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Editorial

Over the last two years, political life in West Africa has been disrupted by what some have described as the ‘return of military coups in Afri-

region, suggests the failure of multipartyism and neo-liberal interventions to deliver on citizens’ expectations for democracy and economic development.

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ca'.¹ Between 2020 and 2022, military-staged coups took place in Mali, Chad, Niger, Guinea, Sudan and Burkina Faso. To some observers, this was a return to familiar African ways. The period 2000 to 2020 appears to them to have been only an interlude that eventually had to give way to events in Africa that, by their very nature, test the promise of multiparty politics and neo-liberal economic reforms for democracy and development. The return of coups, especially in the West Africa

Despite the recent generalisations, some little recourse to history proffers some tentative explanations on the re-emergence of military coups in some countries. Between 1958 and 2010, 44.4 per cent of the military coups in Africa occurred in West Africa and the Sahel Region. Most of them flared up in former French colonies, suggesting a confluence of interests in the region that were triggered by a persisting colonial legacy worth studying. Indeed, six of the seven coups that happened from 2019 to 2021 can be mapped out in this region.² Yet, the brazen manner in which the recent coups have occurred, the response from continental and regional security bodies, and the refusal by the coup plotters and regional bodies to engage in a credible process to restore civilian rule in these countries signals that a long-drawn-out political crisis is in the offing in West Africa and the Sahel. In this

protracted process, it is worrisome that in some of the countries cited above the coup plotters have attracted, even if fleetingly, some civilian support which has been expressed through street demonstrations in which the demonstrators seemed to delight in the ignominy that befell the deposed leaders. A few analysts have been quick to imagine into existence the concept of ‘the good coup’ and have offered it as an issue worth discussing.



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The so-called ‘return of military coups’ and the possibility of prolonged military rule raises deeper questions beyond gazing at ‘good’ or ‘bad’ coups. A few organisations and leaders, operating under different frameworks including Coalition for Dialogue in Africa (CODA), are tackling this question at a deeper level and are leading policy advocacy on the matter. No better description of the danger that coups pose can be found than that of the Senegalese historian, Abdoulaye Bathily, who recently reiterated that the best military rule is worse than the worst civilian rule. The issue, according to this thinking, is not whether there can be a good or bad coup, but rather to understand the circumstances in a society that would make a military coup seem palatable.

Past experiences of military rule in Africa indicate that coups carry limited and temporary political appeal. Military juntas often reproduce many of the worst elements of military dictatorship while resisting, stalling or postponing the possibility of return to civilian rule. This indeed is the history of military rule in Africa documented in numerous studies, including the one edited by Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily, *The Military and Militarism in Africa*.³ In this history, the military periodically rode the bandwagon of popular frustration directed against civilian rule with promises of radical change in the political and economic system, only to end up reproducing the malaise of intolerance in worse forms. With decisions being taken in the barracks and implemented with the expectation of unquestioning compliance, the past military regimes in Africa inflicted all possible extremes of brutality and corruption, as evidenced in the wanton looting of the state under Jean-Bédél Bokassa of the Central Africa Republic, Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Sani Abacha of Nigeria, to name but these few. And, as has been pointed out, with the exception of countries such as Nigeria under Abacha, the worst forms of military coups and brutalities have taken place in former French colonies, often with the tacit approval of the French army, which has maintained permanent army units in these countries. Some military regimes adopted a civilian veneer when they conducted periodic elections and civilianised themselves but they still preserved a level of intolerance that was uprooted only through popular uprisings of the Arab Spring type, in Egypt, Algeria and Sudan. Even so, the resilience of the military regimes in Algeria and Egypt is notable and the record of these civilianised regimes is tainted by intolerance and the misuse of state power for personal gain.

This history demands that focus should be directed at a careful study of civilian rule to identify and explain the trends and tendencies that triggered the coups. A central issue should be to explore why civilian rule that obtained across the continent in the three or four decades after the return of multiparty politics failed to deliver on its promise. It is also curious why this failure is more evident in former French colonies of West Africa and the Sahel. A general consensus seems to have emerged that the promise of the second coming of *uhuru* has fallen far short on delivering public goods. This is true at the economic level, where livelihoods have consistently been undermined and the future for young people compromised. Economic pacts between civilian governments and ‘international investors’, especially in resource-rich countries, did not do much to deliver economic dividends for ordinary people. Instead, they deepened exploitation, as has been documented in a series of reports, including the *2015 Report of the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa*.⁴ This, plus the evident collapse in governance in large parts of West Africa, parts of Central Africa into the DRC, and Mozambique, points to an intricate web of local and external triggers. Be they in Burkina Faso against generalised insecurity, or the outbursts of violence in the province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique (where chaos broke out fuelled in part by drug trafficking), or Uganda where civic space is thoroughly constrained under the everlasting rule of Yoweri Museveni, or Sudan where a civilianised military dictatorship has overstayed its welcome, repeated protests and periodic riots collectively indicate reasons why African youth might be tempted to see coups as providing a path to a different future.

More worrisome is the limitations of regional mechanisms in addressing the spate of coups. Regional economic commissions like ECOWAS have been perceived, often for good reason, as complicit in the persistence of bad governance. An often-repeated question, raised in this issue of the *Bulletin* in Lionel Zevounou’s article, regards the legal rationality of the sanctions taken in recent months by ECOWAS against military coups. ECOWAS’s recent sanctions in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso have faced criticism from some quarters, based on the observation that ECOWAS did not intervene on the side of civilians in these countries when the deposed civilian leadership was running roughshod over the population. The mechanisms of its interventions are weak, given the nature of ECOWAS, and raise valid concerns. The systematic undermining of governance systems in

these countries, coupled with a debilitating crushing of hope, explains why coups seem palatable. That the systemic undermining happens among member states of existing regional institutions not only paints them as complicit but also as illegitimate actors in mediating against coups. This is notwithstanding some excellent work that these organisations have undertaken in the past, in the case of ECOWAS at least, in dealing decisively in the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s. The accusation of illegitimacy is of course given credence by the state-centric character of these organisations and their lack of anchoring in popular spaces in member states.

While there is legitimate displeasure directed against local leadership, the deliberate support from external non-African actors, which has worsened the situation in West Africa, bears even greater responsibility. The historic neocolonial role of France in Francophone West Africa has been implicated in economic exploitation that often works through the manipulation of military relations with its former colonies. Having tied West African currency to the French franc, the economies of the countries in this region have been distorted and disconnected from each other in a manner profitable only to France and its lackeys in the region. Popular protests in the region, from Burkina Faso to Senegal, have often targeted this interference by France as a way of highlighting the hate that African citizens bear against European control over local affairs and the consequent distortion of governance systems within the region. This is even truer of the African Union, whose multilateral negotiations with Europe are often based on the agenda preferred in European capitals. For far too long, the identified areas of priority engagement have been those directly related to the European agenda while Africans are lectured ad nauseum on how immigration, to take one example, is dangerous to Europe.

To many Africans, the failure of the AU and ECOWAS to effectively channel African concerns reflects the persisting colonial umbilical cord that feeds into a tired neocolonial tendency in Africa. Perhaps, whether in search of some legitimacy or to vouchsafe his fragile hold on power, the military leader of Mali's de-

cision to send the French packing, including ending the presence in Mali of 2,500 soldiers, is an indicator of what happens when an atrocity is allowed to fester for far too long. Yet, replacing the French troops with the Wagner Group does not bode well for the promise of emancipation and may herald a new but dangerous phase in the region. The jury is out on this one, but the need for African intellectuals and policy actors to lead a different thinking around the question of militarism is not lost on CODESRIA.

Notes

1. See, for example, Mucahid Durmaz, 2021, 2021, the year military coups returned to the stage in Africa, *Al-jazeera*, 28 December, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/28/2021-year-military-coups-returned-to-the-stage-in-africa>; Peter Mwai, 2022, Are military takeovers on the rise in Africa?, *BBC News*, 2 February, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46783600>; Ruth Maclean, 2022, Five African Countries. Six Coups. Why Now? *The New York Times*, 31 January, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/burkina-faso-africa-coup.html>
2. Gani Yoroms, 2021, Approaches and challenges in ECOWAS' security sector reform and governance in West Africa, *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 2, <https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.10520/EJC167574>; David Zounmenou, 2009, Coups d'état in Africa between 1958 and 2008, *African Security Review*, Vol. 18, Issue 3: pp. 71–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2009.9627543>; Mohammad Dan Suleiman and Hakeem Onapajo, 2022, Why West Africa has had so many coups and how to prevent more, *The Conversation*, 15 February, <https://theconversation.com/why-west-africa-has-had-so-many-coups-and-how-to-prevent-more-176577>
3. Eboe Hutchful and Abdoulaye Bathily, 1998, *The Military and Militarism in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA.
4. United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa (UN.ECA), 2015, Illicit financial flows: Report of the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa, Addis Ababa: UN.ECA. <https://hdl.handle.net/10855/22695>

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