



DEMOCRACY'S DISCONTENT AND THE RESURGENCE OF COUPS IN WEST AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: *The resurgence of military coups in African politics poses a challenge for democracy and it highlights the fragility of democratization in Africa. Going by the recent coup waves, democracy appears to be in a very fragile state in Africa. Africa for a very long time has enjoyed relative stability in its democratization process. However, this long period of stability is being challenged again as there have already been five successful overthrows of democratically elected governments in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2021 and 2023 in addition to the unsuccessful attacks. It is equally worth noting that the recent coup waves in Africa have been dominated by West African states: Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. Unlike in the past when citizens greeted attacks on democratically elected governments with discontent and disapproval, the recent coups have for so many reasons been met with support and acceptance by citizens through celebrations on the streets and supportive messages on social media. This paper therefore seeks to examine democracy's discontent and the resurgence of coups in West Africa to identify its implications for Africa. The study relied essentially on qualitative data predicated on secondary data. The paper adopted populism as its framework of analysis. The paper revealed that the popular support for the recent coup waves stems from citizens' dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy and democratic leadership. The study recommended, amongst other things, that democratic institutions should be reformed and strengthened, good governance should be promoted by African leaders, and maximum attention should be paid to the welfare and concerns of the military to strengthen professionalism.*

KEYWORDS: Coups; Democratization; Populism; Military coup resurgence; Africa; West Africa.



INTRODUCTION

The early 1980s witnessed the return of stability in Africa's democracy following the first coup era of the post-independence period in Africa. It can be recalled that in the period between the 1960s and 1980s, numerous democratically elected governments saw their regimes toppled by military forces which led to the overthrow of elected governments in Benin, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda, among others (Clark, 2007). In the same vein, Ajayi and Olu-Adeyemi (2015) posited that almost all of West Africa witnessed military coups until the 1990s when states transitioned into democratic rule as a wave of democratization swept across the world. Since African states gained independence, the military has played a central role in the African political system evidenced by several military interventions through coup d'état, thereby usurping political power (Giles, 2019). The frequency of military intervention in African politics at the time was occurring at a very alarming rate. Thomson (2010) posited that in the period between 1952 and 1990, Africa witnessed a total number of 71 military coups d'état. Political liberalization began to sweep back across Africa as more countries started accepting democratic rulerships. The long period of military disappearance in African politics ushered in a period of stability in the nascent democracies as democratically elected governments began to end their tenures without being scuttled by the military. Similarly, Anyoko-Shaba (2022) submitted that following the triumph of democracy over militarism, the military overthrow of the government was on extinction in Africa for two decades.

However, this period of stability of democratization is being challenged again by the recent coup waves which have led to the reemergence of military intervention in political systems similar to the ones in the 1960s and 1970s. Singh (2022) noted that between February 2021 to February 2022, there were five successful overthrows of democratically elected governments in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Burkina Faso. This is in addition to the four unsuccessful attacks on democracy in Niger, Sudan, Guinea-Bissau, and Sao Tome and Principe (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). It is worth noting that as the world was fighting the COVID-19 menace, coups were already happening in Africa. Mali's 2020 coup was the first of the COVID-19 era followed by the September 5, 2021 coup in Guinea; then came the Sudanese coup of October 2021 and Burkina Faso's 24 January 2022 coup. The resurgence of course in Africa in this present time is alarming (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). Falola (2022) attributed the reemergence of coups in the region to the failure of democracy to be intensified and deepened. These coups are however indicative of the fragile and regressive state of democracy in Africa. As Hanson (2021) noted, fears of systematic democratic decline are regrettably well-founded due to the global decline in the efficacy of established political parties along with soaring partisan divisions in many long-standing democracies. "The resurgence of military coups on the continents has created fresh debates about the ability of African states to sustain democracy" (Mohammed, 2022).

Going by the current waves of coups in Africa, democracy seems to be in a very fragile state in Africa. It is worth noting that the recent coup waves in Africa in the last five years, barring Sudan, have had a common denominator as they have been dominated by West African states: Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Guinea-Bissau. According to Adefisoye and Braimah (2023), the recent surge in military intervention in the three years of 2022 to July 2023 in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Niger requires scholarly interrogation into the factors behind such upsurge. The resurgence of military coups in African politics is therefore a challenge for democracy and it highlights the fragility of democratization in this part of the world. In light



of the above, this paper sets out to examine democracy's discontent and the resurgence of coups in West Africa to identify its implications for Africa.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

This paper adopts populism as its analytical framework. Populism is best suited for the explanation of the conditions that give rise to popular support for authoritarian alternatives to democracy, and hence, why citizens are willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives in these countries. The explanation of populism by Norris and Inglehart (2019) submits that citizens' support for authoritarian alternatives to democracy is spurred by their disillusionment with the performance of elected officeholders and representative institutions, which includes parties, elections, and parliaments. "In virtually all African societies, there exist forms of political challenge arising from conjunctures of dysfunctional political structures such as failure of the leadership to meet the demands of its citizens" (Anyoko-Shaba, 2022). This therefore leaves the door open for authoritarians to attack democratic norms and practices and the emergence of strongman leaders. This is evident in the pattern of the coup resurgence in Africa. As citizens feel disillusioned with democracy and seek alternatives, the members of the military therefore see it as an opening for them to legitimize their attack on democracy. The 'strongman leaders' in this case represent the military.

In the past, during the post-independence era in Africa, attacks on democratically elected governments were greeted with discontent and disapproval by the populace. But this cannot be said about the current waves of coups ravaging democracy in Africa. Unlike in the past when the masses usually would protest or react negatively to any attempt at democracy, in contrast, the masses this time have shown a sign of acceptance and support for the attacks on democracy. This is evident in these countries where the coups have occurred. The citizens have trooped in their numbers to the streets to solicit selfies with soldiers and cheer them on in apparent support. Some have also gone as far as posting supportive messages on social media platforms. For example, the aftermath of the July 26, 2023 coup in Niger witnessed citizens filling stadiums in support of the military government. This recent warm reception to military takeovers and support for coups d'état by citizens in some African countries has been caused mainly by the disappointment following the promise that democracy would bring prosperity and improve living conditions. Populism in this case helps us explain why citizens are willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives in these countries. Sharing a similar view are Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022) who stated that it is not surprising to see citizens celebrate the current coup waves going by the several cases of poor governance indices across Africa, such as corruption, lack of free, fair, and credible elections, and the increasing security crisis. "The popular protest that erupted in many parts of Africa in 2021 partly reflected the growing alienation of young people, who aspire to better living conditions and economic opportunities" (Arezki, 2022). For instance, Tuki (2023) examined the attitudes of Niger citizens toward the military overthrow of the democratically elected government in Niger and showed that Nigerians generally do not have a strong aversion toward military intervention. In fact, according to his study, half of the population either "strongly approve" or "approve" of military rule. About 70 percent of the population either "strongly agree" or "agree" with the military intervening if the democratically elected government is corrupt.



The Recent Coup Waves in West African States of Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea

Niger: 2023

Following a period of democratic rule in Niger since the previous coup of 2010, in July 2023, a military coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani toppled the government of President Mohamed Bazoum. ABC News (2023) reported that “members of Niger’s presidential guard detained President Mohamed Bazoum inside his palace and appeared on national television saying they were seizing power to end the deteriorating security situation and bad governance in the country.” The challenge of the July 2023 coup in Niger transcends Niger as it creates tension in West Africa, particularly as the region has experienced six coups in three years, as an emergent ‘putschist-populist’ politics threatens hard-won democratic progress (Melly, 2023). Military intervention has been a consistent element of politics in Niger since it achieved independence from France in 1960 (Aljazeera, 2023). The July 2023 coup in Niger, according to Choudhury (2023), is a mix of simmering tension and historical underpinnings. Furthermore, he stated that before the coup, electoral fraud and considerable disenchantment and dissatisfaction were on the front burner of the allegations leveled against the government of President Bazoum. Also, in March 2021, there was a failed coup attempt days before newly elected President Mohamed Bazoum was due to be sworn in. Neither the president nor president-elect were captured or harmed and Bazoum’s inauguration proceeded as scheduled (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). President Bazoum however remained in power until the July 2023 coup that ousted his government.

Burkina Faso: January 2022 and September 2022

Between January 2022 and September 2022, two successful coups occurred in Burkina Faso. The government of President Roch Marc Christian Kabore was ousted by a military coup. Consequently, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was installed as interim President. However, his presidency did not stand the test of time as he was also ousted from his interim position by another military coup. Martin and Lebovich (2022) noted that for months, grievances existed within the armed forces, in addition to tension between the military and the democratically elected government of Roch Kabore. Consequently, on January 24, President Kabore was detained by soldiers, with the government and national assembly dissolved. The country’s constitution was suspended, in addition to the closure of the country’s borders. The coup plotters declared him unfit to lead Burkina Faso in the face of new challenges such as the rise of the Jihadist insurgency that had accounted for the loss of lives of thousands of people (Munshi, 2022). Eight months after the installation of Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba as the interim President, another coup happened in Burkina Faso on September 30, 2022, in what MacDougall (2022) described as a “coup within a coup.” Mutinous soldiers blocked roads near the presidential palace and the state television broadcaster RTB subsequently went off the air for a brief period (Maclean, 2022). The ouster of Damiba and the dissolution of the interim government was thus announced on state television by the 34-year-old leader of the coup, Captain Ibrahim Traore, who immediately closed the country’s borders and imposed a curfew (Rakotomalala & Chothia, 2022).

**Mali: 2021**

The 2021 coup in Mali ousted the government of President Bah N'Daw and the military took over the government citing ongoing security concerns as the reason for the coup. The 2021 coup was the second of the two coups that occurred in Mali in the period between 2020 and 2021. The military after the 2020 coup agreed to cede power to a civilian-led interim government that would oversee an 18-month transition to democratic elections in February 2022. Tension however ensued between the civilian leadership and the military, which aimed to maintain its influence in interim institutions (ABC News, 2023; Zulueta-Fulscher, 2021). President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane reshuffled the cabinet and the ministers of security and defence colonels Modibo Kone and Sadio Camara were removed (Akinwotu, 2022; Jezequel, 2021). The action of the president did not go down well with the colonels as they arrested the president and the prime minister and took over the civilian-led interim government.

Guinea: September 2021

In September 2021, the government of President Alpha Conde was ousted by a military coup led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya. They cited poverty and endemic corruption as the justification for their overthrow of the government. Colonel Doumbouya however installed himself as interim president with a promise of transitioning to democratic elections within three years. He went further to suspend the constitution and detained President Conte. All regional governors were replaced with military commanders and the function of the executive was temporarily delegated to the National Rally and Development which he established (Zulueta-Fulscher & Noel, 2021). Before the military coup, the democratic election of 2010 that brought President Alpha Conde into office was Guinea's first democratic election since it gained independence from France in 1958 (Chin & Kirkpatrick, 2023). President Alpha Conde was infamous for altering Guinea's constitution to elongate his stay in office beyond the constitutionally entrenched two terms. This manipulation of the constitution and the subsequent maneuver of the election by President Alpha Conde heated the polity in Guinea (Rosenje, Onyebuchi & Adeniyi, 2021). In the same vein, "instead of consolidating the democratic process, Alpha Conde's attitude to democratic principles, institutions, and culture was glaringly disappointing and was a threat to democratic consolidation," Rosenje, Onyebuchi, and Adeniyi stated. President Conde ran for a third term in the presidential election held in October 2020 having replaced the 2010 constitution with a new constitution in March 2020 thereby abolishing the two-term limit the 2010 constitution would have subjected him to (Boucher, 2019).

Sources of the Popular Support of the Recent Coup Waves by the Citizens

"The resurgence of coups and upsurge in military intervention across Africa directly violates democratic tenants and represents a threat to peace, stability, and security on the continent" (ORF, Observer Research Foundation, 2022). The re-emergence of military coups in Africa has received popular support by citizens evidenced in the citizens trooping to the streets in their numbers in apparent support of the military coups in the affected countries. For example, in Gabon, the people went out in the country's capital Libreville to cheer the soldiers and celebrate the overthrow of the government. The same applies to Niger, which after the July 26 coup, witnessed popular support as advocates of the coup filled stadiums in the country as a show of solidarity. Guinea was also not left out in this scenario. In fact, in 2021, immediately after the



government of Alpha Conde was toppled, the streets of Conakry witnessed widespread jubilation by the citizens. This trend of support for military attacks on democracy is however traced to the deep-seated frustration with democratic leaders in Africa. Uprisings and protests are also preludes to military resurgence. When the leadership proves incompetent in meeting the demands of the citizens, they mostly show dissatisfaction through protest. For instance, before the January 24, coup d'état in Burkina Faso, there were different protests and mobilizations (violent or nonviolent) that arose (Falola, 2022).

As Odigbo, Ezekwelu, and Okeke (2023) stated, the acceptance and support for democracy especially during the third wave of democracy in the 1990s stems from the awareness and desire of the people to ensure accountability, equity, and justice. Furthermore, democracy embodies virtuous principles necessary for an inclusive, progressive, and stable society. These attributes of democracy make it provide the greatest happiness to a greater number of people in society (Odigbo, Ezekwelu, & Okeke, 2023). In line with this, when looking at the coup waves and the popular support from citizens, it is a sign of citizen's dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy and its inability to incorporate these democratic principles to provide happiness to the people. The promise of good governance and development has not been met even when elections are conducted, and citizens become fed up with democratic leadership in Africa. It can be recalled that the post-colonial period in Africa saw the African indigenous political class taking over political power from their colonial masters. But instead of focusing on providing the dividends of democracy for their people, they abandoned their core functions and embarked on personal ambitions of endless struggle for the consolidation of state power. Over the years, citizens have witnessed leaders under democracy turn themselves into dictators as they refuse to let go after completing their constitutional terms in office. Mohammed (2022) argued that African leaders are guilty of changing the constitutions of their countries for the sole ambition of staying longer in power than the limits stipulated by the constitutions of their states. Furthermore, "it requires a robust and sincere democrat to resist a third term agenda, whether it is nurtured by the incumbent president or by his cronies in government" (Mohammed, 2022). Also, Cassani (2020) noted that out of four presidents whose final tenures in office were due in 2020, only two, Pierre Nkurunziza in Burundi and Mahammadou Issoufou in Niger agreed to step down. Similarly, presidents Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Biya of Cameroon, Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi, Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Tandja Mamadou of Niger, and Idriss Deby of Chad are notable examples of African leaders who manipulated the constitution to elongate their stay in office (Mbaku, 2022).

On numerous occasions in these countries, citizens demanded a change of government. Just as Mugabi (2020) highlighted the Malian coup, the public and opposition parties supported the coup as they had previously staged massive protests demanding the resignation of their president. The same can also be said about the Guinean coup as it was welcomed with public celebrations. Furthermore, the source of the recent popular support for coup plotters can be attributed to citizens' discontent with democracy caused by years of poor governance and pitiful democratic performance which have made them receptive to other alternatives. Just as Odigbo, Ezekwelu, and Okeke (2023) noted, the weak or personalized state institutions in Africa only reinforced failures. The stability and viability of a democracy determine the extent to which it overcomes common societal problems. Consequently, citizens' discontent with



democracy manifests as a result of poor governance, bad leadership, lack of development, and the trajectory of impunity and social injustice.

Civil-Military Relations in Africa

The classic understanding of civil-military relations according to Naidoo (2006) is “about the balance of power between the civilian political authority and the military. Civil-military relations necessitate that the military is subordinated to a democratically elected civilian government. Various constitutional and institutional measures are put in place and civilian oversight becomes a key aspect of the relationship.” Generally, the civil-military relationship should be one in which the civilian leadership supersedes the military, meaning that the military leadership should receive orders from the civilian leadership. Also, the domain of military expertise is differentiated from civilian authority as the military performs the duties of assisting the civilian leadership in protecting the state against external aggression. However, it is also important that the civilian leadership exercises caution not to upset the military because of the obvious capabilities of the military. Just as Osariyekemwen and Osariyekemwen (2021) noted, the “national guard” function of the military makes it very powerful and sometimes unquestionable when it begins to exert an almost unrestrained influence in government which culminates in the direct takeover of government.

In a democratic dispensation, the role of the military is largely dependent on factors such as the level of political culture or the overall orientation of the people towards the political system (Finer, 1975). The military is forced to accept civilian control when the political culture is high and the civilian leaders have the legitimate right to rule. The reason for this is that a mature or advanced political culture permits the military to employ subtle methods such as normal constitutional channels and resort to collusion with the civilian authorities. However, when it is low, it becomes a problem because the legitimacy of civil rule is eroded and hence weak civilian control ensues. As a consequence, the military displaces or even supplants the weak civilian leadership by resorting to threats to withdraw support or direct coercion against the civilian government (Finer, 1975).

The civilian leadership should therefore pay attention to the concerns of the military. Thus, their interest should be integrated into policy output and the budget to ensure loyalty and full cooperation with the government in power (O’Hanlon & Miller, 2019). In Africa, this seems not to be the case as the civilian leadership does not pay enough attention to the concerns and welfare of the military. There is a clear difference between civil-military relations in Africa and the Western countries. Sharing a similar view is Fourney (1977), who identified this difference in the strict adherence of the Western countries to military professionalism imbued with national protection while African countries cannot cut down their greedy political adventure and focus on the assigned function of national protection.

Civil-military relations require an objective and professional military establishment and this has been absent in most African states. Supporting this view is Naidoo (2006) who argued that objective civilian control of the military requires professional military establishments strong enough to avoid being drawn into politics, yet not so strong that they could disregard civilian elites. The absence of good governance in African civilian leadership has made it difficult for professionalism to be entrenched in African democracy, largely because the same conditions that constrain good governance in Africa cause unprofessionalism in the military. Civilian control of the military in Africa is more subjective than objective because it lacks the basic



features of an objective civilian-controlled military. Huntington (1957) argued that when civilian control of the military is objective, the civilian and military institutions are distinct from each other, the institutional boundaries that separate the civilian and military spheres of activities and functions are demarcated, policies of the civilian authority are implemented by the military, and the military is limited to policy issues of security and defence. Subjective civilian control occurs when the institutional boundaries between the civilian government and the military are blurred, meaning the functions of the military are not clearly defined or strictly confined to security and defense issues.

The military is expected to secure persons and properties and defend the state. However, African militaries have failed in these two functions. Instead of securing the people, they have preyed on the citizens. Rather than defending governments, they overthrew them, including democratically elected governments (Young, 2012). African leaders' politicization of the military for personal interests has therefore weakened the military's professionalism. The credibility of military institutions, argued Nugent (2004), became greatly imperiled as a result of the selfish interest of these African leaders. Furthermore, as the political leaders wrangled among themselves in the early independence of the African political class, the military set themselves up as the arbiters of the fate of squabbling politicians. The military therefore began to get involved in issues outside its purview and gradually turned Africa into a continent of coups.

Implications of the Coup Resurgence on Africa

Although coup resurgence has been more dominant in West Africa, it poses a broadened challenge for Africa. The implication of the re-emergence of the coup is the fact that this coup wave poses a significant threat to peace, stability, and democratic stability in the continent. The fear is that the coup resurgence in West Africa could come with the contagion effect whereby it could spiral out of control and spread across other parts of Africa. Explaining the implication of the coup resurgence in West Africa on Africa from the contagion problem, Falola (2022) submitted that where there is a military coup in one area of a region, there is a possibility that countries in other areas of the region might also resort to it. Military coups in West Africa bring about a sense of legitimacy and encouragement in other regions in Africa. Other African countries that share similar problems with their West African counterparts, on seeing those in Africa resort to coup and authoritarian alternatives as a solution to their problem, might be motivated by it, and consequently see coup as a viable solution to their problem. Also, seeing how the citizens in these West African countries have openly supported the military overthrow of democratically elected governments, militaries in other countries might join in these attacks on democracy with the belief that their citizens would also support them. The recent coup wave has mostly followed a similar pattern, creating openings for more coups in the region. For instance, after the coup in Burkina Faso, citizens, instead of condemning it, celebrated it. A similar development also occurred in Niger and other African countries in terms of citizens celebrating military coups. Other instances where a coup in one country encouraged a similar action in another country, according to Osariyekemwen and Osariyekemwen (2021), are the Algerian and Sudanese coups of 2019 and the Malian coup of 2020. The juntas encouraged by the coup in one country, replicated the same in their own country.



CONCLUSION

This paper examined the resurgence of coups in West Africa and its implications for Africa. It also discussed the popular support the recent coup waves have received from the citizens in those countries. However, the paper has shown that West Africa has been the epicenter of the military coups resurgence in Africa. Tenure elongation or sit tight syndrome of Africa's political elites, bad governance, electoral malpractices such as lack of conduct for free, fair, and credible elections, arbitrary amendments of the constitution, and the absence of rule of law in governance by the African political elites were the reasons given in the past by the juntas for seizing political power. In the recent coup waves, these reasons have also been given by the juntas. The popular support the recent coup waves have received from the citizens stems from citizens' dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy and its inability to properly incorporate democratic principles to provide happiness to the people. Fed up with democratic leadership, the citizens now trooped en masse to the streets in protests and supported authoritarian alternatives to democracy which the military juntas have relied upon to truncate democracy and the democratization process in the West African region and Africa in general. This paper has also shown that there is a clear difference between civil-military relations in Africa and their counterparts in Western countries, hence the reason Africa has experienced more coups than Western countries. Whereas the military in Western countries has mostly adhered to professionalism imbued with national protection, in Africa, this has not been the case as the military has become highly politicized both for the selfish interests of the political class and the military itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper recommends that African political elites should intensify their efforts at tackling the issues and challenges of democratic rulership in Africa that the military always leverages to overthrow their governments. During the post-colonial period, the military always used political instability, corruption, sit tight syndrome, and maladministration of the ruling elites, amongst others, to legitimize their unlawful overthrow of the government. Today, as witnessed in the recent coup waves, such justifications still exist. It means, therefore, that for Africa to do away with military intervention in their democratization process, they must first of all prioritize all the loopholes that currently exist in the African political system.

Again, Africa's democratic institutions should be reformed and strengthened so that democracy can achieve the desired results in the region. Strong institutions engender good governance. In Africa, what is mostly present is strongmen leaders instead of strong institutions, and, at times, this accounts for why the leaders attempt to suppress the people, manipulate institutions, and impose themselves. Strong institutions have autonomy. In essence, they cannot be pushed around by the ruling class. In return, the ruling class will be adequately checkmated and the dividends of democracy entrenched to provide the citizens with the desired happiness. This will also lead to stronger civil-military relations because strong democratic institutions ensure that the military stays under civilian control, with maximum attention paid to their welfare and concerns. This will reinforce professionalism in the military as it will make it difficult for them to be drawn into politics or be used by the political elites for personal ambitions. It is not uncommon to see the military in Africa involved in politics either when they are being used by the political class to rig elections or suppress opposition from the people or civil society



organizations in the region. With strong institutions, laws will be enacted that will ensure that military involvement in politics is avoided. Similarly, the need for democratic reforms is important to regain the confidence of the citizens of the various African states. As shown in the study, citizens no longer have confidence in democratic institutions providing them the democratic dividends. A reform will give them a sense of belonging and the hope that their past mistakes are being corrected. By putting these reforms into practice, gradually their interest will be regained and the citizens will in turn return to how it was in the past when they willingly put their bodies on the line in the protection and defence of Africa's democracy.

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