

Introduction

Yet Another Season of Coups in Africa?

This Special Issue reflects on the current tensions in the Sahel. We asked a few African scholars to share their insights and help us make sense of the multidimensional crisis in the region, with major repercussions for the trajectory of democratisation on the continent. The contributions are all informed by extensive research experience in the region as well as a commitment to propose recommendations for credible and sustainable long-term solutions.

The July 2023 coup in Niger came on the heels of high-profile, successful coups in neighbouring countries, including the September 2021 coup in Guinea that ousted Alpha Condé, the August 2020 coup that removed Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in Mali, subsequently followed by a ‘corrective coup’ led by Assimi Goïta in May 2021. In January 2022, the government of Roch Marc Kaboré of Burkina Faso was overthrown, followed by another ‘corrective coup’, which brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power.

What historical factors contribute to the recurrence of military and other coups in this region?

In the four Sahelian states currently under military rule (five if we include Sudan), the military and security forces have consistently played an important role in

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the political process. Since the 1960s, the military has operated in a capacity of co-governance or parallel governance, functioning both as a counterpower and a parallel state institution. By and large, the process of consolidating the separation of civil and military powers has unfolded at an uneven pace across the continent. Although it seems to have been resolved in parts of southern Africa (with the exception perhaps of Zimbabwe) and eastern Africa (though Uganda has what might be termed a civilianised military regime), it remains highly contentious in West Africa. As highlighted by Khisa and Rwengabo in their contribution, the emphasis on coups overlooks the essential requirement for a more meticulous examination of the military’s historically varied role in governance across the continent. How can we explain the role and impact of the military on the political life of Niger and the Sahel region over the past few decades? Does this have anything to do with the crisis of confidence in the liberal democratic model?

That crisis of confidence is articulated differently across various social categories and political constituencies. For this reason, it would be unwise to treat its symptoms, its underlying causes and its consequences as if they were all on the same level. The recurring coups do not signal an unattainable democratic aspiration. For Niger, Burkina Faso, and other countries in the region for that matter, there are deeper issues intertwined with an uneven and fraught postcolonial state-building process. Institutional precariousness is both a contributor to coups and a consequence of them. There is a belief that coups could potentially pave the way for an alternative governance model. After all, the very question of democracy in postcolonial Africa remains wholly unresolved. So does the question of nation-building in plural societies. Yet the ineptitude and the corruption of civilian leaders give military leaders useful syllogisms to peddle. Nevertheless, Khisa and Rwengabo not only find few redeeming qualities to coups but also deplore their instrumentalisation by military and civilian actors.

That there is a knowledge dimension in the process of social change is often overlooked. Frantz Fanon, writing in the early post-independence period, was perhaps

right about the fact that African intellectuals had abandoned the continent. In more recent times, however, matters are not helped by the withdrawal of scholars from major policy debates. This has been attributed to the deliberate dismantling of universities and research institutions on the continent. Nonetheless, no emergency should exempt scholars from rethinking the foundations of collective deliberation.

Key Themes in this Special Issue

The political tension in Niger has rekindled longstanding debates—albeit in a different geopolitical context—bearing on the function of regional institutions in conflict management and the advancement of democracy in Africa. In recent years, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has operated in a context of mounting scepticism about its relevance and purpose. Popular perception of the community organisation is that of an old boys' club that applies rules inconsistently in favour of presidents against the interests of the community's citizens. Both ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) follow policy templates that entrench a procedural approach to democracy while narrowing the space for the exploration of alternative democratisation frameworks. But as Lionel Zevounou appositely shows in his contribution, ECOWAS is a complex body with political, judicial, economic and normative purposes and an equally diverse body of actors animated by different perspectives.

Following the July 2023 coup in Niger, ECOWAS imposed a series of stringent sanctions aimed at pressuring the coup leaders into reinstating Mohamed Bazoum's government. The package of sanctions and the manner in which they were handled denote, according to Zevounou, a mode of governance that is reminiscent of colonial commandment. This situation is compounded by an 'international community' that sees the organisation's legal status as devoid of any rational agency. An immediate consequence is the ease with which the community's organisation can be instrumentalised to enforce damaging sanctions and interventions.

Zevounou also highlights several inconsistencies in the various normative debates, which create ample space for arbitrary interpretations of the organisation's mandate. Both Zevounou and Folashadé Soulé underline the adverse consequences of emphasising 'good governance', which has contributed to an outward-looking perspective. This emphasis has encouraged increased involvement with major global powers and the continued internationalisation of African domestic affairs, especially against the backdrop of escalating international competition.¹

Apart from what seems like an inconsistent application of community principles regarding the violation of constitutional change, what is at stake is the regionalisation of a constitutional law that is inadequate at the national level. The imperative of 'restoring' regimes that have perverted the constitutional

process to push for illegitimate mandates seems quite paradoxical.

In addition to concerns linked to the democratic process, the ongoing crisis raises questions about the significance and feasibility of regional governance within the realm of collective security. What conceptual value does 'regional governance' hold in today's geopolitical scenario, especially amidst the politicisation of the military in a context of insecurity, and the possible competing commitments of member states engaged in multiple alliances and treaties? This becomes especially pertinent when considering the impact of migration treaties signed by Sahelian states with the European Union on national security governance and community regulations, particularly concerning the principle of free mobility.

Linked to the above is the unmissable shift in relations with former colonial powers. France's waning influence in Francophone Africa is inevitable. Criticisms of French neocolonialism become most pronounced during times of crisis, as observed in recent years in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Although France and its African allies recognise the necessity for reform, a recurring inclination to 'manage' crises rather than seize them as an opportunity for effective change has resulted time and again in the deferral of postcolonial reform. This reform would entail African sovereignty over domestic political processes, effective control and governance of natural resources for local beneficiation, and the establishment of normal diplomatic relations between formerly colonised and former colonisers.

The growing anti-imperialist/ anticolonial front is mobilising youth around the critical question of the postcolonial (com)pact, more specifically the revocation of postcolonial security and defence treaties and treaties of economic cooperation. The anticolonial posture is more broadly a critique of a historical system in which a former colonial power and former colonies are entangled in intricate ways. It is a critique of a system of subjugation that produces effects over time, namely Colbertism and its colonial operationalisation in Jules Ferry's mission civilisatrice. For the Macron government, it is inconceivable for France 'not to do anything'. Thus, neocolonial righteousness and a misplaced complex of superiority preclude any meaningful transformative framework of relationship or any redemption. The process towards delinking/rupture from the neocolonial order seems irreversible. How might it be better guided and supported?

Ultimately, the Sahelian dilemma poses questions around public intellectuals and the nature of the 'wisdom' they are expected to distil in times of historical shifts. The role of CODESRIA is precisely to provide a platform for that. How can intellectuals invest scholarly work in the march of history? Most scholars are attempting to make sense of the conundrum that plagues the region and the continent more generally, but a fringe section of academics is peculiarly invested in the notion that the pursuit of meaningful sovereignty, what they disdainfully call 'neovereignism', is futile. But word games should not absolve anyone from ethical and historical responsibility.

A Constrained Space-Time

One of the reasons for the ease with which religious or political rebellions have been able to recruit adherents lies in the very configuration of the postcolonial state. Hamidou Magassa shows how a vision of the state mainly centred on cities, especially capital cities, creates a distorted national space-time. This observation holds true for the postcolonial state in a general sense because it does not conform to a singular space-time framework but rather operates across various temporal registers, leading to a loss of control over diverse and interacting dynamics. Magassa also underscores the crisis of legitimacy at the core of the existing legal frameworks in this multidimensional conflict. In addition to eroding state authority, the crisis pits different segments of society against each other and reinforces normative structures that give rise to divergent orders.

In the same vein, Niang points out that the persistent militarised governance of state peripheries has fostered a deep anti-state sentiment. At the same time, it has allowed non-state forms of governance to emerge and develop. Many peripheral communities experience the state as a violent, predatory and exploitative institution. Their rise against states has produced widespread insecurity and eroded existing mechanisms of peaceful coexistence.

Security Policy

Considering the above and given the Sahelian states' overarching emphasis on counterterrorism, Folashadé Soulé and Amy Niang remark that security policy has been woefully inadequate. Where it has been delegated to external

forces, including bilateral and multilateral partners, the approach to security has seldom resulted from a thoroughly considered set of objectives or a long-term strategy for stabilisation. By and large, inconsistency in policy and pervasive mistrust among state agencies has led to a deterioration of security over time. The absence of trust explains inconsistent policy responses to specific security threats. Using the example of the worsening security situation in Tillabéri, Abdoul Aziz Oumarou illustrates the consequences of contrasting interpretations of, and approaches to, security in Niger. Whereas the Issoufou Administration pursued a tough stance against armed groups, Bazoum's government managed to initiate a brief dialogue with these groups, resulting in a temporary improvement in the security situation and a respite for the local population.

Further, Soulé's well-informed analysis shows that security policy in the Sahel is marked not only by a congestion of actors and strategies, conflicting objectives among multilateral actors (EU/UN) and bilateral partners competing for influence (France vs. other EU members vs. emerging powers), changing priorities within Sahelian governments, a misalignment between security needs and the actual provision of cooperation. The resulting absence of a clear and coordinated strategy is a consequence of the complex and fraught foundations of mutual engagement. Mistrust is prevalent, with the belief that Sahelian autonomy is being undermined, which fuels widespread opposition to Western military presence. In this context, the diversification of security partnerships emerges

as a criticism of the limits of conventional security cooperation, particularly the ineffectiveness of the French counterterrorism strategy.

Security policy in the Sahel has also been characterised by disorder and dissonance. While it depends heavily on security partnerships, it appears to be lacking the necessary vision, well-defined objectives and overarching, cohesive strategy required to guide its interactions with external partners. As Folashadé Soulé suggests, external partners have a part to play but only if Sahelian leaders are able to define for themselves a meaningful strategy. The same could be said about the democratic predicament.

A question that many are reluctant to contemplate is the very purpose of democracy, especially 'this' democracy, within a context that calls into question nearly every canonical and normative determination about the location and use(s) of people's sovereignty. What does democracy mean when it has essentially bolstered the ability of corporate groups to capture the state and reshape it according to their private interests? To reduce the region's rich historical and cultural tapestry to a stale debate of democracy vs. autocracy not only misses a significant and necessarily historical pointer, it also leads to a misdiagnosis of the crisis of state and society and its potential solutions.

As most contributors to this issue suggest, without a proper regime of truth, the quest for democracy in Africa remains constrained by injunctions that prioritise superficial electoral procedures of 'fairness' and 'openness', all the while neglecting the complex structures of African societies.

What is the way out of the current dilemma? At the least, one must consider the roots of claims that sustain antagonisms. For Grovogui, 'there is no good peace that does not prefigure a viable future and there are no good peace-makers who do not consider the central concerns of the antagonists before us today'. The Sahelian population's primary concern revolves around the pursuit of long-term stability and collective control over vital public resources. In this waning era of neoliberal globalisation, the Sahel region yearns for a fresh international order that guarantees fair access to its resources while requiring a relentless fight against governments that prioritise multinational corporations and engage in predatory practices.

Collective insecurity spurred by uncertainties induced by a particularly harsh environment and the challenge of devising equitable means of access to scarce resources has inspired highly creative practices of governance and cohabitation. These have

had to take into account a great diversity of economic activities, cultural practices, knowledge economies, lifestyles and religious and spiritual traditions. Grovogui submits that the memories of these arrangements, together with their institutional expression, cannot be understood in the normative language of the liberal democratic framework, for they have nurtured conduct that places the necessity of cohabitation above differences. It seems that protagonists and antagonists in the present predicament would need to be reconnected with the ethical foundations that underpinned the arrangements mentioned above with a view to updating them to the present context. The task ahead is to draw from these resources as a guide to devising mechanisms of governance in respect of pluralism, differences and needs.

Note

1. There is a well-developed literature on the itinerary of the idea of 'good governance', which shows how the notion was emptied of its analytical value as it shifted from being a salutary commentary on state-society relations and became just another 'new label for aid conditionality'. See, for instance, Thandika Mkandawire's 'Good Governance': The Itinerary of an Idea, *Development in Practice*, Vol. 17, Nos 4-5, August 2007.