

Reverse of Democracy's Third Wave: Understanding the Causes of Coups d'état in West Africa in the Twenty-First Century

Isaac Brako¹, Thomas Prehi Botchway², & Gilbert Arhinful Aidoo³

Abstract

Rising coups in West Africa have raised serious socio-economic, political and security concerns across Africa. This paper contributes to debates on the causes of the rising military coup infernos, the effects on the sub-region and its peoples, and suggests remedial actions. The paper found that several factors, including the French colonial policies of Assimilation and Association, neocolonialism, geopolitical undercurrents, non-performance of civilian regimes and corruption enable the phenomenon to fester. The paper suggests that, among other things, in order to reverse the current trend and to avoid such occurrence in the future, African countries must de-link themselves from existing colonial linkages that do not inure to their benefit. Also, agreements and treaties that are inimical to the general wellbeing of the citizens, and which have over the years been used as basis for popular uprising and military takeovers must be carefully renegotiated.

Keywords: democracy; good governance; human security; political stability; West Africa.

¹ Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science Education, University of Education, Winneba
Email: ibrako@uew.edu

² Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science Education, University of Education, Winneba
(Corresponding Author)
Email: tpbotchway@uew.edu.gh

³ Lecturer, Department of Political Science Education, University of Education, Winneba
Email: gaaidoo@uew.edu.gh

Introduction: The Resurgence of Coups d'état in West Africa

African countries have (since independence) been confronted with myriads of costly socio-economic, political, and security crises with precariously deleterious effects on the region's progress (Caparini, 2015). At independence, almost all African leaders committed to developing their respective polities. More importantly, they took to the path of democracy and good governance but would soon shy away from it. Constitutions of the emerging states in Africa were sooner than later, subjected to numerous amendments carried out in a manner that undermined the essence of constitutional rule and the principles of multiparty democracy. What would follow is the emergence of both civilian and military authoritarianism with costly governance, development, and human security implications (Mbondeniyi & Ojienda, 2013; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). Nonetheless, the demise of the Cold War would return the euphoria for democracy and mark a departure from authoritarianism in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Aidoo & Botchway, 2021).

The early 1990s was replete with numerous attempts to adopt, or return to multiparty democracy in the region. Efforts were hurriedly made to promulgate new constitutions that would guide these emerging democracies. Indeed, the so-called third wave of democratization brought to bear, greater pressure on African authoritarian leaders to adopt freer multiparty democratic political systems (Aidoo & Botchway, 2021; Frempong, 2012); an era Lucian Pye (1990) labelled as "the global crisis of authoritarianism" (Frempong, 2012, p. 21). The African continent witnessed, more than ever, agitations for comprehensive constitutional reforms as part of efforts towards a return to civilian rule (Aidoo & Botchway, 2021). This was to help promote good governance and rule of law by limiting powers of the African leaders so as to guarantee the liberties, freedoms, and human rights of African nationals (Mbondeniyi & Ojienda, 2013).

However, notwithstanding the euphoria that greeted this new phase of democratization, a cursory look at events in the 21st century Africa shows that countries on the continent are not out of the woes of constitutional crises, bad governance, coups d'état, and human rights abuses yet (Mbondeniyi & Ojienda, 2013; Ajei, 2016; Gyimah-Boadi, 2018; Ani, 2018; Botchway & Owusu, 2024). It was against this backdrop of growing concerns about the liberal state-building project that some contemporary African academics have made a compelling case against the utility of multiparty democracy as practiced in Africa (Ani, 2018; Ajei, 2016). These scholars argue that the "experience of many African countries in the majoritarian... democracy has been characterized by competitive power struggles that are too adversarial, aggressive, and divisive to the point of being harmful" (Ani, 2018, p. 343). The point advanced here is that while constitutional governance and multipartyism have been widely but reluctantly accepted by many

African leaders, they have failed to build and allow democratic institutions to work in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2018; Cole & Schofer, 2023; Botchway, 2018).

Many have even pointed to a reversal of the third wave of democracy in Africa following the increasing authoritarian tendencies of elected civilian leaders often manifest in what can best be described as ‘constitutional’ or ‘executive coups’ (changes of term limits and manipulation of constitutions and institutions of state to perpetuate their rules), and increasing coups d’état in the region (Fomunyoh, 2020; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). For example, between 2020 and 2023, as many as seven successful coups (Mali: August 2020 and May 2021; Burkina Faso: January 2022 and September, 2022; Guinea: September 2021; Niger: August 2023; Gabon: August 2023) have been staged in Africa (Brooke-Holland, 2022; MIF, 2022; Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023), with almost all of these events happening in former French colonies, particularly in West Africa.

As discussed afore, Africa experienced waves of military coups d’état in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. During these periods, more than a half of the countries in the African continent came under the administration of military juntas (Mbondenyi & Ojienda, 2013). Quite a number of African states retained their democracy and in some instances some of the military leaders converted their polity into de jure one-party system and dictatorial regimes (Frempong, 2012; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). It was the expectation of many that with the emergence of the third wave of democratization, the coup phenomenon and the attendant dictatorial rule had come to an end. However, the rise of military coups d’état in the continent, particularly the Francophone countries, brings into sharp focus the phenomenon of military coups d’état in Africa. This paper therefore seeks to contribute to the debate on the causes of the recent military take-overs in Francophone West Africa, the effects on the sub-region and its peoples, and remedial actions to take in order to stem the phenomenon from escalation into alarming proportions. The authors make the case that the colonial experiences of Francophone West Africa may partly be blamed for the recent rising coups d’état in the region (as attempts to wean themselves off continual French control).

Causes of the Current Coups in Francophone West Africa

The early 2000s saw a calm Africa with significant reduction in coups d’état than previous years. However, since 2010, the region has been plunged back into numerous tendencies of authoritarianism, constitutional crises and democratic reversal (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). As alluded afore, since 2020, the West African sub-region has recorded about seven successful coups (Pryce & Time, 2023). Multiple factors, including poor governance, corruption, limited socio-economic growth, low-income levels, poverty, insecurity, autocracy, colonial connections,

and geopolitical power dynamics have accounted for the upsurge of the recent coups in West Africa in particular and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) as a whole (Amoateng, 2022). Particularly, this section will address these concerns under the following broader subthemes: The French colonial policies of Assimilation and Association, internal factors, and external factors.

The French Policies of Assimilation and Association

The root cause of the recent coups d'état in Africa can be traced to the French colonial administration and how it was terminated. Unlike the other colonial powers, the French had a special treatment for the inhabitants of its former colonies – classifying them into citizens (citoyens) and subjects (sujets). The former were those inhabitants who satisfied certain basic requirements and were granted French citizenship status that made them enjoy certain privileges. Automatic French citizenship was conferred on residents of the four Senegalese coastal towns of Dakar, St. Louis, Rufisque and Goree following their long contacts with the French merchants and government officials and had therefore assimilated the French culture. Residents outside the four communities had to meet the following requirements – being an adult, proficiency (speak and write) in the French language, Christianity (profess the Catholic faith), denounced polygyny, and demonstrated evidence of sound moral character (Brako & Asah-Asante, 2015). Inhabitants who failed to satisfy these requirements were considered as subjects and inferior; who were denied all privileges enjoyed by the citizens. They were subjected to harsh treatments such as serving an instant punishment including serving jail term without trial (indignat), rendering forced labour (prestation) and denial of political rights (Abaka, 2002).

Beside the classification of the socio-cultural assimilation, there were other forms of assimilation which had to do with how the French colonies were administered and the integration of the French colonial economy to that of the Metropolitan France. France had a centralized system of administration for all her colonies, with a common law, enacted by the French Parliament which had representation from all her former colonies. The economies of the territories were also integrated into that of Metropolitan France, all the territories were bound to sell their raw materials which were mainly agricultural commodities exclusively to France. The market was the only avenue for the territories to buy all their finished products.

The nature of the colonial policy put in place in which the educated Africans were made to enjoy a number of privileges delayed nationalism in French West Africa. Even when the phenomenon was dawned on Africa, particularly in the British Africa in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, France merely reformed her

colonial policy through decisions arrived at the 1944 Brazzaville Conference and the June 1956 Loi Cadre Reform to grant partial autonomy to her former colonies (Tordoff, 1984; Crowder, 1967). The prevailing circumstances in the African continent importuned her to give independence to the colonies en bloc in 1960. Even with that, the economies of the former colonies are still tied to the apron-strings of France. They have to keep a threshold of their overseas reserves in the French account in France.

After six decades of the partial autonomy given them under the guise of independence, the recent spate of coups and the related comments from the coup plotters and their supporters suggest that the French West African nationals are now seeking to dismantle whatever structures that tie them to their former colonial masters and extricate themselves from all vestiges of colonialism, hence that is one of the underlying currents of the recent spate of military coups d'état in West Africa.

Other Reasons for the Emerging Coups D'état in the 21st Century West Africa

Internal Factors

By internal factors, the paper examines activities within the country either by an actor or entity within the said country which has led to the ousting of the civilian rule. These factors include the civilian regime performance thesis (poor governance, economic mismanagement, corruption, poverty, etc.); political exclusion of opposition and minority groups; and internal rifts of political regimes. These are among the several internal issues writers and coup leaders have mostly based their action on to overthrow civilian regimes (Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023; Chacha M., 2022).

According to Chacha (2022), the recent coups on the continent, particularly in West Africa is motivated by issues of economic mismanagement, corruption, and poor governance. Odigbo et al. (2023) also argue that the primary causes for the recent military takeovers have been as a result of issues such as insecurity, poverty, poor leadership, economic crisis (which has emerged as a result of corruption), and lack of transparency and accountability in governance. Moreover, Dwomoh-Doyen (2023) stresses that citizens in most SSA countries have become discontent and frustrated due to the lack of development, limited access to education, healthcare, unemployment, and the lack of security (visible in the actions of militant groups and violent extremists) in the region.

In a similar stead, Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022, p. 53) highlighted that several cases of “poor governance indices across the region from corruption to the lack of free, fair and credible elections, to deepening security crisis, among

others” have been the main factors for the recent coups. To them, it is therefore “unsurprising that the citizens celebrate the return of the military in politics” (Chigozie & Oyinmiebi, 2022, p. 53). Specifically, it is argued that insecurity, bad governance, electoral manipulations, and incumbency abuse through autocratic behaviours by political leaders have been the cause of the coups in Mali, Guinea Conakry, Guinea Bissau, Niger, and Burkina Faso since 2020 (Chigozie & Oyinmiebi, 2022).

With a focus on poor governance, Chacha (2022) identifies this as a key factor necessitating coups in the sub-region. He argues that public dissatisfaction of incumbents in the governance of these African countries has contributed to these coups. For instance, Dwomoh-Doyen (2023) recognises that Mali which has been overwhelmed by lasting instability with coups in 2012, 2020 and 2021 has its roots in poor governance. In his argument, he reasoned that these coups occurred in Mali because citizens were tired of the ineffective leadership coupled with the massive corruption that was visible under the civilian regime, which explains the support the military have received in these instances. Amoateng (2022) and Odigbo et al. (2022) also stressed on the 2022 coup in Burkina Faso and highlight the failure of the then President Roch Kaboré to curb violence by Islamic extremists as a key reason why the military had to get themselves involved in politics.

Saeed (2023) like the above scholars identified economic challenges and insecurity as contributing keenly to the recent coups in West Africa. However, Saeed (2023) went on to stress that economic instability has been one of the major causes of social unrest in Gabon which ultimately led to the overthrow of the then President Ali Bongo. The writer noted that even though Gabon produces about 200,000 barrels of crude oil a day, making them the fifth-largest oil producer in SSA, over 30% of Gabon's population lives in poverty. According to a World Bank data, about 36.9% of Gabonese youth workforce, aged 15 to 24, were unemployed in 2022. For Saeed (2023) these dreadful situations create fertile grounds for military insurgence.

Refusal of an outgoing government to relinquish power following defeat in free, fair and regular elections is one of the definitions the Lomé Declaration of 2000 and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance of 2007 gives to the phrase unconstitutional change of government (Handy, Akum, & Djilo, 2020). Across the continent, several sitting presidents have tampered with constitutional terms to stay longer in power many of which have failed, resulting in these coups (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). In the wake of Alpha Conde's ousting, former president of Liberia, George Weah, stated that,

While we are condemning these military coups, we must also muster the

courage to look into what is triggering these unconstitutional takeovers. Could it be that we are not honouring our political commitments to respect the term limits of our various constitutions? (George Weah, cited in Thomas, 2021).

This statement resurrects discussions of how political leaders' unconstitutional attempts contribute to these coups on the continent. This was one of the reasons that was cited for the overthrow of the former president of Guinea Conakry, Alpha Conde.

External Factors

In spite of the internal factors playing a key role in the rise of coups in recent times in West Africa, some external factors such as neocolonialism, geopolitical factors, and the role of regional and international bodies are partly blamed for the situation. As Oyebade (2007) observed, the strong historical connection and economic reliance on former colonial hegemony and the remnants of colonialism have produced unstable and unequal climate that promotes military participation in politics. The relationship, what has been described as neocolonialism, where former colonial powers influence the decisions of African leaders in all ways except political, is one that has been instrumental in keeping most of these coup-ridden countries in poverty (Saeed, 2023). Similarly, Sesay (2015) notes that neocolonialism is to blame for the chronic nature of poverty and development challenges in West Africa. This has resulted in a general displeasure and grievances that might serve as fuel for military insurrections.

The French state and her former colonies have a strong connection through what can be described as absurd agreements one of which allows France to remit enormous amounts annually from her former colonies for the use of the Francs CFA (Falola, 2023). Falola (2023) further contends that the notable exploitation of Nigeriens, for example, through mining done by French-state-backed Orano's Somair, and the over-dependence of resources-rich Francophone African states on France, are some reasons for the several military overthrows that have happened recently. France continues to pursue its interests in these nations, massively investing in their home politics and security cooperation, which has fostered anti-French sentiment among the masses. It is based on this background that Saeed (2023) stresses that the surge in military insurrections across Africa, mainly in former French colonies, is not a coincidence. Most citizens in these countries do not support this idea and usually back a strong stance against France.

Saeed (2023) therefore explains that most coup leaders receive popular

support since they show themselves as opposed to the status quo. He notes for instance that the military regimes have consistently opposed the French involvement in their domestic affairs. The regime usually assures the masses that their presence would guarantee the preservation of their nation's identity and sovereignty. In Niger for instance, the military has rescinded five military agreements with France, accusing the former president Mohamed Bazoum of serving French interests (Saeed, 2023). They have again accused France of exploiting the country's riches, such as uranium. The relationship leaves these former colonies worse-off, which has played a role in the many coups recorded in the region.

Another external factor that is worth discussing is the geopolitical struggle between the East (particularly Russia and China) and West (The United States, and the EU countries). What was described as the Cold War over three decades ago seems to have resurfaced on the African continent (Kwarteng & Botchway, 2018). Russia and its Wagner group have been mentioned as playing a crucial role in the 2020 and 2021 coups in Mali, and the 2022 coup in Burkina Faso (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022). The growing presence of Russia on the continent is not a comfortable pill the US and EU countries love to swallow. But Russia also sees this as an opportunity to grow her allies on the African continent. Suleiman and Onapajo, (2022) again note that the case of Mali, for instance, China joined Russia in preventing France and the US to have the UN Security Council support a decision to impose economic and border sanctions on Mali (Suleiman & Onapajo, 2022; Kwarteng and Botchway, 2018). This sharp division among global superpowers tend to fuel either a like or dislike for a particular government that may or may not support either side (West or East). A textbook play of peak Cold War activities that led to the overthrow of several leaders on the continent (Amoateng, 2022).

Lastly, the role of regional and international bodies is another major factor driving coups in the sub-region. In a study conducted by Maiangwa (2021), he noted that the democratic ratings of most of the West African states have reduced significantly between 1990 and 2022. Based on this, Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022) in their paper argued that the undemocratic nature of most of these states provides the military with the excuse of intervening in the political process. This is partly because of the failure of bodies like the ECOWAS, the AU and the UN to take a strong stand against the menace. Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022) point out that these bodies, like the ECOWAS, have a role to ensure that the people in the region benefit from the economic and political decisions of the state. The absence of this leads to coups. When these coups occur also, the anti-coup responses fail to address the leadership and institutional deficiencies that triggered the military's intervention, setting the stage for future coup attempts (Chacha, 2022).

Effects of the Recent Coups in West Africa

The seemingly popular support offered coup plotters raises the argument that these coups may inadvertently provide positive impact to the countries involved, seeing that most of these civilian leaders have been autocratic in their leadership styles. But Chigozie and Oyinniebi (2022) argue that coups rather create conditions for political, economic, and socio-cultural crises. In a paper released by the Mo Ibrahim Foundation in 2023, it was argued that coups are never the solution to any sort of socio-economic, security, political or cultural challenges a country faces. The paper outlined that since the insurgence of the coups in recent years from 2021, little has improved in the countries that have seen these coups. The report asserted that promises of elections have failed to materialize and living conditions have not improved. It went on to point out that civic space continues to be restricted across all countries, while the security situation in Burkina Faso and Mali is even worse. They noted that incidence of violence against citizens were low between 2020 and 2022, prior to the 2022 coups in Burkina Faso but increased by about 6% between 2022 and 2023. Also, they observed an increase of about 24% of violence against civilians in Mali from the 25% in the pre coup era between 2017 and 2020 and 49.2% in the coup era between 2020 and 2023. This simply means these coups will not address all the problems in these countries, hence may be counterproductive.

According to Ogunranti (2023) the recent coups have the potential of distorting trade agreements on the continent. The ECOWAS protocol on free movement and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) desires to make it easy for the movement of goods, persons and industries from one country to the other on the continent. About 46 countries have ratified the Agreement, including the coup countries like Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. ECOWAS and the AU have subsequently imposed sanctions on these countries. These countries also seem to have support for each other, forming a sort of a tacit agreement to support one another, and in some cases offer military assistance to one another if a regional body decides to take action against any of them (Ogunranti, 2023; Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023). Ogunranti (2023) argues that the standoff between the military regimes and the regional bodies is likely to impact negatively on the free trade agreement and movement of persons, goods, services and industries. The 2023 World Trade Statistics Review by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) affirms that most of Africa's trade relations remains with China, India, the US, and EU. This military insurgence could worsen the case in spite of the AfCFTA agreements. Questions are further raised as to the position of the suspended countries and what that means for the AfCFTA and the ECOWAS protocol on the free movement of persons, goods, and services.

Moreover, Brack (2022) has stated that ECOWAS is likely to lose its credibility in maintaining peace, security and stability in the region. Brack (2022) used Mali's case where the military administration constantly refused to implement the calls of ECOWAS to return the country to civilian rule despite the sanctions imposed on them. This has been seen in the case of Gabon, Niger and the rest. Such developments have created a dilemma on whether sanctions are effective in addressing coups. Born out of this argument, Chigozie and Oyinmiebi (2022) explain that this ineffectiveness has contributed to coup contagion effect. Since others have been able to withstand the pressures from the regional body, it emboldens others to use the barrel of the gun to seek political, socio-economic, security, and cultural justice. The effect of these coups therefore is that it may convince other states to employ this tactic, leading to the contagion effect, as has already been seen (Chigozie & Oyinmiebi, 2022; Adefisoye & Braimah, 2023).

Lastly, for many, the recent coups are largely undermining the democratic stability of the region, which may likely result in the ultimate reverse of democracy in West Africa. According to Adefisoye and Braimah (2023), allowing military take-overs to fester in the sub-region would no doubt distort the progress made on democratization and good governance. As Arvanitopoulos (2022) notes, democratic institutions thrive on norms of compromise and cooperation, and respect for truth that are bolstered by active, self-confident citizenry and free press. These democratic values are however under attack now courtesy the recent coups in the sub-region. The situation has also led to the gradual erosion of checks and balances, the rule of law, human rights and press freedom, giving way to institutional collapse (Arvanitopoulos, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined the causes, and effects of the rising coups in West Africa. The paper found that, among other things, the French colonial policies of Assimilation and Association, neocolonialism, geopolitical undercurrents, and non-performance of civilian regimes are among the major factors that enable the situation to fester. The situation has seriously affected and even worsened the security situation and socioeconomic and political developments in the sub-region as well as regional cooperation.

The deteriorating socio-economic, political and security conditions of the region call for urgent attention and redress. The authors therefore suggest that in order to reverse the current trend and to avoid such occurrence in the future the following recommendations are given serious attention.

Firstly, African countries must delink themselves from existing colonial

linkages that do not inure to the benefit of these states and their citizens. Thus, agreements and treaties that are inimical to the general wellbeing of the citizens, and which have over the years been used as basis for popular uprising and military takeovers must be carefully renegotiated, or if possible abrogated through mutual consents.

Secondly, building strong institutions and adhering to constitutionalism must be prioritized. There is the need to focus on building not only the institutional capacities of states, but also measures must be put in place to ensure effective political socialization and imbibing the norms and values of the society that promotes respect for institutions and respect for the constitutional order. When this is done appropriately, democratic norms and practices would become 'the only game in town'. Thus, no group would attempt to overthrow the existing constitutional order.

Thirdly, it is important to understand that democracy does not run on empty stomach – there must be democratic dividends. The general population must not be seen as just electors of leaders through periodic years. They must be at the center of planning and policy making. Thus, all policy formulation and implementation must interrogate what benefits they portend for the population at large. In this way, the socio-economic, as well as the political needs and aspirations of the citizens would become the basis of government decision-making and policy formulation and subsequent implementation.

Moreover, there is the need to check excesses on the part of civilian administrations and leadership ineptitudes. In this regard, Africa's political class and leaders are to note that as they mostly claim theirs must be a call to serve the state and not to loot. Efforts must therefore be put in place to deal with corruption, civilian-administration despotism, nepotism, old boyism, cronyism, winner-takes-all politics, and all practices that creates the perception of or actual existence of injustice in the state. There must be equitable distribution of resources. In effect, there is the need to cherish meritocracy while abhorring mediocrity and incompetence which usually breed discontent, both civilians and the military and which in turn leads to coups on the African continent.

Finally, there is the need for regional and sub-regional bodies in Africa to not just institute, but also ensure the enforcement of stringent anti-coup norms and sanctions. Consequently, various existing provisions on anti-coups in Africa such as the Article 4(p) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union of 2000 (condemnation and rejection of unconstitutional changes of governments); Chapter 8 of the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (Sanctions in Cases of Unconstitutional Changes of Government, Articles 23–26); Article 7(g) of the Protocol Relating to the Establishment of the Peace and

Security Council of the AU which prohibit unconstitutional changes of government must all be strictly adhered to and enforced. These will serve as deterrent to all prospective coup plotters and their accomplices on the continent.

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