
A NEW WAVE OF COUPS D'ÉTAT WILL NOT JEOPARDISE DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

In reaction to a coup in Sudan, carried out on 25 October 2021, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called on the international community to fight against the “epidemic of coups d’état” which had spread in Africa and Asia. He referred to increasingly frequent instances of forced regime changes carried out by members of the military – e.g. in Myanmar in February 2021, and most importantly in sub-Saharan Africa. A month later, this issue was raised by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who during his first trip to Africa talked about the “retreat of democracy” which has already been apparent across this continent. In Africa, coups d’état pose a threat not only to stability but also to the process of strengthening the state institutions.

The military interventions carried out in December 2017 in Zimbabwe and a year and a half later in Sudan can be viewed as a prelude to the currently evident trend. In the former, President Robert Mugabe, who was more than ninety years old at that time and was preparing to hand over the presidency to his wife, was ousted from power; in the latter, former military collaborators forced Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power for 30 years and against whom a street revolt had broken out, to resign. Unlike in the past, both events were accompanied by an ambivalent attitude on the part of the international community, in particular the African Union (AU), and a certain degree of understanding towards the exceptionality of the situation. In contrast to these attitudes, the subsequent coup, carried out in Mali in mid-2020, although popular locally, met with widespread international condemnation as a symptom of recurrence of the practice of coups d’état that could inspire further coups, in particular in West Africa. These concerns proved justified

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– between early 2021 and February 2022 the continent saw as many as five successful military coups and several attempted coups. Such frequency of coups has not been recorded for decades.

– on 31 March 2021, two days before the inauguration of the new president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum, military officials from the air force base in Niamey tried to seize control of the capital city's institutions (the attempt was thwarted);

– on 20 April 2021, after the death of Chad's president Idriss Déby at the front, the Transitional Military Council headed by his son, Mahamat "Kaka" Déby, proclaimed itself the new authority. It ignored the constitutional principles according to which the speaker of parliament should be appointed as the head of state;

– on 4 May 2021, in Mali a group of military officers overthrew the country's civilian president Bah N'daw, whom the military had appointed as president as part of a power transition following a coup that had taken place a year earlier. As a consequence, the military junta's leader Colonel Assimi Goïta consolidated his power and formally assumed the office of the country's president;

– on 5 September 2021, soldiers from an elite armed forces unit arrested Guinea's president Alpha Condé and their commander Colonel Mamady Doumbouya was appointed as the interim president;

– in September 2021, Sudan saw a failed coup attempt organised by officers loyal to the overthrown regime of Omar al-Bashir, and on 25 October – a successful takeover of power by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who until then had been a member of the transitional civilian-military authority;

– on 23 January 2022, in Burkina Faso the head of an elite army unit Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba overthrew president Roch Kabore having accused him of ineffective fight against jihadists;

– on 1 February 2022, armed militants attacked the building of the government of Guinea-Bissau, where a cabinet meeting chaired by the country's president Umaro Sissoco Embaló was taking place;

– in August 2021 in Madagascar and in February 2022 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Djibouti the authorities reported that they had thwarted conspiracies that involved the intention to carry out coups.

The trend is all the more worrying because in recent years coups seemed to have been eliminated from Africa's political landscape, which was attributed to socio-political changes and to the adoption of pan-African policies of non-recognition of authorities appointed as a result of a coup. Since the early 1990s, as a result of the end of the Cold War, the global so-called third wave of democratisation and local civil society activism, African states have developed a preference for multiparty systems. Following the adoption (in 2000 in Lomé) by the AU's predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), of the Declaration on the Framework for an OAU Response to Unconstitutional Changes of Government and the establishment in 2003 of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), an AU's body capable of imposing sanctions, by 2015 the Union had intervened 14 times in matters relating to attempted coups.¹ Each time, it suspended the specific state as member of the AU, and forced the military to gradually transfer power to civilian structures and to restore constitutional order – most of the time successfully. Separate instances of pressure being put in order to transfer power happened as part of initiatives carried out by regional organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). After that time, it seemed that the phenomenon of coups d'état was a thing of the past.

However, coups returned in the situation of visible progress in consolidation of pro-democracy procedures and sentiments in Africa, which occurred regardless of their dubious degree of rooting. According to a poll conducted in 2019 by Afrobarometer – Africa's most reliable opinion poll – on average 68% of the surveyed individuals from 34 states strongly support the view that democracy is the best form of government, 78% reject strong-man rule, and 72% – military rule.² These results are similar to those obtained in previous years. The figures can be viewed as high, considering that the current socio-economic realities are conducive to undermining people's faith in democracy. In the past, democratic procedures usually emerged in those countries that had achieved a satisfactory level of economic development, while most

¹ I. Zamfir, *Actions of the African Union against coups d'état*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2017.

² R. Mattes, *Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat'*, Afrobarometer Policy Paper no. 54, February 2019, p. 7.

African countries lack a perceptible development dividend.³ Despite this, recent years have seen instances of a peaceful transfer of power in countries in which elections had previously always been accompanied by violence (Nigeria in 2015) or in those that were in the process of solving profound internal conflicts (Liberia and Sierra Leone in 2017). Due to the fact that biometric documents are becoming increasingly popular, forgery is less widespread, which boosts transparency and confidence in the auditability of procedures. Extensive monitoring activities carried out by civil society have led to the recognition of opposition victories in Ghana (2016) and Zambia (2021). In Kenya (2017) and Malawi (2020), despite pressure from government institutions, courts annulled the results of dishonestly conducted elections, thereby demonstrating their growing autonomy and determination to defend democratic principles. A number of states saw the rise of grassroots movements for democracy and quality of governance (e.g. Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso, #EndSARS in Nigeria, Ye'n a Marre and #FreeSenegal in Senegal) which largely channelled society's expectations regarding reforms which the governments had failed to implement.

Therefore, it is difficult to interpret the new wave of coups d'état as a sign of longing for strong-arm rule or fatigue with the ineffectiveness of democratic mechanisms. Although to justify their actions members of the military most frequently cite endemic corruption, poor economic management and the lack of national unity, historical experience indicates that these individuals are no more competent to tackle these problems than civilian authorities (the few exceptions include the successful reformist rule of Captain Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso in 1983–1987). In the case of military authorities, their representatives' tendency to dominate over ordinary citizens and the discretionary nature of their decision-making processes are conducive to the spread of corruption. Insufficient knowledge of the economy and the tendency to impose obedience on society make it impossible to manage the country's economic affairs in a reasonable manner. Due to the practice of ethnic favouritism in military promotions, the armed forces often becomes a sower of divisions rather than a unifying force. Therefore, in most cases,

³ R. Gopaldas, *Democracy in decline in Africa? Not so fast*, ISS Today, 4 November 2021, Institute for Security Studies, <https://issafrica.org>.

modern-day coups are more of a by-product of the weakness of state institutions and international instruments in Africa.

GOOD COUPS?

Over the first 50 years of most African countries' existence as independent states,⁴ around 3.5 coup attempts were recorded annually on average (of which 51.5% were successful). Most of them happened in the 1960s through 1980s and were the consequence of structural crises of the newly-established states, which emerged when the optimism of the first generation of governments, usually single-party governments, had waned. Most of the coups carried out at that time involved a straightforward seizure of power by a new (military) leader, whose actions were usually accompanied by a passive attitude on the part of a major portion of society. Such an intervention equated to elimination of pluralism (or whatever remained of it) and the launch of military dictatorship in which the leader acted primarily in the interest of a narrow group, sometimes enjoying foreign support. Examples of most recent "classic coups" of this type include former Chadian army's chief of staff Idriss Déby seizing power in 1990 for many years, and a similar coup carried out by General François Bozizé in the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2003. Both politicians continued their dictatorial rule as nominally civilian presidents, while the militarisation of the state apparatus continued. From their perspective, organising a coup was the only available and rational method of assuming leadership and maintaining it for as long as they were not threatened by another coup or guerrilla attack.

At the same time, however, a different model of a coup was taking shape—one that served as a response to society's demand for a new political opening. The 1991 coup in Mali, in which General Moussa Traoré, the country's dictator for more than two decades, was overthrown, was mainly the culmination of a major protest movement against his dictatorship. Lieutenant-Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, who arrested the president and became the head of the Transitional Committee for the Welfare of the People, promised (and later delivered on this promise)

⁴ J. Powell, C. Thyne, "Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: A new dataset", *Journal of Peace Research* 2011, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 255.

that he would not run for president and would not strip whoever wins the presidential race of power. In this case, military intervention was the only available method (as it seemed at that time) of changing a system which was incapable of implementing reforms, and of renewing the social legitimacy of the state. The junta became very popular but its public support was based on the implicit assumption that the new government would be short-lived. The new authorities' principal task was to prepare the election. It was held in 1992 and for the next 21 years Mali was regarded as a model African democracy and stood out against the region.

Subsequent coups had a similar function, including the coup in Niger in 1999, in Mauritania in 2005 and another coup in Niger in 2009. They were characterised by transparent social contracts under which the interim military authorities devised a schedule for their successors taking over power, and supervised its implementation. In each of these cases, the interventions made it possible to end the rule of authoritarian governments that were holding power at that time or were only just emerging, in a situation when no such change could have been achieved through legitimate political mechanisms. This gave the interim military authorities a unique mandate to launch radical reforms – for example, in 1992 in Mali, the new situation was conducive to a voluntary end of the Tuareg rebellion, in 1999 in Niger all political parties agreed on the provisions of a new constitution, and in Mauritania Colonel Mohamed Vall launched a debate on a possible return of some 60,000 representatives of black ethnic minorities, who had been forced to flee the country in the wave of pogroms back in 1989, and on compensation that could be offered to them. In the following years, these individuals were repatriated, their Mauritanian citizenship was restored and their assets returned to them.⁵

These unique coups, which did not result in the introduction of new dictatorships, did not fit in with the traditional understanding of a coup as an unequivocally harmful form of unconstitutional seizure of power. Although international and regional institutions have failed to devise mechanisms under which these coups could enjoy special

⁵ “Returning refugees say they are fitting in well”, *The New Humanitarian*, 25 February 2008, www.thenewhumanitarian.org.

treatment, they have nevertheless become reference points which most authors of recent coups cite in a more or less open manner. For example, the prospect of establishing a ruling dynasty in Zimbabwe, composed of members of one family, helped to justify the rebellion organised by General Constantino Chiwenga as an anti-authoritarian initiative which initially met with society's enthusiasm. In April 2019 in Sudan, protestors calling for resignation of military dictator Omar al-Bashir set up a tent city at the entrance to the armed forces headquarters in order to inspire soldiers to support the revolution and to topple the president, which was intended as the first step towards establishing a fully civilian rule. In 2020 in Mali, junta members initially seemed uninterested in appointing one of them as a leader,⁶ which made them look as if they did not care much about taking over power. Lieutenant Doumbouya's intervention in Guinea is another one referring to the ideal of a "good coup" – in his first speech following the toppling of president Condé he quoted Jerry Rawlings, a revolutionary who seized power in Ghana in 1979: "If the people are crushed by their elites, it is up to the army to give the people their freedom", and announced a shift from the system in which power is in the hands of one individual.⁷ Certain more obvious cases of seizing power in order to protect one's own interests, e.g. in Chad and in Sudan in 2021, were in turn met with widespread opposition on the part of the public. This forced the military leaders to seek some, even if sham, legitimacy for their actions, e.g. showing the intention to initiate a national dialogue (in Chad) or pretending to continue the 2019 revolution (in Sudan).

WHY ARE COUPS CARRIED OUT THESE DAYS?

Military coups occur almost exclusively in those countries in which they happened in the past.⁸ For example, Senegal, all of whose neighbours experienced coups in the past, has never seen one. Even the country's 2011 and 2021 political turbulences which were accompanied

⁶ E. Ogunkeye, *Mali colonel Assimi Goita declares himself junta leader as opposition pledges support*, France24, 19 August 2020, www.france24.com.

⁷ *Guinea coup: Who is Col Mamady Doumbouya?*, BBC, 6 September 2021, www.bbc.com.

⁸ P. Conley, "African Coups in the 21st Century", *Democracy in Africa*, 17 September 2021, <http://democracyinafrica.org>.

by a looming threat of authoritarianism haven't produced one as it would have likely happened elsewhere in the region. While the argument claiming that properly motivated coups can result in a new political opening seems right in the short term, in the long term such coups hamper the process of building stable institutions. As a consequence, the armed forces continue to be a disproportionately dominant structure in the country, and frequently they are the only functioning major institution, almost synonymous with the state. Therefore, the military's predominance and the fact that it permeates into various spheres of life make the country vulnerable to further coups. The government formed in 2007 in Mauritania as a result of Colonel Valla's exemplary "good coup" ruled the country for less than a year and a half and was dissolved following another coup. It is likely that the most recent coups in Mali would not have happened had it not been for the 2012 coup carried out by Colonel Amadou Sanogo, which took place under similar conditions, while the recent coups in Guinea would not have happened if two military interventions following the death of President Lansana Conté in 2008 had not been carried out. Examples of previous seizures of power convinced the officers that "taking a shortcut" was an easy option, and made coup look like a standard and available political tool. Specific coup patterns have spread to other countries as well – it is evident that Dombouya was inspired by Goïta with whom he had attended training for representatives of special forces back in 2017, organised by the US military in Burkina Faso.

Many coup organisers, young officers in particular, are graduates of foreign military courses. The mastermind behind the 2012 coup in Mali attended military training in the US, while the organiser of the 2008 coup in Guinea, Colonel Moussa Dadis Camara, was trained in Germany. Similarly to the majority of officers hailing from former French colonies, Chadian General "Kaka" graduated from French schools, while others – e.g. Dombouya – served in the Foreign Legion. Goïta's collaborators in the 2020 coup, Colonels Malick Diaw and Sadio Camara, had returned from training in Russia shortly before the coup.⁹ These links frequently give rise to speculation about a foreign inspiration of coups, but evidence

⁹ *Niger: Political situation in Niger since the coup in April 1999*, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 7 December 2000, www.refworld.org.

is most often lacking, especially when officers have a history of foreign military education in more than one country. It makes more sense to assume that graduates of foreign military courses and fellowships, particularly those offered by the US, may be more likely future organisers of coups.¹⁰ Due to both popularity and availability of this type of training – the US alone offers more than 30 such programmes,¹¹ some lasting just several days – it is standard, rather than exceptional, practice for officers from African states to complete them. However, the most elite courses are attended by soldiers with outstanding leadership skills, who, upon returning home, enjoy greater prestige among the local officer cadre and boost their sense of agency. This, in turn, may increase their readiness to carry out political interventions.¹²

When members of the military decide to carry out a coup, they are hoping that they will not face any serious consequences. The sanctions introduced by the AU between 2003 and 2015 never resulted in coup perpetrators being held criminally responsible. These individuals were aware that the restrictions imposed on them, such as suspension of their membership of regional organisations, would be temporary, and that they would be rehabilitated after a year or so. Moreover, in recent years, the AU has shown insufficient determination and consistency in its attempts to eliminate coups. Although the situation in Egypt in 2013 and in Zimbabwe in 2017 resembled classic examples of seizure of power rather than “good coups”, the military managed to convince the AU that their actions “were not a coup d'état”,¹³ as a result of which they avoided even minor sanctions from this organisation. Similarly, in April 2021 the PSC failed to impose sanctions against Chad, claiming that the junta's arguments citing the need to ensure stability following the

¹⁰ “A shooting puts the spotlight on military training for allies”, *The Economist*, 14 December 2019, www.economist.com.

¹¹ L.J.M. Seymour, T. McLaughlin, *Does US military training incubate coups in Africa? The jury is still out*, The Africa Report, 2 December 2020, www.theafricareport.com.

¹² J.D. Savage, J.D. Caverley, “When human capital threatens the Capitol: Foreign aid in the form of military training and coups”, *Journal of Peace Research* 2017, vol. 54, no. 4.

¹³ L.E. Asuelime, “A Coup or not a Coup: That is the Question in Zimbabwe”, *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 2018, vol. 5, no. 1, p. 5–24.

sudden death of the country's leader, were justified.¹⁴ In 2019 in Sudan, the AU initially condemned the Transitional Military Council, but later it recognised it as a reliable partner worthy of becoming a component of the future government. In these circumstances, the adoption – including by ECOWAS – of a tough stance towards Mali and Guinea in May and September 2021 seemed selective and, in this context, insufficient to discourage other possible coup initiators.

A THIRD TERM OF OFFICE—A CONSTITUTIONAL COUP

Attempts to extend the period of rule beyond the number of terms enshrined in the constitution (usually two) are a problematic practice and another example of a breach of the generally accepted principles of governance. Out of 42 presidents who ended their legitimate last terms of office between 1990 and 2019, a mere 53% stepped down voluntarily. For example the leaders of Gabon (Omar Bongo in 2003), Uganda (Yoweri Museveni in 2005) and Cameroon (Paul Biya in 2008) succeeded in abolishing the limitations on the number or terms of office. Other leaders – for example in Rwanda (Paul Kagame in 2015), Ivory Coast (Alassane Ouattara in 2020) and Guinea (Alpha Condé in 2020) – have reset their presidential term tallies to zero. Other politicians, e.g. in Namibia (Sam Nujoma in 1998) and Burundi (Pierre Nkurunziza in 2015) have secured themselves the possibility of serving an additional, one-off term of office.¹⁵

In some cases, the leaders' plans to extend their period of rule were blocked by national institutions (e.g. Nigeria's parliament in 2006). In other instances, even if they were given the opportunity to extend their rule, specific leaders lost the subsequent elections (e.g. Abdoulaye Wade in Senegal in 2012). In April 2021, uncertain about his re-election, Somalia's president pushed through an extension of his expiring term by two years, but later he withdrew from this plan.¹⁶

¹⁴ *AU summit switch to Addis deals diplomatic blow to Kaka*, Africa Intelligence, 28 September 2021, www.africaintelligence.com.

¹⁵ A. Cassini, *Term Bids and the Risks for Democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 26 October 2020, www.ispionline.it.

¹⁶ *Bowing to pressure, Somalia's president agrees not to extend presidential term*, Reuters, 28 April 2021, www.reuters.com.

Tunisia's president Kais Saied suspending the operation of the country's parliament (on 25 July 2021) is an example of another unilateral method of effecting a political shift without resorting to the use of the military. Citing the intention to cleanse the corrupt political system, he went on to rule by issuing decrees,¹⁷ and in March 2022, when parliament attempted to convene an online session to strip the president of his extraordinary prerogatives, he dissolved it.

Although less spectacular than military coups, "constitutional coups" have similar functions – according to declarations of their perpetrators they serve to avoid chaos, but in reality their aim is to seize power. They are accompanied by violence, although not as open as during military coups – frequently specific regulations are enacted in conditions that prevent genuine debate and opposition. They also serve to undermine democratic standards and to weaken the institutions. The practice of "constitutional coups" continues to be tolerated and the leaders that resort to it face no consequences. This is despite the fact that it is explicitly prohibited for example under the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which is formally binding on the 34 AU states that have ratified it. The prevalence of this practice indicates that constitutional provisions and democratic procedures are secondary to the will of a specific individual, which also undermines efforts to eliminate coups d'état as such.

Finally, there are cases where a military coup prevents a president whose approval rating is declining from pushing for a third term. This was the motivation behind the coup that toppled Mamadou Tandja in Niger in 2009, the palace coup that responded to the demands voiced by a protest movement against Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso (2014), and the most recent coup in Guinea. In the context of the latter coup, the current ECOWAS chairman, Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo, has called on the ECOWAS countries to adopt and to consistently obey regulations¹⁸ banning "third terms of office" as a necessary measure to prevent any future military coups.¹⁹

¹⁷ S. Grewal, *Kais Saied's power grab in Tunisia*, Brookings, 26 July 2021, www.brookings.edu.

¹⁸ A previous attempt to introduce a region-wide ban on extending a leader's period of rule beyond two terms of office failed in 2015 following objections voiced by Togo and Gambia – states ruled by long-time leaders.

¹⁹ E.F. Forson, *Ghana's president backs calls for West African body to outlaw 3rd term mandates*, Andalou Agency, 4 October 2021, www.aa.com.tr.

A DOMINO EFFECT?

The coup carried out by young Malian officers: Assimi Goïta, Malick Diaw, Ismaël Wagué, Sadio Camara and Modibo Koné, has a special place on the list of the most recent coups. This was the first in a series of recent coups in which society manifested its overwhelming support not so much for the very act of toppling the authorities (as in the “good coups”), as for the members of the junta as the coup’s leaders. This was facilitated by the anti-French rhetoric they used, having correctly recognised public sentiment, as well as by the references they made to the sense of national pride, and by their image as young professionals that was popular with the youth. As their power solidified, especially after Goïta became president in May 2021, members of the Malian junta were reluctant to provide a specific timeframe for the restoration of civilian authorities, usually required by regional institutions. Later, Doumbouya in Guinea and Damiba in Burkina Faso followed suit (the former proclaimed himself president, just like Goïta did). In all these instances, young officers from the most elite units viewed themselves as the vanguard of a generational shift as they overthrew civilian leaders hailing from the same social group, i.e. one that was for many years closely associated with the French socialist party. An influential anti-Western pan-African activist from Benin, Kemi Seba (who has nearly 1 million Facebook followers), has defined the current trend and called on the officers from francophone countries to follow Mali’s example, to overthrow the formal democratic government and to base the new order on an alliance between “sovereignist-oriented military officials and a pan-African civil society”.²⁰ Unlike in the coups in Zimbabwe and Sudan, in which power was seized by high-ranking officers representing the older generation in order to maintain their collective political and economic privileges, as a result of the coups in Mali, and later in Guinea and Burkina Faso, young charismatic officers communicating their desire for radical change came to power. In particular in francophone states, officers view Goïta’s success, which involved changing the rules of the game (e.g. withdrawal of French troops, increasingly close ties with Russia) and winning society’s support, as a new benchmark. Guinea refusing to support the ECOWAS sanctions imposed on Mali for failing

²⁰ Kemi Seba’s Facebook account, Facebook, 31 January 2022, www.facebook.com.

to hold the previously announced elections was one manifestation of this unique solidarity between the young military officers in power.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

The events that happened in 2021, which was a record-breaking year when it comes to the number of military coups, and at the beginning of 2022 should not be viewed as symptoms of fatigue with representative democracy which continues to be the continent's most desirable form of government. However, they indicate that the process of boosting this democracy must be accompanied by tangible benefits in areas such as socio-economic development, strengthening of institutions and consistent application of international pressure both on military juntas and on leaders seeking to extend their rule using seemingly legitimate methods. The coups were accompanied by declarations and expectations regarding political systems opening up to a greater degree (Guinea), by secondary attempts to gain broad legitimacy (Chad), and by a mass-scale grassroots protest movement calling for restoration of the state's reformist orientation (Sudan). This indicates a prevailing reluctance to restore the "strong-arm" rule. Against this backdrop, the popularity of the new military government in Mali, which has also spread to francophone West Africa, remains an exception whose ultimate assessment is not known for the time being. However, it is certain that a new pattern that has crystallised there inspires further coup initiators, triggering a domino effect. This pattern continues to be an exception, rather than a rule, and its possible consolidation will depend on the development of the domestic situation, especially in Mali and Burkina Faso, e.g. the severity of the threat posed by jihadists. The attitude of the AU and the regional blocs towards the new trend will also matter – especially their ability to restore their credibility, consistency and greater enforceability of their decisions. The special ECOWAS summit devoted to coups (held on 3 February 2022) did not result in any breakthrough regarding these issues. Therefore, Senegal's president Macky Sall, who chairs the African Union in 2022, will be under pressure to bring about such a breakthrough.

²¹ *Guinea keeps borders open with Mali hit by ECOWAS sanctions*, Africanews, 11 January 2021, www.africanews.com.

Military and constitutional coups in Africa from 2017 to early 2022



Source: own study.