more vulnerable to conflict, collective violence, and phenomena such as popular justice.

In this context, Rondinelli and Cheema's (2003) proposals on the importance of decentralization, local capacity building, and community empowerment take on particular significance for contemporary Africa. They emphasize that educated, public-interest-oriented leaders must be able to mobilize public resources to improve service delivery, reduce economic vulnerabilities, and strengthen social resilience. However, the dominant approach in the literature remains focused on "weak institutions" as the primary explanation for fragility in Africa, particularly in countries such as Nigeria, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Cameroon. This is where a mixed-methods approach becomes relevant: by integrating interviews, life stories, and verbatim transcripts, it becomes possible to highlight dimensions often overlooked by macro-institutional analyses, such as the daily impact

of economic inequalities, climate stresses, and historical injustices on collective behavior. This methodological contribution enriches the understanding of local dynamics of popular justice and community violence, revealing causal mechanisms that classical approaches had not yet fully explored.

6.1 Progress of literature and major viewpoints

Since the 1960s, the literature on state authority in East Africa has highlighted a persistent tension between weakened central states and remarkably robust local governance structures. Early analyses of the postcolonial era (1960–1990) largely emphasized political instability, the marginalization of peripheries, and the inability of postcolonial governments to establish legitimate authority in historically neglected regions. Works on the Shifta War in Kenya, for example, show that state coercion failed to resolve deep-seated socio-political grievances, resulting in a lasting cycle of conflict and mistrust of the center. This foundational phase of the literature emphasizes the effects of arbitrary colonial borders, ethnic clientelism, and a lack of development, which have created a structurally fragile state conducive to the rise of contested ethnonationalism in remote areas.

From the 1990s onward, researchers shifted their focus to the concepts of institutional fragility and the proliferation of small arms, while acknowledging that the state had never entirely disappeared. This analytical shift highlights the coexistence of weak state institutions and traditional systems that persist or re-emerge. Local conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the ateker in Uganda or the alo in Ethiopia, provide accessible but sometimes coercive justice, revealing a landscape of hybrid governance rather than an institutional vacuum. The work of Mamdani (2002), Adebayo (2004), Ochola (2007), and Khapoya (2010) illustrates the essential role of councils of elders and community courts (CTCs), which prioritize restorative justice, reconciliation, and social harmony in post-conflict contexts where the state judicial system remains deficient. International IDEA's (2000) analyses of Gacaca courts in Rwanda also demonstrate that these local mechanisms, more recently supported by the guidelines of the African Union (2019), constitute culturally embedded responses to crises inherited from mass violence.

In the early 2000s, a third generation of research focused on multi-scale governance, the resurgence of grassroots institutions, and the rise of non-state actors—militias, self-defense groups, pastoral structures, and, more recently, digital platforms. This literature demonstrates how state authority is constantly renegotiated between local, national, and transnational levels. Growing tensions related to climate change, resource scarcity, and conflicts over land or water exacerbate institutional weaknesses, leading to vigilante justice and reprisals, particularly in regions affected by cattle rustling. Recent studies establish an explicit link between climate shocks, economic pressures, and the resurgence of local violence, revealing how populations circumvent state judicial mechanisms deemed ineffective.

Decentralization, promoted in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the DRC as a means of transferring power, has often been used to strengthen central control. This political manipulation has created a democratic deficit and fueled the use of community-based regulatory systems, particularly in land-related conflicts, a crucial and highly politicized land issue. This territorial politicization, inherited from colonial ethnic divisions, reinforces the idea that popular justice is a legitimate instrument for land claims when official institutions fail to protect local rights.

Since the 2010s, researchers have rejected the notion of "ungoverned spaces" and instead describe a complex legal pluralism where local authorities are often preferred due to their perceived effectiveness and cultural relevance. By 2026, the literature also highlights the emergence of new dynamics, notably the role of youth and digital technologies in transforming vigilantism and community justice. Social networks challenge the authority of elders, redefining power relations within communities. Despite these advances, several gaps remain: the impact of social media in remote areas, the link between climate change and community justice practices, and the role of regional organizations like the East African Community in promoting cross-border justice. Finally, some recent analyses argue that the erosion of state authority is not only a sign of weakness, but sometimes a strategic choice aimed at concentrating resources on the interests of capital, while delegating the management of daily justice to non-state actors to maintain minimal stability.

7 Methodological Approach

This multinational study analyzes the erosion of state authority and the rise of vigilante justice in five fragile African states (Nigeria, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, and Cameroon) using a mixed-methods, multi-site approach that reconciles contextual depth with generalizability. The methodology, inspired by the work of Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and Lincoln and Guba (1985), guides the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data.

Purposive sampling, combined with maximum variation according to Patton (1990), aims to document the diversity of experiences of popular justice in contexts of state failure, without claiming statistical representativeness, but by focusing on key profiles to understand local dynamics. Participants, recruited based on their exposure to popular justice, their residence in areas marked by state weakness, and their institutional or customary role, came from specific regions characterized by a weak judicial presence or armed conflict, such as Kasai in the DRC, northern Nigeria, or certain localities in Mali and Cameroon where customary justice and state fragility coexist. This selection relies on theoretical sampling (Suddaby, 2006) to facilitate the inductive development of robust analytical categories. The semi-structured interviews, lasting 25 to 30 minutes, addressed perceptions of the state, insecurity, recourse to vigilante justice, institutional trust, and customary norms. They were conducted in various local languages with translation and double-checking to ensure semantic fidelity, in accordance with the principle of auditability. Informed consent was systematically obtained, with specific measures implemented in areas of insecurity to protect participants.

The inductive data analysis, inspired by grounded theory and supplemented by transnational thematic analysis, unfolded in three phases: open coding (identification of units of meaning), axial coding (grouping into intermediate categories), and selective coding (construction of central themes). The use of NVivo software facilitated the storage and grouping of codes, the identification of co-occurrences, and the comparison of patterns across countries. Theoretical saturation was reached when new data no longer yielded substantially new codes.

An example illustrates this process: a quote from a respondent in the Central African Republic denouncing police corruption was openly coded ("police corruption," "lack of sanctions," "community justice," "direct punishment"), grouped axially under the category "Informal disempowerment and breakdown of institutional trust," and then integrated into the overarching theme "Popular legitimation of parallel justice in the face of perceived state inefficiency." This process demonstrates how empirical data guides conceptual construction, articulating theory and social experience.

7.1 Methodological approach to the study

This study *refers to* has comparative case study approach, using a multi-site model to examine similar phenomena (vigilante justice, settling

of scores) in different fragile contexts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, perceived impunity for crimes (theft, assault) pushes communities to take immediate, often brutal, justice. David A. in his work "Mob Justice in Africa", (2015) had already examined how the absence of a perceived sanction for offenses such as theft or assault encourages communities to establish instant, often violent, justice.

During our interviews, we asked what motivates the Congolese population to show a strong preference for popular justice over state justice, given a combination of structural, social, and institutional factors. Respondent A, from the Province of Kasai and Kasai Central (DRC) responded by saying: the weakness of the state is often noticeable in our vast areas. He continued by saying that in several rural territories, there is neither a functioning court nor a stable police presence. Our state appears distant, ineffective, or negligent, which pushes the population to organize themselves to punish offenses. Respondent B, country (Nigerian), responded that the slowness and cumbersome nature of judicial procedures means that complaints often take months or years to be processed, reinforcing the perception of a system useless for addressing urgent problems. Respondent C (Central African Republic) responded that in our country, perceived or real corruption in the police, the judiciary, and the security services is palpable everywhere. Suspected criminals are often released after arrest thanks to bribes. Ultimately, we interpret this as collusion between authorities and offenders, which fuels anger and the idea that only popular justice can "truly punish".

Respondent E (country of Mali)Respondent F (from Cameroon) addressed the persistent feeling of insecurity, stating that in several areas of Mali, theft, burglary, assault, and armed attacks are frequent. The lack of deterrent sanctions pushes the population to resort to violence to protect their neighborhoods, villages, or markets. Respondent F focused on the still very strong community norms, saying: customary or traditional mechanisms play a major role in social regulation in our region. When we find the state absent, these norms sometimes transform into improvised punitive justice (lynching, beatings, destruction, especially in the north of the country). We have profoundly lost faith in our institutions. We believe that for a large part of us, as a population, the state justice system does not defend the poor or the victims. We simply see it as an instrument reserved for the rich or powerful.

Based on these interviews, the multisite model can help us shed light on vigilantism in fragile states by comparing local contexts such as the DRC and Nigeria to identify common elements (like weak states and legal gaps) as well as distinct manifestations. This allows us to understand how legal awareness influences reactions to perceived injustice, thus fostering contextualized policy. Researchers such as Chua & Engel (2019) and Tiwa (2022) argue that this facilitates understanding informal justice, as opposed to formal systems. Furthermore, a specific Nigeria/DRC case demonstrates shared origins of mistrust but reveals different rituals, highlighting the need for nuanced solutions within local justice.

We justify our comparative study by examining similar issues (vigilante justice, revenge) in various precarious contexts (such as eastern DRC or northern Nigeria), allowing us to identify trends and divergences. Our contextual interpretation is based on the work of Chua and Engel (2019), who offer an understanding that transcends single case studies to grasp how varying local legal consciousness (individuals' experience with the law) and state effectiveness shape vigilante conduct. Regarding the identification of elements, Tiwa (2022) was a key influence, highlighting recurring problems such as state failure or deeply held beliefs about justice, which lead to informal incapacity (vigilante justice). Some authors highlight how individuals' perceptions and experiences of the law, which they call "legal conscience," lead them to engage in private justice actions, especially when official systems are lacking (Chua and Engel, 2019). Others emphasize "informal disempowerment" as a response to recurring victimization, illustrating how communities establish their own justice systems when the state is unable to defend them (Tiwa, 2022). Global Development Ideas recommends allocating funds to research to identify local justice needs in fragile states in order to establish legitimate and context-appropriate institutions (RDM, 2011).

To better explain this phenomenon, let us take the example of eastern DRC (Witchcraft): Due to deep-rooted beliefs about witchcraft, community members attack supposed witches (informal incapacity) following the perceived failure of state courts, illustrating a powerful local judicial system outside the formal legal framework.

Another case that was recounted to us during our interviews with some group leaders in Northern Nigeria (Boko Haram/Banditry) involves residents creating self-defense groups such as Yan Kassa to counter bandits and insurgents. This initiative is motivated by the state's ineffectiveness in guaranteeing security, as well as by local ethnic/religious tensions and the need for swift and decisive justice. By comparing the two cases, we can highlight the recourse to vigilante justice, a consequence of state weakness and local interpretations of justice. However, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this process is generally rooted in mystical beliefs or those related to black magic, whereas in Nigeria, it is more often motivated by threats of overt violence. This illustrates how a shared vulnerability gives rise to different forms of vigilante justice specific to the context.

Using the same multi-site model, let's try to understand popular justice and self-defense in the Central African Republic (CAR), Cameroon, and Mali, comparing justice systems in fragile contexts. This model reveals common factors, such as state weakness and the demand for swift justice, while also highlighting unique local adaptations that challenge universal legal models. Researchers like Bayart and Mbembe emphasize African political dynamics, and studies show the coexistence of parallel systems alongside state law, often in the face of insecurity, leading to violent settling of scores or community resolutions. For example, the Dozos in the CAR and Mali illustrate rapid informal justice in response to the failure of formal systems, but this can also result in violence.

7.2 Implementation of a multi-site model.

Our comparative framework involves studying how state authority, traditional law, religious courts (such as Sharia in certain regions of Mali/Cameroon), and self-defense groups (like Dozos and Bokola) interact in parallel, conflictual, or synergistic ways in each country. Here, we have considered data up to October 2023. We then develop a map of the disparities in conflict intensity (civil war in the Central African Republic versus Boko Haram in Cameroon/Mali), ethnic composition, and historical traditions regarding justice. This relates to shared factors. Our aim is to identify common elements such as state decay, instability, corruption, and unmet citizens' demands for justice.

To consolidate this model, our arguments are based on the following statementsJean-François Bayart argues that African states rely on extroversion and informal networks, which fosters non-state justice in the face of weak formal systems. Achille Mbembe addresses the fragmentation of power and necropolitics, demonstrating how this leads to heightened violence as a means of asserting power. Studies by the World Bank and UNDP reveal that local populations develop informal justice systems in response to the absence of the state, highlighting the gap between formal law and lived realities.

Let us reinforce this model with the arguments of Jean-François Bayart, taking as an example the group known as the "Dozos" in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). Consider the case of the traditional hunters' brotherhoods (Dozos) that function as parallel judicial and police entities. In Mali, the precarious situation stems from the fact that

the Dozos regularly conduct patrols in the Sahel in collaboration with government forces against jihadists; while in the CAR, they have been incorporated (sometimes violently) into factions. Consequently, if the state fails to guarantee security (for example, by protecting farmers from thieves), the Dozos step in, responding to citizens' calls for security and justice. From this comparison, we understand that success in these three countries generates conflict, including clashes with communities and accusations of abuse. This blurs the line between vigilante justice and violent score-settling, especially when these situations are politicized by armed groups. A comparison of the dynamics allows us to understand how needs such as justice and security manifest themselves under various political tensions in the Central African Republic, Cameroon, and Mali. In Mali, rural areas rely heavily on customary justice due to limited access to formal courts, particularly for frequent land disputes. Traditional mediation and 'popular justice' are the primary methods of conflict resolution, while recourse to formal courts remains rare.

A 2021 study shows that rural Malians find customary institutions more effective than the formal justice system due to their speed, fairness, and low cost. This perception of the ineffectiveness of state laws pushes communities toward non-state alternatives. A multi-site model could compare these preferences in Mali with those observed in the Central African Republic or Cameroon to see if these factors are universal in fragile states.

4. Box 1: Prototype of the semi-structured interview guide

Prototype of the maintenance guide

Theme 1: State incapacity or absence
Theme 2: Breakdown of trust between populations and institutions
Theme 3: Role of armed actors and non-state groups
Theme 4: Parallel governance
Theme 5: Socio-economic factors
Theme 6: Community and cultural dynamics
Theme 7: Effects on stability and governance
Theme 8: Options for rebuilding state authority

Table 1. Analysis of the interviews conducted

No.	Country	Institutional, state and non-state actors	Sex	Age	Interview Code	Time (min)
01	Mali	• Incapacity or absence of the State	M	35	A&B	15
		Weakness of judicial institutions	F	40	C	10
		Slowness and corruption in the official justice system	M	41	D	20
		Lack of police and administrative presence in rural areas	M	25	E	10
		Failure to protect populations	M	28	F	15
02	Nigeria	• Breakdown of trust between populations and institutions	F	42	G	15
		Perception of impunity for criminals; Distrust of local courts and authorities; Feeling of abandonment by the State	M	40	H	10
		• Role of armed actors and non-state groups; Militias, self-defense groups or community armies, extremist groups (e.g., Boko Haram)	M	26	I	20
			M	43	J	10
			F	61	K	15
			M	52	L	15
03	DRC	• Socio-economic factors; Poverty and marginalization; Inequalities in access to justice and public services; Internal displacement and resource-related conflicts	M	41	Q	10
		• Community and cultural dynamics; Weight of customs and traditional norms; Community-based conflict resolution	M	25	R	20
		Socialization to violence in certain regions exposed to armed conflict; Fragmentation of public authority	M	28	S	10
			F	42	T	15
			M	40	U	15
			M	26	V	10
			M	43	W	20
			M	61	X	10
			M	52	Y	15
			M	52	L	15
04	CAR	• Effects on stability and governance; Perpetuation of a cycle of mistrust and defiance towards the State; Strengthening of local armed actors	M	–	E2	10
		• Options for rebuilding state authority; Judicial system reforms; Strengthening of administrative and security presence; Dialogue with traditional authorities and community leaders	M	–	F2	20
			M	–	G2	10
			F	–	H2	15
			M	–	I2	15
			M	–	Day 2	10
			M	–	K2	20
05	Cameroon	• Options for rebuilding state authority; State incapacity or absence; Breakdown of trust between populations and institutions; Role of armed actors and non-state groups; Parallel governance	F	–	B2	10
		Socio-economic factors; Community and cultural dynamics; Effects on stability and governance	M	–	C2	15
			M	–	D2	15
			M	–	E2	10
			M	–	F2	20
			M	–	G2	10

Source: Domain Author

8 Results of empirical surveys and discussion

Our study is based on grounded qualitative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), enriched by the triangulation and systematization inherent in mixed-methods approaches. Given the heterogeneity of the contexts (DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, CAR), data from interviews, focus groups, observations, legal documents, reports, speeches, and press articles were transcribed and centralized in NVivo 12 to ensure traceability and comparability. Open coding generated over 120 initial codes (e.g., absence of police, summary justice, war economy). Axial coding grouped these into intermediate categories (security vacuum, institutional substitution, strengthened customary governance, etc.), revealing causal, hierarchical, or co-present relationships. Selective coding resulted in eight structuring themes: state incapacity or absence, breakdown of trust, the role of armed actors, parallel governance, socio-economic factors, community dynamics, effects on stability, and avenues for state reconstruction. Theoretical saturation was verified according to Guest et al. (2006): stabilization of codes after three rounds of interviews, absorption of new verbatim transcripts without new codes, robustness of themes despite a 25% increase in data, and transnational redundancy of discourse. One example illustrates the progression from raw to thematic: a testimony on local judgment becomes, through open and axial coding, the theme ”parallel governance.” The results show that 87% of participants perceive the state as absent or ineffective; 72% denounce a breakdown of trust linked to corruption; 69% recognize a regulatory role for armed actors; 74% describe alternative systems of justice and taxation; and 61% associate poverty with summary justice. 54% invoke the primacy of customary norms; 82% link institutional vacuums and increasing insecurity; 48% propose hybrid solutions (community involvement, traditional authorities, professionalized security). In discussion, the relationships are nuanced: popular justice and state weakness maintain a self-reinforcing cycle; parallel governance emerges almost causally from the security vacuum; corruption and extractive institutions are strongly correlated, but with local variations; resource-related conflicts fuel war economies without being their sole cause; finally, popular justice reflects not a governance vacuum, but a polycentric, decentralized, and often coercive governance, confirming Ostrom (2010) and Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan (2014). Thus, this phenomenon is analyzed as the complex product of structural, historical, and socio-political factors, and not as a simple symptom of state collapse.

9 Conclusion

This study reveals that popular justice, far from being a marginal phenomenon, is a structured and rational response of African populations to the weakening of state authority in fragile states. A mixed-methods, multi-site approach highlighted common dynamics, such as a weak state presence, corruption, judicial delays, and insecurity, as well as national specificities. Popular justice is rooted in structural, cultural, and political factors, reflecting a profound disconnect between public institutions and citizens.

The findings converge on a central conclusion: in the absence of a state capable of ensuring security and justice, communities develop alternative, often violent, systems to meet an immediate need for order and protection. These forms of local justice (self-defense, customary norms, community mechanisms) illustrate the existence of hybrid governance where formal institutions and non-state mechanisms coexist.

Restoring public authority requires polycentric governance that integrates the state, traditional authorities, and community actors, while strengthening accountability, combating corruption, and enhancing administrative presence. This approach is crucial for sustainably reducing the parallel justice system and rebuilding the legitimacy of the state.

The erosion of state authority in countries like the DRC, Mali, Nigeria, Cameroon, and the CAR is attributed to factors such as authoritarian colonial legacies, predatory governance, and corruption. Faced with the incapacity of these states, parallel forms of justice (customary courts, militias) appear more accessible and culturally relevant, but they also contribute to territorial fragmentation and cycles of violence.

The increasing use of informal justice reflects the weakness of states and a complex legal pluralism, revealing a broken social contract. To reverse this trend, it is essential to strengthen governance, ensure transparency, combat corruption, and integrate traditional mechanisms into a credible institutional framework. Only an inclusive approach, grounded in local realities and supported by legitimate institutions, will restore public trust and the rule of law.

Managerial implications

Popular justice practices emerge in response to the shortcomings of official institutions in terms of effectiveness, legitimacy, or accessibility. Public officials should strengthen the state presence, expedite judicial procedures, and create accessible mediation mechanisms. Public managers, local authorities, and security actors would benefit from collaborating with community structures to develop locally adapted conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. Inclusive governance, based on transparency, anti-corruption, and the engagement of community leaders, would reduce public mistrust and limit informal violent mechanisms.

Limitations of the research

The qualitative approach limits the generalization of results to other African countries or socio-political contexts.

The sensitivity of the topic and the mistrust of those involved limited access to information, affecting the depth of the analysis. The study is confined to a specific period, failing to capture the evolving dynamics within an unstable political context.

Future research perspectives

Quantitative studies could quantify the extent of grassroots justice and statistically identify its contributing factors. A longitudinal analysis would shed light on the evolution of these practices in relation to state reforms and socio-political transformations. Inter-country or regional comparisons would reveal effective governance models against parallel justice. Research could explore the role of new technologies, social media, and transnational actors in the dissemination or regulation of these alternative justice systems.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the effectiveness of judicial and security institutions by improving the speed of procedures, the proximity of services and transparency in the handling of cases.
- To establish accessible mechanisms for mediation, amicable dispute resolution and community dialogue in order to offer credible alternatives to vigilante justice.
- Actively combat corruption within the police and justice services, as it fuels public distrust and encourages the use of informal sanctions.
- Develop participatory governance involving community leaders, local organizations and civil society actors to co-create solutions adapted to the social context.
- Strengthen the state's presence in areas where insecurity and the absence of authorities promote the emergence of parallel justice mechanisms.
- Conduct awareness campaigns to inform the public about the dangers of mob justice and the legal remedies available.

• Support the continuing education of public officials (police officers, magistrates, local leaders) on participatory approaches, conflict management and respect for human rights.

• Develop a monitoring and evaluation system to measure the effectiveness of reforms, detect risk areas and adjust actions according to realities on the ground.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

We wish to inform you that the study data is not accessible due to restrictions put in place by representatives of the organizations.

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