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Africa: The recent upsurge in military coups – Their cause and implications for democratic governance and Christian communities

Author: Yonas Dembele

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Africa: The recent upsurge in military coups - Their cause and implications for democratic governance and Christian communities

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1. Introduction

The military coups in Gabon on 30 August 2023 and in Niger on 26 July 2023, have reinvigorated debates on the vulnerability of African nations to coups d'état. These occurrences prompt questions which align with broader concerns about governance and stability and necessitate an analytical framework that takes into account various contributing factors. It is not sufficient to merely examine the political motivations or power dynamics within the armed forces; rather, one must also consider the role of public discontent and geopolitics. US Senior Official John Kirby questioned the premise of [classifying](#) these military interventions as forming a trend (Reuters, 30 August 2023); however, African officials and UN leadership disagree (see Section 2 below). In the subsequent sections, this short report will explore five critical questions:

- First: Can the current resurgence of military coups in Africa be classified as a trend?
- Secondly: What are the underlying factors motivating military personnel to instigate coups?
- Thirdly: What socio-political or economic conditions are precipitating these interventions?
- Fourth: What implications does this phenomenon have for the state of governance and democratic institutions?
- Fifth: How are Christian communities in the affected countries impacted by these military interventions?

2. Is the current resurgence of military coups a trend?

The concept of a “trend” in political science often necessitates repeated instances of a similar event within a specific timeframe, influenced by similar underlying factors. Here, the numerous coups and attempted coups in Burkina Faso, [Guinea Bissau](#) (Reuters, 2 February 2022), [Gambia](#) (BBC News, 21 December 2022) and even the relatively peaceful and well-functioning [Sao Tome and Principe](#) (Al-Jazeera, 25 November 2022), alongside the six coup attempts in 2021 (four of which were successful). In less than three years, Sudan witnessed two coups, underscoring the nation's turbulent journey towards democracy: The first coup in [April 2019](#) resulted in the removal of long-time leader Omar al-Bashir (Freedom House, Special Report, 2022). This change was fueled by a substantial social movement that began in August 2018, when al-Bashir's intention to run for a third presidential term divided the ruling coalition. By 1 January 2019, various civic and political groups had united to form the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), which coordinated a nonviolent resistance against rising food prices and other issues, ultimately leading to al-Bashir's ouster. However, the second coup in [October 2021](#) took a different turn, as the military took full control, justifying their actions by claiming that civilian infighting was jeopardizing the nation's stability. This military rule has thus far failed to serve the broader interests of the Sudanese people, resulting in both political and economic instability. Both coups are part of ongoing research by Freedom House, focusing on how civic movements grow in authoritarian settings.

This list of coups suggests a recurrence that transcends isolated incidents. The assertion is corroborated by UN Secretary-General António Guterres who discerned a “[succession of military](#)

[coups](#)" (UN Geneva, 31 August 2023), highlighted by underlying geopolitical tensions and an encroaching sense of impunity. In June 2023, Bankole Adeoye, the head of the African Union's Peace and Security Council, described the situation as a "[wave](#)" of military coups, noting: "Never before in the history of the African Union have we seen four countries suspended within a single calendar year or 12-month period" (France24, 6 February 2022).

Historically, military coups were commonplace in Africa during the decades following independence, representing one of the significant impediments to democratic consolidation on the continent. According to a study by US researchers Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, Africa has witnessed [over 200 coup attempts](#) since the 1950s, with approximately half of those attempts succeeding (TRT World, August 2023).

A discernible decline in the frequency of coups was observed after the year 2000, as can be seen from the US study. However, recent data indicates a reversal of this decline. For instance, 2021 saw military interventions in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Niger followed by additional attempts in 2022, including two successful coups in [Burkina Faso](#) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 28 October 2022). This uptick in military coups, corroborated by the recent episodes in Gabon and Niger, provides empirical substantiation for considering these incidents as part of a resurging trend.

3. What are the underlying factors motivating military personnel to stage a coup?

The motivation behind the military coups staged in Africa are not merely the outcome of domestic crises but represent an intricate web of local grievances and international geopolitics.

a) Domestic issues

On the domestic front, societal discontent concerning systemic corruption, public disenfranchisement and failures in public service delivery often act as precursors, providing a semblance of legitimacy for military intervention. Such domestic conditions are commonly marked by social unrest, questioning the government's validity and prompting military elements to portray themselves as restorative forces. As a result, in several African nations a degree of public endorsement for military intervention has been noted. This support can be seen as a reflection of general dissatisfaction with existing governance structures, which were often viewed as being corrupt and/or ineffective. Therefore, a country's armed forces are sometimes perceived as a necessary agent for bringing about political change and stabilization. However, this initial public approval is often conditional and may wane over time, especially if the military leaders fail to meet governance expectations.

b) Geopolitics

On the international stage, geopolitical complexities present a formidable layer of influence and complexity. The strategic interests of external powers such as Russia and the West, particularly France, have served to exacerbate the fragility of governance structures. Russia's geopolitical actions in the African theater are geared toward extending its influence, as evidenced in Mali and

Burkina Faso. France's maneuvers, particularly in its former colonies, aim to sustain its geopolitical foothold, often counteracting other international presences. The evolving situation in Mali, exemplified by the comments of Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maiga at the [UN General Assembly in September 2022](#) (Al-Jazeera, 24 September 2022), indicated a significant recalibration of the country's international alliances and internal governance structures. Maiga's explicit lambasting of the French government on such a public international platform showcased a shift in the diplomatic landscape.

France's subsequent [withdrawal of troops in 2022](#) (Al-Jazeera, 16 August 2022) underlined the growing assertiveness of the Malian leaders and perhaps a broader trend of recalibrating relations with former colonial powers. The request for UN forces to also [vacate Mali](#) (UN, Africa Renewal, 6 July 2023) further compounded this narrative, signaling a move, that might totally isolate Mali from the West. As noted by International Crisis Group on 9 February 2023, the reorientation of Mali's diplomatic and security approach [poses a risk](#) to the framework of regional stability which has been in place since 2013. The severance of ties with France, coupled with deteriorating relations with other Western and regional allies, potentially places Mali in a position of increasing isolation. This shift could have significant implications for both national and regional equilibrium, casting uncertainties on existing collaborative efforts to maintain peace and security in the area.

Russia has another tool to rely on - the Wagner group. The engagement of these well-armed mercenaries is creating a further layer of complexity. Their alignment with coup leaders intimates broader transnational, strategic stakes, as seen in their opposition to ECOWAS deployments in Niger. Despite the upheavals surrounding the Wagner group in 2023, including the Moscow mutiny in June and the death of Wagner's leadership - specifically Yevgeny Prigozhin - in August, the general belief among experts is that Wagner's operations in Africa will persist. On 23 August 2023, Rama Yade of the Atlantic Council was quoted as saying: "[With or without Prigozhin](#), for Russia in Africa, it is business as usual" (Atlantic Council, 23 August 2023). Before his death, Prigozhin had declared that Wagner's activities in Africa would continue. This leaves Moscow with several options post-Prigozhin: Dissolve Wagner, nationalize it, or install new leadership. Russia values Wagner's ventures in Africa, which include mining concessions and effective anti-Western propaganda. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov underscored this when he stated to concerned African allies a few weeks after Prigozhin's rebellion that Wagner's work in Mali and the Central African Republic "of course, will continue". Adding a further layer of complexity, shortly after Prigozhin's death, President Putin issued an [executive order](#) requiring all private military groups to pledge allegiance to Russia (The Times of Israel, 26 August 2023). This action could be viewed as both a consolidation of control over groups like Wagner and an elimination of any future threats to Russian initiatives.

4. Regional contagion: How success in one military coup - and the inability of regional and international players to effectively deal with previous coups - can encourage instability in neighboring states and shape geopolitical tactics

The regional contagion effect posits that a successful military coup in one African nation serves as a catalyst for similar activities in adjacent countries. In essence, the accomplishment of one coup effort adds a layer of perceived legitimacy and emboldens military elements in neighboring states to consider similar interventions as viable options. This model of “success breeds success” perpetuates a regional cycle of instability that undermines governance and threatens to erode democratic institutions across multiple nations.

It is clearly to be observed that coups d'état in various countries have not been effectively countered to restore civilian rule. The African Union's limited sanctions and similar measures have not produced the desired outcomes. The military juntas that have ousted governments manage to navigate around these sanctions. They often do so by aligning their international relations with countries that neither demand the return to civilian rule nor the protection of human rights and democracy.

This undermines the effectiveness of the African Union, ECOWAS, and other international and regional organizations in deterring coups d'état. Their inability to enforce meaningful sanctions or take decisive action results in a lack of consequences for those who seize power unlawfully. It raises questions about the organizations' roles and their impact on promoting stable governance, human rights and democracy.

The contagion effect is also not confined to regional boundaries; it extends to international actors as well. Geopolitical adversaries who may have covertly or overtly supported a coup in one nation can take 'lessons learned' from a successful intervention to the next target country. For instance, the [Wagner group](#), which successfully backed one regime change, uses the operational and strategic insights gained to influence or facilitate another coup elsewhere (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 9 August 2023).

This aspect of the contagion effect adds an additional layer of complexity to the regional dynamics of military coups in Africa. It suggests that each successful coup serves as both a tactical and strategic playbook for like-minded military factions and [international actors](#) interested in destabilizing regions to further their interests (RDI, 17 August 2023).

In summary, understanding the motivation behind military coups necessitates an examination that transcends local contexts and considers broader geopolitical landscapes. The volatile blend of internal grievances, complex geopolitical strategies and even mercenary engagements serves as a tinderbox for military actions. Thus, efforts to stabilize governance and build robust democratic institutions must grapple with this multifaceted interplay of factors.

5. What implications does this resurgence of coups have for the state of governance and democratic institutions on the African continent?

The resurgence of military coups in Africa has profound implications for governance and the sustainability of democratic institutions on the continent. Historically, military interventions have had a stultifying effect on democratic norms and institutions. The displacement of elected governments by military regimes undermines the basic tenets of democratic governance, including checks and balances, the separation of powers, and civilian control of the military, thus further entrenching autocratic rule.

Military regimes that come to power often employ repressive tactics to consolidate their rule, undermining key democratic institutions such as the judiciary, the electoral commission, law enforcement and the legislature. Instances abound where military rulers in Africa have manipulated constitutions, suppressed opposition parties and stifled civil liberties, thereby rendering democratic institutions ineffective or subservient to autocratic whims.

History shows that many African leaders who rose to power through military coups have been notorious for weakening or completely dismantling democratic institutions. For instance, the coup in Sudan in 1989 led by Omar al-Bashir resulted in a three-decade-long dictatorship that eroded democratic institutions and rights. In Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe's initial ascent to power was bolstered by military backing, setting the stage for a regime notorious for human rights abuses, including unlawful detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings. During his tenure, democratic institutions were systematically dismantled, free speech was stifled, and opposition figures were ruthlessly silenced. Land was also seized without compensation, leading to economic collapse and widespread poverty. His rule did not just weaken democracy; it shattered the pillars of a just society, leaving an indelible mark on the nation's history.

Furthermore, military interventions inherently lead to the militarization of the state, where the armed forces are no longer neutral entities but rather political actors with vested interests. This is a grave threat to democracy, as it erodes the very foundations of state institutions meant to be impartial and independent. The decline goes beyond weakened governance; it leads to severe curtailments of freedom of speech and freedom of movement. Citizens find themselves unable to criticize the government without fear of repercussions or even move freely within their own country. The military often rules with an iron fist, employing brutal methods to root out suspected 'terrorists', which frequently results in the violation of people's right to protection and due process. In such an environment, the integrity of democratic values is not merely undermined — it is systematically dismantled.

In a nutshell, the recent wave of military interventions on the African continent presents a substantial threat to governance and democratic institutions. By stifling democratic norms, disempowering institutions, and breeding cultures of impunity and authoritarianism, military coups have historically been (and continue to be) inimical to the development of democracy in Africa.

6. How are Christian communities impacted by these military interventions?

The implications of military interventions for Christian communities in the affected countries warrant meticulous scrutiny, particularly in the context of governance and rights. Dictatorships typically provide a challenging environment for the flourishing of rights, including religious freedoms. Though it may be argued that authoritarian regimes can offer a veneer of stability, such stability often comes at the cost of suppressed civil liberties and minority rights.

Applying the World Watch List (WWL) methodology, one of the principal engines of Christian persecution in Africa is *Dictatorial paranoia* (see: [Complete WWL methodology](#), October 2022, p.16). The tightening of control often accompanying military coups can exacerbate existing prejudices and discriminatory practices against Christian communities. Increased surveillance, restrictions on religious gatherings, and stringent censorship of religious texts can further marginalize these communities.

Furthermore, in countries where jihadist groups are operational, it may appear at first that an authoritarian regime could more effectively combat such extremist entities. However, authoritarian regimes can exacerbate religious tensions and often create fertile ground for radical Islamic ideologies to gain traction. Such governments may employ repressive measures that fuel resentment and create an environment where these ideologies can thrive, thereby posing an even greater threat to Christian communities.

Therefore, under military rule, which is prone to devolve into authoritarianism, the prospects for Christian communities to thrive and safeguard their rights become increasingly grim. This is not just a theoretical concern; the impact is tangible and devastating. For instance, in Sudan, Christians had scarcely any room to freely practice their faith. Individuals like Mariam Yahia Ibrahim, Hassan Kodi, and others faced years of unjust incarceration, making it perilous for anyone to speak up against such abuses. Some have been forced to flee their country, while others have been pushed into leaving under inhumane conditions, completely cut off from basic rights and social provisions that are readily available to others. This analysis exposes the overwhelmingly negative impact of military coups and subsequent authoritarian regimes on Christian communities, leaving them vulnerable to systemic persecution and stripping them of their freedoms.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent upsurge in military coups across Africa signifies a trend that requires multifaceted analysis. Both domestic factors — such as public discontent and governance failures — as well as international factors — such as complex geopolitics and the involvement of external actors — play into this alarming development. The historical evidence shows that under military regimes the maintenance let alone the building of democratic institutions is often very problematic. For Christian communities, living under military juntas can pose a severe threat to their rights. Military juntas often transition into authoritarian regimes that suppress criticism and

other liberties, including freedom of religion. In such conditions, the rights of Christians are likely to be trampled underfoot. In the longer term, the threat of thriving jihadist groups endangers their very survival.