

## **The Resurgence of Military Coups d'état in African Politics and the Reversal of Democracy**

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### **Abstract**

The resurgence of military coups in African Politics recently is intriguing. It is a recurrent of militarism in the continent of Africa which went on extinction about two decades ago. This development is problematic because military coups d'état have the potency of contagion effect. They can spread wide and fast too in the circumstance of the level of facilitation by different situations. Last year, Chad, Mali, Guinea and Sudan experienced military Coups d'état. This year also the Military struck in Bissau and Burkina Faso between January and early February respectively. The rather quick successive upsurge and dimension coups have assumed backsliding Africa to the brink of praetorian society calls for concern. This paper attempts to examine the resurgence of military coup d'état in African politics and the reversal of democracy in the Region. The method of Data collection and analysis were built on qualitative descriptive approach while the conflict theory was adopted in explaining the problem investigated. The study found out that, the resurgence of military coups in African politics is a threat to democracy and needs to be tackled for democracy to survive.

**Keywords:** Resurgence, Military Coups d' etat, African Politics, Reversal, Democracy

### **Introduction**

We want our politics to be based on the will of the people, not the whims of the generals, our freedom on the democracy of popular sovereignty, not the democracy of gunfire. (Wilmot, P.F. 1988).

The spate and phenomenal culture of military coups d'état in African Politics was on extinction about two decades age following the victory of democracy over militarism in governance. This development also accounted for the popular endorsement of democracy over

military rule at the global plane. Recently, military coups have resumed in politics in Africa and have taken a contagion dimension. With the emerging trend of quick successive coups, the positive trajectory of democratic flow is being punctuated. The interruption of democracy by the military through coups were a typical feature of countries of the South, indeed Africa and mostly West African sub-region as historical records of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have embodied.

The exit of military regimes from the African political space was deduced by many pro-democracy activists and analysts that military rule was phased out completely in politics or could not resurface this soon due to the defiant posture of the global community to it. Today, the re-emergence of military coups on the continent of Africa is perceived with astonishment and regarded as unjustifiable by many people. Ostensibly, the countries that experienced military regimes in the past are still recovering from the violence perpetrated by the military against them and are still haunted by the vestigial of their misrule. Clearly, in virtually all African societies, there exist forms of political challenge arising from conjunctures of dysfunctional political structures such as failure of the leadership to meet the demands of its citizens. This often gives birth to tension and uprisings which the military consider as deciding factor to intervene by staging a coup sometimes this factor is spurious and untenable because when their interest is at stake, they strike. Even though military rule by whatever excuse is an aberration, they always seek legitimacy by their assurance to be short-lived, relinquish power after restoring normalcy to the society. Experience has shown that the so much speculated normalcy restoration by the military has always remained elusive. The African military is an epitome of terror and notoriety. It interferes unduly on the fundamental human rights of the people. It has not proven to be a

vanguard of the social transformation of any African society. By this deficit, the military has destroyed its own credibility of being a corrective regime.

The resurgence of military coups d'état in African politics is a threat to democracy and it leaves no doubt about leadership crisis in the society. The leadership is to blame because it is the custodian and sets the agenda for the development of the society. The paucity exhibited by the African leadership has foot-dragged democracy to the present democratic debacle with the outcomes of authoritarianism in countries such as Chad, Mali, Guinea, Bissau, Sudan and Burkina Faso among others in the region.

In the light of this recurrence of military coups in Africa, we are poised to x-raying the circumstances that have conditioned their comeback in politics which clearly are due to deteriorating economic conditions and limited state capacity and suggest the way out of military threat to democracy in Africa.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings**

The clarity of the key concepts in this intellectual enterprise is pertinent and undeniable. We therefore conceptualise them to dispel the fog that may surround their import and usage. At this juncture too, we would provide or test a theory of human behaviour that can buttress the issue under discourse.

Military coup d' etat alludes to the sudden, forcible and unconstitutional removal from power of an existing government by the military usually with violence. Military coups are either carried out against a civil led government or against the military themselves regardless of regime

type. E.g. monarchical, democratic, or authoritarian or ideology (capitalist, socialist or Marxist), African states increasingly incapable of responding to their citizens fell prey to military leaders professing a special ability to undertake political-military reforms and economic development. (Shraeder, 2004: 204). This feature has been typical of countries of the South. Latin America was the first country that experienced a military coup d'état in the southern hemisphere of the Globe. The first of these interventions occurred in Argentina led by Colonel Juan Peron in 1943 and spread like wildfire plaguing the third world (Asomba, 1973:17). Amongst the third world, Africa is worst hit in the phenomenal tide of military coups. "There were 71 military coups d'état in Africa between 1952 and 1990" (Thomson, 2010:134). The above figure is frightening and alarming, unexpected of a supposed apolitical institution, whose legitimate functions for an armed forces organization are for defence and aggressive purposes. That is the reason for its expected confinement in the barracks in anticipation of external attacks defence and pacification of internal disorders. The armed forces see itself as an organization with an independent position on all the major political issues. This is induced by the armed forces strengths of patriotism, discipline, professionalism and cohesion domiciled at the heart of military service. The attributes of the military are tenable in the military of the West. That accounts for minimal or absence of military interventions there. Conversely, the prevalence of military coups in Africa is astronomically high. The self-acclamation of "sincere patriots" when it strikes is a misnomer in the Africa case. Military coups in Africa are staged with selfish interest motive, proven by military budget enlargement, progressive change of ranks and acquisition of sophisticated military hard-wares for their organizational safety. It usually suspends the constitution and dissolves the old cabinet. In its place it rules by decrees which have retrospective effect. Most of

its ministers are chosen from the political class it supposedly displaces to form its government. Their choices of ministers are usually technocrats from the civil populace and assigned to ministries that are highly technical and professionalized. This act of the military is proof that it is incapable of managing governmental affairs and statecraft deficient. From 1951 to 2002, there have been eighty-six successful military coups in Africa. Only six African countries: Botswana, Cape Verde, Eritrea, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa have never experienced military coup plots (Shraeder, 2004: 203). This appears incredible and so much unusual in the inter civil-military or intra-military relationships in Africa. Whereas, many African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Mauritania, Sierra-Leone, Burkina Faso and Benin among others have had series of coups and counter-coups both successful and unsuccessful, some of the African countries have not experienced attempted coup plots. Military rule is not mandatory thou. This opens another window for further interrogation in future episodes on democracy and military nexus in Africa. However, we shall attempt hypothetically that, African countries that have not experienced any coups d' etat or plots are immersed in the attributes of patriotism, discipline, professionalism and cohesion, which have made them apolitical. The countries have built robust democracies as in the West. We shall however not be detained here. The recent military coups in West Africa with rapid succession have added to the existing massive figures of military coups in Africa.

Democracy is a form of government in which government is under the control of citizens as a whole. It encourages good citizens to play active role in the political affairs of their country. It is popularly regarded as “rule by the people”. Abraham Lincoln (2004:91) defines democracy as “government of the people by the people and for the people”. Lincoln’s definition of democracy is catchy but for the purpose of rigorous intellectual display, it is in deficit.

Democracy however is a constitutional order in which the rights, obligations and duties of citizens and the state are exercised in their interplay and relationship with all inclusiveness. It is the idea of popular sovereignty where citizens participate in their society's government. Democracy provides an atmosphere in which people freely discuss and associate with one another for the progress of their country or society. It recognizes the equality of all citizens and allows for the use of methods of decision-making which ensures that the will of the people always takes precedence. With the above attributes, democracy is regarded as the best form of government because by its nature, it is supposedly an all-inclusive form of government. Reliant on this, virtually all organizations presently tag the pre-condition for acquiring its membership as democracy. Political regimes across the world are instigating democratic reforms and joining supranational organizations such as European Union (EU) for which democracy is an agreed condition for entry (Blaug and Schwarzmantel, 2004: 1). The popularity of democracy cannot be over emphasized. Today, all countries across the Globe tag themselves democratic. The resurgence of military coups in Africa is however eroding the gains of democracy hence democratic deficit.

No members of any society have equal access to the values and limited resources endowed with by the society and characteristic of inequality hypothesis, conflict abound. Conflict theory is a sociopolitical theory that originated with Karl Marx (1818 – 1883). It seeks to explain political and economic events relating to competition for unequal distribution of resources affecting society, individuals and groups within social confines which are essentially conflict-driven. Marx used the theory to explain the exploitation of the working class in capitalist societies. Against this backdrop, there are two classes: a ruling bourgeoisie and an oppressed

proletariat. The ruling elites will set up systems of laws, traditions and other societal structures in order to further support their own dominance while preventing others from joining their ranks (Hayes, 2022). The theory helps in explaining the lopsided economic and political structures of the African societies which have introduced intense conflict among the segment in the democratic and military systems which can be resolved. The imbalances have occasioned the military to utilize its monopoly of instruments of coercion to disrupt democratic flow to the brink of reversal as witnessed in recent successive military coups in Africa.

### **Sources of the Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa**

The reasons for resurgence of military coups d' etat in Africa are not different from the usual causes of military coups in Africa. Scholars in the province of political engineering such as Claude Welch, Le Fever, Huntington, Janowitz among others have tried to legitimize military rule by giving their reasons for military intervention in politics which involves the following approaches: **Apolitical** which is military passivity in politics and confinement to its primary role of defence and aggression. **Mutiny** involves a demonstration of recalcitrance and insubordination of junior ranking members to their superiors. **Coup d' etat** involves a means of supplanting of existing leaderships. To those scholars, military intervention is necessitated by military attributes of specialism, cohesion and professionalism. This idealistic hypothesis is more practical in the West. According to Wilmot (1988:2), "Pioneering writers such as Dudley, Huntington, Finer, Guttridge and Le Fever could be forgiven for not having adequate empirical foundation of their abstract model building. They were extrapolating the ideal-typical structure of the military as an institution". However, for the causality of the resurgence of military coups

in Africa, specific circumstances of countries in Africa account for them. But generally, it is a historical development process. This is enriched by the conceptualization of Historical Materialism as a tool of analysis. The thesis of Historical Materialism accounts for the origin of militarism in Africa as a colonial creation. The military was clearly designed for Africans who were intransigent to the operations of colonialists in their bid to exploit the resources of Africa through imperialism. After independence of African countries, the military institution did not go with the colonialists. Instead, it was maintained for rapacity and outright brutality against oppositions of the indigenous elites who succeeded the imperialists. Colonialism also created a capitalist economic system in Africa which introduced conflict among classes which involves struggle between those who have (bourgeoisie) and those who do not have (proletariat). The military in Africa as a part of the African society is not excluded from class struggle. Among the military itself are large numbers of poor citizens in uniform who suffer the deprivations and indignities of the majority of the civilian population (Wilnot, 1988:8). The military also engages in conflict with the civil populace and itself. It intervenes to correct the imbalances in the society arising from corrupt practices and mismanagement of state resources by previous governments.

Uprisings and protests are also overtures to military resurgence in Africa. The citizens protest mostly when the leadership proves inept in meeting its demands. Before the January 24, 2022 coup d' etat in Burkina Faso, different protests and mobilizations (violent or non-violent) had arisen (Fatola, 2022). This coup d' etat was led by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba that ousted the government of Roch Marc Christian Kabore.



Prior to the above scenario, the continent had already witnessed seven popular uprisings within the last decade that brought about changes in government in Litya (2011), Egypt (2011), Tunisia (2011), Burkina Faso (2014), Zimbabwe (2017), Sudan (2019) and Algeria (2019) (Ani, 2021). The resurgence of military coups in Africa points to the failure of democracy in the continent. Generally, the salient features of African state are namely, intense ethnic conflict, the single-party system and high incidence of efficiency norms on political competition, the recurrence of military coups, political repression, and the poor performance at economic development (Ake, 1981).

When the military strikes, instead of total condemnation of the act, a reasonable number of citizens of the countries affected celebrate the military because democracy has failed to provide its dividends to the people. This narrative also suffices it that, democracy and military regimes interchangeably have a relationship of causality. It is an undeniable fact because both antithetical forms of government are deterministic cause of each other from our analysis so far. A democratic deficit or decay begets a military coup. Conversely, military regimes after sanitizing the polity which involves conduct of elections and probably adjustment of the constitution among other things, return power to a democratically elected government or civilians.

### **Recommendations**

In view of our analysis regarding the resurgence of military coups d' etat in Africa thereby eroding the gains of democracy to the brinks of collapse, we hereby make some recommendations, to stop military coups and maintain democracy in Africa. There is efficacy in ensuring that the military in Africa is specialized, has cohesion and professionalized like its

courter-part in the West, in the true spirit of militarism, in order to maintain its traditional role of defending the territorial integrity of African states and for pacification of internal disorders. There should be robust reforms of the African democracy to curtail its failures which create cracks as safe havens for the juntas to take refuge. African democratic governments should be responsible to provide dividends of democracy to its citizens so that they regain its interest in democracy and defend it as well. The reforms should involve strengthening the constitution, fight sincerely against corruption, resist insecurity and create employment and reduce poverty for all and sundry especially the teeming youth population among other things. Good governance should be promoted to achieve these.

The response of repugnance to military coups or bad leadership instituted by the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and pro-democracy activists should be sustained as the posture has paid off positively. In 2017 for instance, the out-of-date steadfast authoritarian traditional regime of President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe came under duress to resign by the Zimbabwean military coupled with the people's protests and a civilian leadership was enthroned. AU and ECOWAS totally condemn coups in recent times in Africa and refuse to recognize any military led government in the region. African countries that are praetorian should emulate other countries that have not tested military coups since their independence like South Africa, Eritrea and Botswana and so on. These countries share similar crises with them but have not opted for the military as a solution to their predicaments.

The corporate and personal interests of the military should be adequately catered for. These include prompt payment of their personal entitlements and enlargement of their budget for

acquisition of operational gadgets and hard-wares for effective operations. When these requirements are undermined, they become susceptible factors to the rage of the military to strike. Above all, there should be benign democratic governance. It is only people-oriented governments that can guarantee good life to the citizens when it upholds economic conditions and improve state capacity to manage its affairs effectively.

### **Conclusion**

The study reveals that the resurgence of military coups d' etat in Africa today are primarily due to deteriorating economic conditions and limited state capacity to manage the resources of the state to provide for all and sundry, typical of African states. The resurgence of military coups in Africa is evidence of democratic decay arising from state crisis with abysmal and marginal level of democratic performance. There is urgent need for democratic reforms to allow citizens of various African countries to regain their confidence and interest in democracy and defend it from reversal.

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