

The Pains, Perils and Poisons of the Coup D'état

Military coups in Africa tend to attract inordinate attention, especially from the Western media and academia. The Western media is usually keen to report the dramatic and the sensational that comes out of Africa. On its cover page of January 1984, *Time Magazine* summarised the continent in three words: 'Coups, Conflict and Corruption'.¹ On 31 January 2023, the *New York Times* ran a headline: 'Five African Countries. Six Coups. Why Now?' (MacLean 2023). A similar story appeared in *The Economist*, on 9 October 2023: 'Where will the next coup be in Africa?' In other words, for Western media, the coup is Africa's bizarre normalcy.

It is bizarre because recent research shows that there is no particular relationship between coup diffusion, the proliferation of coup-incentives and the triggering of coups d'état. It also seems that 'democratic backsliding' is not a sufficient coup-trigger. But there is an observed correlation between poverty, coup legacy, ongoing dilemmas of democratic consolidation and recent coups (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023). There are as yet no sufficient or compelling explanations for the recent upsurge in coups.

But we have been told that the 'coup-epidemic' has returned to the continent with a big bang—a wave of military putsches across the Sahel and West Africa, starting particularly with the August 2020 coup in Mali against President Ibra-

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him Boubacar Keïta, then in 2021, coups in Chad, Mali (again), Guinea Conakry and Sudan; in 2022 in Burkina Faso (twice in January and September); and in 2023 in Niger and Equatorial Guinea.

These coup incidents have led many to suggest that there is a return to the era of coups d'état, but that suggestion betrays a lack of historical perspective on the over-sized roles of the military and militarism in African political processes writ large (Hutchful and Bathily 1998). The claim of a 'return of the coup' in and of itself says little about the causes and triggers of these putsches. It also says little about the fluctuations in coup incidents over time—decline, then return, then decline again.

For most of the 2010s, the count of successful coups trended downwards. The trend and trajectory appeared to point towards an emerging 'taboo' of sorts against direct military takeovers on the continent.² As Issaka Souaré persuasively argued in a 2014 article in the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, since the adoption of the Lomé

Convention, a normative standard had taken root, with the African Union playing the role of a 'norm entrepreneur' (Souaré 2014).

Coups in Historical Context

Egypt registered Africa's first military coup d'état in 1952. Sudan followed in 1958. Further south and across to West Africa, the bloody overthrow of President Sylvanus Olympio in Togo in 1963 became the bookend to an unfolding wave. When the khaki men turned on President Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966, the reverberations rang louder across the continent and, indeed, around the world. Dr Nkrumah was not just the doyen of Africa's struggle for liberation; he was the chief architect of a united continent. His regional and international reputation as the Pan-Africanist and continental liberator of the time did little to save him. His overthrow was a clear harbinger of what lay ahead for the continent.

By the end of the 1970s, there had been a staggering forty successful military coups. The historian Richard Reid has laconically noted a revolving-door regularity of soldiers overthrowing soldiers in Benin—in just ten years, Benin had experienced five successful military coups (Reid 2012:154). At the end of the 1980s, most African states had experienced at least one successful coup, with several repeat cases, notably Benin, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, tied at six apiece.

After overthrowing civilian leaders, uniformed men turned to overthrowing each other in counter-coups, palace coups and ‘coups of descending order’. In Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone, among others, senior officers who had overthrown civilian incumbents were themselves taken out by disgruntled junior officers.

One thing that emerged in this era of routine coups that is interesting—and remains puzzling to students of civil–military relations—is that while some countries experienced recurring military coups d’état, others, like Ghana after Jerry Rawlings’s ‘second coming’ in 1981 and Uganda after Tito Okello’s overthrow in 1986, did not follow the same course. During the 1990s, some countries remained more coup-prone than others despite the latter having a previous, similar predisposition to coups. There seems to be an unknown mechanism for cutting the cord that connects one coup d’état to the next. Understanding the ‘coup-proofing’ strategies, therefore, remains a relevant area of inquiry (Rwengabo 2013).

The Ghanaian Experience

The overthrow of Dr Nkrumah in 1966 introduced a coup-culture that dogged Ghana for a long time. After a brief return to civilian democratic rule in 1969, President Kofi Busia was overthrown in 1972 by Colonel Ignatius Kutu Acheampong, who in turn was overthrown in a 1978 palace coup by his deputy, General Frederick Akuffo, only for General Akuffo, too, to be overthrown months later in a junior officer’s coup in June 1979!

The late 1970s and early 1980s were tempestuous times in Ghana. Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings and others mutinied

in May 1979, were arrested and condemned to death for attempting to overthrow General Akuffo’s ruling junta, the Supreme Military Council II. But as Rawlings awaited execution, a small group of junior officers daringly freed him; he then announced the overthrow of General Akuffo and declared a new government under the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). The AFRC then went on a rampage. It was called ‘house-cleaning’.

In what was arguably the most extreme and chilling public act, the ‘small boys’ running the show in Ghana against the ‘big men’, to use Paul Nugent’s words (1995), publicly executed half a dozen senior army officers, including three former heads of state: generals Akuffo, Acheampong and Akwasi Afrifa. Afrifa had co-led the 1966 coup against Dr Nkrumah.

Allegedly, the ‘big men’ in the army and their civilian counterparts had visited so much wrong on the country through corruption, abuse of power and runaway malfeasance that there was a need for an operation of exorcism. The corrupted sociopolitical environment that had eaten up Ghana went by the popular local word *kalabule*. The mantra of the moment, given moral currency and credibility by a controversial Catholic priest, the Rev Dr Kwabena Vincent Damuah, was ‘let the blood flow’. And flow, it did.

For what it was worth, elections were held swiftly at the end of 1979 and a new civilian president, Dr Hilla Limann, took over, only to be overthrown on the last day of 1981 in what became Rawlings’s second coming under a new junta name, the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC). Another junior

officers’ coup ended Ghana’s short-lived Third Republic.

The PNDC ruled Ghana with an iron fist up to 1992, when the Fourth Republic got underway with Rawlings transitioning to an elected, civilian president. He stepped down in 2000 after serving two elective terms. During the first three years of PNDC rule, between 1982 and 1985, there were at least five attempted coups!

Junior officers overthrowing not just civilian governments but the entire political establishment, including the extant military hierarchy, became somewhat of a modal trend across West Africa—in Liberia, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and most infamously in Sierra Leone, where, in 1992 Captain Valentine Strasser became the world’s youngest head of state, aged 25, perhaps clueless about what to do with the power and responsibility that came with that position! Interestingly, decades later, Strasser’s then colleague and deputy who overthrew the young head of state, Julius Maada Bio, came to power through an election in April 2018 and was re-elected in June 2023.

At any rate, the painful experience of numerous coups and failed coups in Ghana, especially at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, appears to have entrenched an anti-coup norm that has held firm among Ghanaians. Today, Ghana runs on a precarious quasi-liberal democratic system characterised by citizens’ disillusionment with the failed promises of democracy, elite corruption and alternation of power between two parties with little socioeconomic transformation. But to the average Ghanaian civilian, and in the armed forces, a military takeover is unlikely to be viewed as a necessary remedy. As Humphrey

Agyekum argues in a recent monograph, Ghana's armed forces transformed from orchestrators of coups to defenders of a civilian political settlement (Agyekum 2019).

The Poisoned Chalice

In many African countries, nearly every successful coup receives a rapturous public celebration from citizens desperate for better government and accountable leadership. But careful assessment shows that coups have hurt more than they have helped Africa's quest for better government and accountable leadership. The record of military rulers and militarism is deeply appalling. Throughout Africa's post-independence period, military rulers have been as bad if not altogether more atrocious than when civilians have been in charge. It is hard to argue that when civilian leadership fails, coups are a solution—for beyond opening up opportunities for a few armed forces elites to snatch state power, coups are mendacious solutions to civilian governance failures.

In the main, then, the coup d'état, while enticing and clutched onto by those clamouring for change, mostly has been a poisoned chalice. In the end, coups have been little more than power grabs by self-seeking military actors and opportunistic civilian allies. Individuals and groups who seize power in such a conspiratorial manner are hardly different from those who rig elections at the behest of either uniformed personnel or civilian-cloaked military actors.

There are very few African countries that one can point to where the military has not had an oversized role or where military actors are not active players, even when the top leadership is civilian. That is, whether or not whoever is at the

top is draped in military fatigues or dons a business suit, the armed forces have been prominent, in fact the most consequential, actors in the politics of most postindependent African states. And the oversized role of the military is bereft of positive records. Neither in the containment of public crises nor in the governance of state affairs has the military's domination given positive results that capacitated civilian structures would not have achieved (Khisa and Rwengabo 2023).

Even if the military does not overtly overthrow civilian rulers through coups, the uniformed personnel and their corporate group, nevertheless, tend to influence political processes indirectly, including determining election results, aiding dubious constitutional amendments like the removal of term limits to entrench incumbents and committing rights violations on behalf of civilian politicians, among other egregious acts. This is the message of a volume published in 2022 on civil-military relations in Africa, with the subtitle '*Beyond the Coup d'état?*' (Khisa and Day 2022).

While the book's subtitle has a question mark, in the main the authors' core argument posits a necessity to move beyond the focus and obsession with the coup d'état to the expansive and often less obvious but insidious roles of the military and militarism in African politics. Erosion of civilian control in non-coup situations explains the weakening of civilian state structures and the persistent inability to avoid coups d'état where armed forces deem fit. Beneath and besides the coup, therefore, civilian power and control eludes most of Africa.

Coups are dramatic and make for salacious media reporting and screaming headlines. But they seldom tell

us the full story of the role of the armed forces in African politics and society. The above-mentioned book argues that coups had been such a common phenomenon for most of the first decades of postindependence Africa but that, since from about the mid-2000s they had been on the decline, it was somewhat sterile to remain fixated on them.

In fact, even with the recent recrudescence that has caused so much animation and online chatter, taken decade by decade there were fewer coups in Africa in the 2010s than previous decades. And it is too early to say if the 2020s will necessarily give us more coups than, say, the 1990s or 1980s. Quite obviously, the recent wave across the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin is alarming and an indictment on the African Union's (AU) tepidness. Despite the apparent anti-coup norm, the AU has hardly been able to rescind coups. In the larger scheme of things, though, the coup recrudescence is symptomatic of the never-ending crisis of 'governance' on the African continent.

Concluding Reflections

In momentous circumstances and desperation for change, and in the heat of triumphalism, there is often a rush to celebrate military coups. But such celebrations betray a lack of historical context and a proper grasp of Africa's post-independence political crises. Coups have scarcely been solutions to the problems Africa faces. If anything, they tend to exacerbate (and not mitigate) security challenges and sociopolitical instability.

Take one example—Burkina Faso. Jihadist insurgency and attacks against civilians worsened following two successive coups in 2022, the first of which was against a civilian, elected president who was

faulted for leadership failures in securing the country (Africa Center 2023). The situation hardly differs in Mali and Niger, where military juntas overthrew civilian governments in the face of deteriorating security situations. But the coup-makers, too, have demonstrated an appalling failure to improve the security situations in those countries. On the whole, military coups d'état have tended to weaken rather than strengthen state systems.

Some analysts may point their finger at external factors in the recrudescence of coups d'état in Africa. But that raises the question of the agency of African armed forces and political leaders: Why should the African continent remain a theatre of external intrusion? Worse still, any sensible African military and security officer, as well as politician, would know that coups undermine rather than enhance struggles and prospects for popular democratic government. Even though coup-makers justify their actions in the rhetoric of democracy, their record of brutality and aversion to democracy are clear. Coup-culture and military praetorian behaviour have done more to contribute to entrenching militarism and the ethos of the gun than to empower civil society and promote accountable civilian authority.

Notes

1. <https://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19840116,00.html>
2. There is undoubtedly a problem with defining what a successful coup is and is not.

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