
Closing The Gap: Averting Coup D'état In 21st Century Africa

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Abstract

Among post-independence African States, coup d'état was a defining feature of many. Remarkably, post-Cold War era later witnessed a meaningful reduction in coups. Nonetheless, and unsurprisingly, coups resurfaced in 21st century with its occurrence in Central African Republic (CAR) in 2003. From the pragmatic perspective, this paper adopts a qualitative methodological approach, with narrative methodical disposition. Findings of this paper reveals that causes of coups have been ascribed to range from a weak government to lack of democratic principles. Also, the paper reveals the gaps in defining a coup, coupled with the misalignment of coup to public uprising. It is argued in this paper that as eminent as the reasons for coup are being put forward in many quarters, there is no reason or sum-reason duly sufficient for coup to be permissible. This paper recommends that regional authorities like the ECOWAS, ECCAS, EAC, SADC, importantly African Union (AU), must speak in one strong voice to work against coup plotters, with the instrumentality of universal structured peace process and criminalizing the act; an approach beyond the already established instruments of bans and sanctions.

Keywords: Africa, Coups, Structured Peace.

1. Introduction

With the dawn of the 21st century, prime hopes across the globe, including Africa, situate with actualizing meaningful development plans, in order to expressively impact on the lives of the teeming populations. Conversely, hitch on governance in form of coup d'état, has been a strong impediment to realizing those plans. Coup d'état, being among the types of unconstitutional change of government leadership cannot be overlooked. By December 1991, there was a firm reduction in coups across Africa (as some of the coups were mere strategies of power-tussle among world powers that were trying to enhance control of some states in Africa), but has resurfaced with a great concern. Africa's 21st century witnessed her first successful coup in

March 2003, when Francois Bozize overthrew Prime Minister Ange-Félix Patassé of Central African Republic (CAR).

Thereafter, thirteen (13) coups have been carried-out in Africa, from 2000 to 2021, the last being that of Guinea in September 2021, when President Alpha Conde was overthrown by Col. Mamady Doumbouya and the Special Forces Soldiers. Thirteen coups in twenty-one (21) years cannot be ignored, especially in countries that boast of democratic dispensations. Complementarily, it also remains a concern because a coup in a particular country is a surreptitious invitation for the same in a neighboring country, learning from incidences of coups in post-colonial Africa.

Historically, the largely acceptable first successful coup in independent Africa happened on the 13th of January 1963 in Togo. Nonetheless, the Republic of Congo (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) witnessed a coup d'état— when Mobutu Sese Seko, a military officer, toppled the reign of Patrice Lumumba— in 1960 in-between what was popularly referred to as the Congo Crisis of 1960-1965. Prior to that eventful year, there were several unsuccessful attempts in Sudan (1959), Ethiopia (1960), and Somalia (1961). After a successful attempt in Togo, Congo-Brazzaville and Benin witnessed coup in August and October of the same year respectively.

Events in Niger (2010), Mali (2012; 2020; 2021), CAR (2013), Egypt (2013), Zimbabwe (2017), Sudan (2019; 2021), and Guinea (2021) provides a pointer to the fact that rampant coups are resurfacing, and conscious and concise efforts are expected to be in place in order to forestall recurrence. This is the *raison d'être* for this paper, providing the manner to keenly curtail incessant coup d'états or any other *raison d'état* for such move.

As widely the concept of coup in Africa, some countries have not still witnessed it, making it possible to advance for a zero-coup Africa. These countries include, among others, Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa. With the present unstructured approach to coup management, even these not-coup-prone countries are not coup-proof, only if a section of an aggrieved military decides to seize political power. A firm approach in dissuading intending coup plotters is critical and crucial, rather than persuading them to relinquish power that was seized. An approach that imminently negotiates with a disorder practitioner only empowers such disorder. Coup d'état is disorderly, and it should not be condoned.

2. Literature Review

“Coup d'état” is of French origin. It means the stroke of the government or blow to the government, often shortened as “coup”, in usage. Synonymously, the word “putsch” is used interchangeably by many authors. Besong (2005) defined coup as a quick and decisive seizure of governmental power by a strong military or political group; it is the sudden overthrow of a government, usually done by a small group that just replaces the top-power figures. Unambiguously, a coup is critically a militarized engagement, and not a political one. Hence, the use of “political group” in Besong's definition appears less objective. Frantically adding civilian face to it, Mwai (2021) puts up a coup to be an illegal and overt attempt by the military or other civilian officials to unseat sitting leaders. But in constructive quarters, an attempt to unseat is not treated as a coup, only an executed move is, this is a deficiency in Mwai's definition. A coup d'état is a sudden (lasting from a few hours to at least one week), often violent overthrow of a government by a small group of military, police, or security forces (Barka & Ncube, 2012).

Similarly, Powell and Thyne (2011) opine that a coup entails the illegal seizure of power by the military or other elites within the state followed by the holding of power for at least 7 days. Humiliatingly, Decalo (1990), in describing coup, asserts it to be the most visible and recurrent characteristic of the African political experience. Decalo's description is another shade of interpreting the governance deficiencies across several parts of Africa, largely beset with corruption and inefficiency. Coups are generally thought of as efforts to unseat the current chief executive, waged via illegal (though not necessarily violent) means, by conspirators who are some part

of the formal state apparatus (Powell & Chacha, 2019).

Self-coup or auto-coup is another term in the parlance of coups, and it is a method of coup d'état whereby the head of a legitimate government, disbands or reduces the power of the legislative arm and illegitimately undertakes unexpected powers not approved in legal statuses. This kind was what happened in Sudan in 1958 (when Prime Minister Abdallah Khalil formed a coalition government between his own party, National Umma Party [NUP] and the People's Democratic Party [PDP]).

To be clear, self-coup is not a proper definition of what a coup is. The point of external power suppressing or eliminating an incumbent leader must be established. Attempted or aborted coup is even weightier than self-coup, considering the externality factor. Coup is the only way that serving military officers can have access to political powers, with authoritarian tendency. Collier (1978) makes it understandable that the final type of authoritarian regime in Africa is the military regime. According to The Africa Report (2021), coups weaken existing political institutions and encourage political violence; they may also set in motion a cycle of counter-coups and conflict that can increase the prospects of civil war, as in the DRC and Nigeria.

Campbell (2021) provided an incomplete version, when he describes coup as the military overthrow of a democratically elected government. It is not complete because coup is defined also even when there is a military overthrow of a militarized government, as the case in Nigeria when General Yakubu Gowon (a beneficiary of coup in 1966) was overthrown in 1975, bringing to power Brigadier Murtala Mohammed. Murtala was later killed in 1976 by military officers. Likewise in Burkina Faso, Paul-Henri Damiba, a military officer who led a coup that ousted the sitting President,

was also ousted by a coup led by Ibrahim Traoré, another military officer.

In common stance, popular features as 7-day duration, military seizure, and external party (force) come to bear. A begging concern is, why allow military stay for seven days before you confirm there is a coup? It can be argued that the act in itself is supreme enough if already confirmed by the perpetrators (or the victim) through the common media announcement. Hence, this paper takes coup d'état to be a militarized action (bloodless or not) carried out against the incumbent government-lead (legitimate or not) of a defined territorial space, confirmed by either the perpetrator(s) or the victim. Emphasis is not placed on duration, but on confirmation.

3. Methodology

From the pragmatic worldview, this paper adopts a qualitative methodological approach, with narrative methodical disposition. Content and discourse analysis are utilized on the articles and journals consulted. Data are from secondary source only.

4. Results and Discussion

Ungoverned Spaces: Build-ups to Coups in Africa

Myriads of argument are put forward as to the causes of coups, ranging from a weak government to lack of democratic principles. Holla and Hamasi (2021) believe that if democracy will not be upheld and its processes guaranteed, it is reasonably expected that military coup d'état will continue to be experienced. However, this notion cannot be taken hook, line, and sinker; reason being that there are states that are not given to democracy, yet are not characterized with coup d'états; Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia are in this class.

Roessler (2011) also have a differing inclination about the not-so-important tendency of democracy in forestalling

coups, asserts that factors, such as low income, large populations, mountainous terrain, and cross-border sanctuaries, causes coups. Supportively, this paper solemnly agrees with Holla and Hamasi (2021) about their statement that democratic stability in Africa, as is worldwide, faces its most significant existential threat to unconstitutional government changes. Demonstratively, democracy is not sufficient for a coup-free state. In 1979, when Shehu Shagari became the President in Nigeria, it was a contested election, which was a sign of an active democratic effort; yet, a coup against Shagari brought Major General Buhari into power in 1983.

Clandestinely, sit-tight leaders and those that overtly refuse to hand-over political power even at the loss of election as in the case of Ivory Coast when President Laurent Gbagbo declined in handing over to the opposition at the conclusion of the 2010 general elections— citing voter fraud— are ingredients to coups. For Gassebner, Gutmann, and Voigt (2016), among the reasons that have been posited for coups are corruption; social, economic, religious, psychological, and political challenges; and dictatorships. Undoubtedly, economic prosperity has a manner of bringing about political stability, examples are high per capita income, industrious labor force, and high literacy rates. Even when an economy is not purely doing badly, for inherent dubious reasons, coups can still take place. According to Ibrahim (2021), they [pro-coup plotters] seek for signs from the people—dissatisfaction with the bad governance of incumbent governments and popular protest— and they ride on that to power.

Some researchers have also argued of the implications of the dictates of former colonial powers in causing coups, but this is not sacrosanct. Unarguably, foreign interferences surely have a way of cementing the actualization of coups.

Fabricius (2021) believes that the real focus of the AU, and other external actors should be on addressing the causes of coups which include the unconstitutional preservation of power. A rebuttal to Fabricius' point is that the main cause of coup is the unprofessionalism of the plotters, not of anything the incumbent leaders are doing, no matter how derogatory.

Connecting the Dots: Linkages for Peace

With the distinguishing factors that are attributable to coup causal, it is preponderant to assert again that there is no sufficient reason for coup to happen, come what may. The allowable 1960 and 1963 coups in Congo and Togo respectively were the foundational failures of the UN in Africa, in the regard of maintaining peace. Additionally, approaches to curtailing coups in Africa by Africans are deficient in some sorts— non-universalism and punctured peace processes are the iconic concern in this discourse. These two notions will be dealt with in lines to come. In 2000, the OAU adopted the Lome Declaration replacing its long-standing tolerance of military seizure of power with a blanket rejection of coups (Nathan, 2016).

But the attendant approach of the Lome declaration has not averted coups in Africa. With the AU succeeding the OAU in 2002, the supposed fight against coups was also inherited. One of the inherent features of a coup is that, if it is faintly permissible, even when being translated into a legitimate government, it has a way of happening again. This is what Collier and Hoeffler (2007) termed “coup trap”, asserting that once a coup has occurred, the chances of a further coup sharply increase. Cogent roadmap to averting coups are discussed below.

Going Beyond Bans and Sanctions: This is categorically important and frontally necessary to avert coups in Africa. Press statements, expectedly, follows the event

of a coup, but seems not to be very effective on its own accord. The African Charter [of 2007] ... bars the perpetrators of unconstitutional action from contesting elections held ... and from holding any position of responsibility in the political institutions of their state (Nathan, 2016). This caveat should not stop at coup plotters not being part of the newly formed government, it ought to be inclusive of non-acceptability of any arrangement or agreement being offered by coup plotters.

At the occurrence of 2012 coup in Guinea-Bissau, the AU, as known for,

Table 1: Mediation and the AU Ban on Coup Legitimation 2007-14

Coup	Mediating Body	AU Asserts Ban	Lead Mediator adheres to Ban	Government complies with ban
Mauritania, 2008	AU	AU: Yes	Wade: No	No (coup leader elected president)
Guinea, 2008	ECOWAS	AU: Yes ECOWAS: Yes	Compaore: Yes	No (members of junta appointed to new government)
Madagascar, 2009	AU (2009); SADC (2009-13)	AU: Yes SADC: No	Ouedraogo: No Chiassano: No	No (member of interim

Source: Nathan (2017)

Economic Sanity: It is important for African leaders to pay adequate attention to the prosperity-drive of their respective countries by moving towards adequate industrialization. An important argument is, producing 80% of what is consumed within the country is necessary, allowing the remaining 20% serve as importation in relation to international friendliness through trade. With emphasis to comparative advantage on goods and services that can be efficiently produced or offered with both natural, physical, and human resources available, this can be a huge success.

The trust on gross domestic product (GDP) over human development clearly reveals that it is a weak thrust when it comes to economic development. The onus rests on leaders of nations to harness

calls for an immediate restoration of democratic governance. The coup plotters, after arresting both incumbent (interim) president and the second runner in the general elections, made the third runner the interim president, and all electioneering processes were suspended for two years. Adding foresight, Conley (2021) asserts that, if it starts to look like coups can capture power without [rigid] consequences [on plotters], there will be more [coups] before the decade is out. The table below gives a glance on bans and its dishonor.

every possible means to provide honest leadership in an earnest rate. This will include structural understanding of their own terrain, and enhancing unhindered people-centered governance. Selfless work-ethics and formidable systems of operations guarantees trust from the citizen, invariably quieting a covert brooding insurrection. Substantial and perceived corruption must be keenly addressed, without fear or favor. All these are important to build a veritable nation, where zero-coup can come to be.

Universal Structured Peace Process: Shannon, Thyne, Hayden, and Dugan (2015) believe that international responses to coups are best summarized with a single word: inconsistent. Equity in intervention process from AU must be strictly adhered to. The Mauritania coup

d'état of August 2005 received muted condemnation from the AU as the overthrown regime had contravened international norms of human rights and good governance; approximately two years later, another coup d'état took place in August 2008 by the same coup plotters of the previous years; this time, condemnation of the coup was more widespread, with stronger criticism from the AU and regional powers (Birikorang, 2013). Popular opinion and succor does not, at all the times, necessitate legality. Even when the larger populace is happy about the occurrence of a coup, perhaps to displace a much berated leader; regional bodies, chiefly the AU, ought to still take a firm stand against the coup plotters.

As it stands, AU has no strong voice against coup plotters. The Mali coup of August 2020, re-occurring in May 2021 became a political headache for ECOWAS. The lead-plotter, Colonel Assimi Goita promised to hold presidential elections in February 2022. But by December 2021, his government suggested transition period between six months and five years, a suggestion earlier rejected by ECOWAS's mediating official, former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan. Submitting the revised timetable on Saturday January 8, 2022 (the eve of ECOWAS meeting to deliberate the circumstance in Mali), to Ghanaian President, who doubled as the Chairperson of ECOWAS, the transition period was reduced by one year (AFP [Agence France Presse], 2022). At the 4th Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the Political Situation in Mali held in Accra on Sunday, the next day, the statement read in parts:

The Authority was briefed on the conclusions of the Assises National de la Refondation (ANR) of 13 December 2021, leading to the adoption of a calendar on the Transition in Mali. The calendar submitted on the 31st December

2021 by the transition authorities to the Chairperson of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, schedules presidential elections to take place by the end December 2026. This will imply a transition period of six and a half (6.5) years. The Authority noted that important stakeholders did not participate in those ANR, thus reflecting a lack of consensus by national stakeholders with regards to the proposed calendar. Following the visit of the Mediator to Mali on 5 January 2022, the Transition Authorities submitted on 8 January 2022, a new calendar scheduling the conduct of the presidential elections for the end of December 2025, setting the duration of the transition for a total of five and a half years (ECOWAS, 2022: par.6-7: pg. 3).

The proposal was vehemently rejected by ECOWAS, which led to fresh and bold sanctions. Among the sanctions are: recall for consultations by ECOWAS Member States of their Ambassadors accredited to Mali; closure of land and air borders between ECOWAS countries and Mali; suspension of all commercial and financial transactions between ECOWAS Member States and Mali, with the exception of food products, pharmaceutical products, medical supplies and equipment, including materials for the control of COVID-19, petroleum products and electricity; freeze of assets of the Republic of Mali in ECOWAS Central Banks; freeze of assets of the Malian State and the State Enterprises and Parastatals in Commercial Banks; suspension of Mali from all financial assistance and transactions with all financial institutions, particularly, EBID and BOAD (ECOWAS, 2022).

These fresh sanctions on Mali ought to have taken place in 2020. The space of time given to the coup plotters in order to orchestrate the platform for a civilian interim government as an aftermath of the 2020 coup ought to have been disallowed. The Malian government has been building

on illegitimacy, they mobilized thousands of civilians for a protest against the sanctions on Friday January 14, 2022 and the government also promised to challenge the sanctions in law court.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

Apparently, where coups are prone, integrative mixture with insurgent activities remains high in these days of terrorism, as being witnessed in Africa. Zero tolerance for coup should now be the new communication pattern, to discourage military officers currently observing the unfolding events of things in Mali and Guinea, considering the penalties for power seizure.

At the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting held on Tuesday January 11, 2022, it was clear that the junta government in Mali had a backing of the Russian government, a holder of veto power at the Council. In that deliberation, Vassila Nebenzia, the Russian representative, said, imposing sanctions only worsens the situation; and in reacting to the accusation of a Russian private security company supporting the junta government, Nebenzia responded that the Malians have every right to interact with partners who are ready to cooperate with them in strengthening security, and that, criticism of such actions is disrespectful to a sovereign State (UNSC, 2022).

The UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on Thursday January 13, 2022, asserted that it is absolutely essential that the government of Mali present an acceptable election timetable (Nation News, 2022). That was too soft of a request. Sources in the Malian Army confirm that putschists who removed Mali's President Keita spent most of the year training in Russia before retrieving to force out the elected leader (Suleiman, 2021). This supports the notion that a member of the UNSC, who ought to be working for global peace, is backing crisis in a member-state. This is not leaving out

other permanent members of the UNSC and their attendant complicities from one country to another. This supports the call for the restructuring of that council, so that all members can be non-permanent.

Reiteratively, popularly-held opinion of power-seizure for seven days before it can qualify as a coup d'état remains insubstantial. On Sunday January 23, 2022, the President of Burkina Faso, Roch Kabore, was nowhere to be found. The next day, a section of soldiers announced take-over from the President. Their announcement reads in parts, "The constitution is suspended, the government dissolved, the National Assembly dissolved, air and land borders are closed until further notice. A curfew has been imposed from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m." (Burkina24, 2022).

The fateful event happened between two days, with the confirmation of a coup, going by the action. Antonio Guterres has also joined the international community in condemning such act. The title of the statement reads: Guterres calls on Burkina Faso coup leaders to 'lay down their arms' (UN News, 2022). Arguably, the lack of delay to firm criminalization of coup plotters gave boldness to the recent coup attempt in Guinea Bissau, a *next door* neighbor of Guinea, on Tuesday February 1, 2022, with gun shots all around the presidential seat of power with the motive to overthrow the incumbent President Umaro Sissoco Embaló, which led to the death of six persons.

At the Extraordinary Summit of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on the political situation in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, held on Thursday February 3, 2022 in Accra, Ghana, it could be observed that a faint embrace of non-constitutional authority has taken place. ECOWAS reaffirms its readiness to work in conjunction with the African Union and the United Nations to provide the necessary technical support to the authorities in Burkina Faso, Guinea

and Mali in implementing the approved timetables (ECOWAS, 2022b). With statements of this nature, unknown coup plotters in another land have been empowered unknowingly to ECOWAS.

Recommendations

The ECOWAS authority should be supported by both AU and UN, in solidifying the firmness of sanctions on Mali, with the addition of Burkina Faso. Worryingly, the global community is challenged in the manner of a coordinated approach in curbing coups, this provides the space for civil society organizations (CSOs) to continue to demand for sanity in the international space. Scholars and researchers should keep advancing the importance of the military in being obliged to the mandate of protecting the territorial integrity as ordered by their commander-in-chief. We do not expect the military to do the work of CSOs since it will be counter-productive— both to the spirit and to the letter— of peace management if allowed.

The moment a coup is carried out, AU authority in conjunction with the concerned sub-regional body should swing into action by submitting the plotter(s) name to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for adequate prosecution with joint-forces of AU and the sub-regional body maintaining peace on the ground, this is a clarion call to criminalize coup plotters. Criminalizing the act of coup, to the tune of life imprisonment in an anti-coup law, by AU will significantly avert its occurrence

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