

# Dunes Shift, Humans Adapt: Political Transformations and Military Coups in the African Sahel

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There is a common view about the recent coups in West Africa that is at once confused, misleading, dangerous and unhelpful. This is that the recent coups are antidemocratic, anti-French, ‘nativist’ and unpragmatic. Of course, most commentators have not put it so starkly. They resort to a plethora of concepts and inferences in their observations: praetorianism, neo-sovereignism, neopatrimonialism, etc., all of which occlude a central normative agenda. The combined elements of this agenda are:

- 1) a return to the status quo ante or restoration of prior regimes;
- 2) the preservation of French and Western interests; and
- 3) the continuing marginalisation of sociopolitical entities with legitimate grievances, some dating back to the time of independence, that conflict with the central tenets of the status quo ante.

This is not to say that the proponents of the above agenda lack evidence for their arguments. Nor is it my claim that they have no desire for peace. I hold simply that the choice of the lenses used by analysts and critics is necessarily a subjective starting point. It is a matter of ‘science’ and objectivity that one does not dismiss perspectives *prima facie* on account of the identity of their authors. In fact,

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the diversity of perspectives and opinions is integral to the quest for truth. It is therefore welcome that the recent military takeovers in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger—and perhaps now Gabon—have generated open debates and positions bearing on both the facts of the matter and the solutions to the crises that brought them about in the first place.

The point of this essay is not, therefore, to uphold sets of facts and realities as exclusively true. Nor is it my intention to claim the monopoly on knowledge of the region or the ways towards peace. However, I hold, that the proliferation of opinions around the Sahel has not been enlightening. Often, commentators and even policy-makers have put forth partial logic or modes of rhetoric that are provable only in the context of their preferred perspectives and agendas. One is that ultimatums, sanctions and threats of military intervention alone would either dissuade the new juntas or bring about legitimacy through the

restoration of democracy and the rule of law. Significant segments of the populations remain unconvinced of this, and not because they do not yearn for effective governance and the rule of law. Rather, they seem to question the nature, purpose and ends of governance as well as the substance and applications of the law.

The apparent disinterest of large swathes of the population in the present solutions to their predicaments suggests that the credibility, legitimacy and viability of these solutions—again, ultimatums, sanctions and threats of intervention—are in dispute, just as the arguments that support them lack persuasive and emotive powers. For instance, arguments in favour of the restoration of the status quo ante are predicated on views that the recent coups represent a setback from democracy and the rule of law. This is paired with views that the juntas themselves are throwbacks from prior military dictatorships.

Taken together, these two sets of views indicate a fear of the dangerous regression towards authoritarianism and neopaternalism. The purveyors of this thesis, who are the majority, often allude to the not-so-demonstrable idea that the region had been inching away from authoritarianism in the direction of governance, which implies the

actuality of representative democracy and effective regimes of law. In other words, this view conflates elections with democracy and the latter with good governance and citizens' participation in the management of public affairs.

To counter the above misrepresentations, several officials—from Nigeria to Senegal and elsewhere—have pointed out that 'democratically' elected officials have also recently tampered with the Constitution or fundamental texts of their countries to retain power. Indeed, the region is also now in the grip of the temptation by officeholders to exploit legal loopholes in the existing Constitution for extra mandates beyond the legal limits. The greatest scandal yet is that so-called 'democrats' or 'elected officials' constantly deploy the resources, machinery and officials of the state in support of their own political campaigns. To the political rivals and competitors of officeholders, these abuses of power are not mere indiscretions. They are the hallmarks of the regimes that the juntas now seek to replace.

The irony today is that the juntas have reverted to the same justifications used by the supposed democrats to seize power. For instance, Alpha Condé (Guinea), Alhassane Ouattara (Côte d'Ivoire) and like-minded others introduced peculiar languages of 'necessity' and 'responsibility' as grounds for subverting constitutional provisions. In Guinea, Condé claimed that he was abiding by the will of his followers and 'the people' by staying in power to complete projects begun under his presidency. Accordingly, 'popular sovereignty' held a 'higher' moral status over the Constitution. Ouattara, too, brought constitutional prescriptions to run for a third mandate on the grounds that chaos would ensue following the elec-

tion because both his hand-picked successors had died mysteriously after declaring their candidacies. In other words, his own judgement outweighed constitutional jurisprudence and democratic norms. Finally, both Condé and Ouattara claimed that they were staying in power to restore the people's faith in government and deliver on their campaign promises. It is not far-fetched, therefore, to detect confusion among supporters of the juntas around the arguments and pleas for a return to the status quo ante in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger. Even the astute observer is at times confused about the purpose and end of restoration.

In what follows, it is not my intention to sketch every development leading to the constitutional orders of the regions and their associated languages, institutions and practices, whether written or unwritten. This essay is one of orientation towards understanding the crises. It offers neither a full account of the above nor exegeses of particular constitutional texts or related philosophical and theological underpinnings. This would be at once pretentious, in any case, and impossible to achieve in this space.

Methodologically, this essay is based on memories and remembrances of past formalised practices and institutions of governance. These memories and remembrances are based on historical, logical and institutional inferences to the origins of the spiritual, constitutional and political terms of cohabitation. These are of heuristic value and hold lessons today for a number of reasons. The most important is that they evolved organically in response to the exigencies of life among diverse communities, from distinct ethnic, linguistic, religious and occupational groupings.

Significantly, the norms and core principles of cohabitation and coexistence share genetic ancestries in ideologies of power, moralities and governance that evolved in the region over centuries. They spanned the advent of empires and statecraft from the Songhai and Mandeng empires of Gao and Mali to nineteenth-century Fulani imamates; the parallel political and moral engineering among neighbouring societies; the retreat of the Moors from Spain and the introduction in North Africa and the Sahel of ideologies and practices of statecraft, law and society drawn on Andalusian antecedents; the introduction of Ottoman ideologies of cohabitation in Mediterranean Africa; the effects of European colonialism on the heels of the transatlantic slave trade; the advent of decolonisation in response to anticolonialism; and the defanging of anticolonialism under less-than-legitimate neocolonial arrangements after decolonisation. I refer specifically to those that pertain to political settlements and management of resources under various imperial rules and states to which various social, market and religious forces contributed.

The objective of my inferences—again from memorial archives and their institutional expressions—is to highlight known, if seldom acknowledged, practices that both align and part with canonised or authoritative views of the region in public debates and reporting. These relate to the ways in which the peoples of the Sahel and their neighbours to the north and south coped with, *inter alia*, the pressures of an inhospitable geographic environment, resource scarcity, cultural and religious pluralism, and empire and warfare, amidst the necessities of production and distribution of the essential goods of life. The base inspirations and fabrics of the underlying settlement were religion, spi-

rituality and the power and wealth of the protagonists and antagonists. It is my contention that, throughout, there seemed to be a consciousness or common awareness of the necessity to find permanent or semi-permanent solutions to conditions of life that spared no one.

The principal inference is that, as in Europe during the time under consideration, religion, war and empire provided the context for much of the social, constitutional and institutional developments in the Sahel and neighbouring spaces and moral ecologies. Like Europe, again, the contours and substances of the basic understandings about governance and living together can only be defined within the histories that preceded each set of arrangements, the moral exigencies leading to them, and the cognitive and emotional frames that attached to them. These principles respond to the material necessities of the *vivre ensemble*, of coexistence, encompassing moral economies of wealth, solidarity and sharing.

In this region, the terms of the base understandings shifted over time due to internal and external factors, prompted in any case by changes of fortune among protagonists and antagonists as well as slavery and imperial and colonial interventions. Nonetheless, it appears that the peoples of the Sahel, and the Sudanese region that abuts it in the south, adapted to and therefore survived each shock to the systems in place. They managed to reach self-generated understandings that set the moral, ethical and symbolic terms of living together, complete with the appropriate institutional arrangements and practices. In any other contexts, the related understandings would be regarded as amounting to unwritten constitutional orders.

To restate, the orders to which I refer emerged under the shadows of jihads, the slave trade, the advent of regional empires, the retreat of the Moors upon the collapse of their Andalusian experiment, and the advent successively of Ottoman rule, French colonialism, African anticolonialism and the *Francophonie*. It is my contention that, during these times, there emerged vernaculars of political subjectivity, power, social relations, spiritual connections that generated modicums of appreciation of the need for coexistence, respect for others and solidarity towards all. These vernaculars emerged from clear understandings of the material, moral, ethical and spiritual exigencies of life and its ends. They can be found even today in languages and practices of power and cohabitation. We hold from collective recollections and memories that speakers—or political protagonists and antagonists—often failed to uphold them, leading to conflicts and wars, as we have today. Even so, they also set the parameters and contours of justice and peace after conflicts and wars.

The ultimate aim of this essay is to point to the undoing of the terms of living together. The causes are many, but one can easily point to French and other foreign interventions in the region. The scales and manners of intervention had lasting impacts, with a bearing on today's disgruntlement towards France and other foreign powers. French interventions included the slave trade, the establishment of the North African protectorates, murderous missions of exploration, subsequent colonial wars and post-World War II subversions of domestic politics in the region that favoured the former colonial power. Together, they contributed

to the fraying of the constitutional, institutional, symbolic and political terms of cohabitation in the region. The memories and remembrances of the degrees of interventions and interferences now appear to the ill-willed and unknowing as 'emotional', anti-French and therefore lacking rational and empirical cognitive foundations.

The last inference is that normative and constitutional practices by incompetent, ill-advised and/or corrupt postcolonial elites contributed to the present political impasses. While it is fair to point to the domestic national corruptive practices of the ruling elites, the postwar context of decolonisation led to mistakes and miscalculations that still echo today. For instance, postcolonial Constitutions lacked the cognitive content of past forms of the *vivre ensemble*. That is to say, they seldom reflected established norms and relationships that proved to have deep meaning for the citizenries. The omission occurred partly because of another omission, more central to proper institutional designs, of the trajectories of the history of the *vivre ensemble*. Both these omissions meant that no proper attention was given to fault lines to be avoided and ramparts or bridges to be reinforced. The final omission was the purpose of the *vivre ensemble*, developed over time to reflect both necessity and imperative: the necessity to join hands for survival and the spiritual imperative to define the end of life. The final omission of postcolonial constitution-making was the transplantation from Europe (in the present case, France) to the Sahel of forms of powers and structures of social organisation that did not reflect either the political or ecological landscapes of the region.

The last remarks are the reasons that I am not convinced that the present juntas are adequately prepared to deliver on their own promises of pan-African self-determination. The last task requires more than political posture. Thus far, one can say with certainty that the phenomenon of the coups reflects a yearning for agency, which is to allow Africans to define their own destiny. Yet, politics without a moral horizon is destined to failure. The same can be said of the oft-repeated appeal to the ideology of Pan-Africanism. This appeal still lacks specificity, without which it is an empty gesture. At the moment, we are caught between flying blind (which is politics without moral horizon) and ineffectiveness: the ultimate outcome of an ideology lacking proper political pragmatism and constitutionalism. In short, the coups have alerted us to the extent of the deterioration of the terms of the 'living together'. However, the juntas are yet to demonstrate the ability to ideologically imagine a destination and the political wherewithal to engineer better constitutional and institutional frames to a better future.

I disagree with those who think that the crises in the region are reducible simply to the problems of terrorism and democracy, the elimination of the one and the institution of the other. The crises have deeper roots as well as, fortunately, accessible solutions in the region. The role of public intellectuals at this moment should extend beyond denunciations and expressions of displeasure. It should be to aid in offering moral, ideological and political resources (loosely speaking) towards new modes of engagement of the problems besetting the region today.

The questions to be answered today are the ones that are the principal axes of the conflicts and wars in the region. Have the Sahel and Sudanese regions historically been Islamic, Muslim, multiconfessional, secular, or all of the above? What do the answers entail in terms of social relations, cultures and cohabitation? Is there an inherent mandate to tolerance? What form does such a mandate take constitutionally? Are historical land tenure systems commensurate with those inhering from the European enclosure models? To whom do the gold, rivers, forests and other resources belong and to what ends must they be put? Relatedly, what kind of economies of production, distribution and exchanges are suitable to the living environment? Further, what degrees of power, commands and injunctions from the above are legitimate? What are the respective spheres of authority of each socio-cultural, religious and political entities? How do we elect leaders and to whom are they accountable? What are the limits of the powers of rulers and what degree of coercion are they permitted to use to maintain and enforce their authorities? Finally, what are the meanings of security and general welfare? There is, however, one central question that hovers above all of the above: Who gets to decide?

These are matters for debate before, during and after the next peace settlements. The related questions must be posed to protagonists and antagonists with the assistance of knowing, knowledgeable and attentive peace-makers. From the Great Sonni Ali Ber to Kwame Nkrumah, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ibrahim Niass, Ouezzin Coulibaly, Amílcar Cabral, Robert

Sarah and beyond, leaders of this region have intuitively understood that good peace and great societies depend on clear vision and forethought. In truth, it is the case everywhere in the world. 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.

In the coming months, I will offer a number of theses on the viability of competing political forms in the Sahel-Sudanese region, which extends to the Mediterranean, that will become clearer with time. The proposed essays are intended to recast the debate over the future of the region. They will therefore link questions of governance and cohabitation to available spiritual, religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural resources that militate in favour of new political experiments. My goal is to offer elements of political imagination to serve as a foundation for new constitutional and institutional arrangements. These resonate with the histories, cultures, desires and ambitions (or wills) of the inhabitants of the region. The 1990s national conferences in the region provided a provisional answer. The outline of this answer was that zones of conflict are public republican spaces just as the antagonists of yesterday and today are all the future citizens of tomorrow. Their lives and concerns are matters for the states to incorporate, and not exclude, in the pursuit of peace.