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Revisiting the Trajectory of Regime Change in Africa – The Case of Mali

[Emma Birikorang and Naila Salihu]

SUMMARY

This policy brief argues that West Africa is not out of the woods with regards to unconstitutional changes in government as the region is increasingly witnessing crises of governance and democratic reversals.

1. Regional and international actors need to pay closer attention to political unrests in la Cote d'Ivoire, Benin and Guinea;
2. Sanctions need not be applied only when the military takeover has occurred. States could be threatened with sanctions and sanctioned when civilian authorities fail to abide by democratic principles;
3. Mediation efforts from the grassroots to the highest decision making levels need to be strengthened;
4. Other African states need to take lessons from recent developments in order to avoid the contagion of unconstitutional regime changes;
5. Military incursion into civilian rule should be condemned and discouraged by all. However, citizens need to have options when faced with political crisis orchestrated by civilian administrators.

Introduction

On 18 August 2020, elements of the Malian Armed Forces, capitalizing on popular discontent, which was led by Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), began a mutiny which resulted in a coup after the capture of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and several of his appointees. These events, as well as several that have plagued Mali since 2012, point to an alarming trend towards democratic reversals in West Africa. In recent years, unconstitutional regime changes and 'constitutional crises' have gradually crept into the West African political sphere. For example, military putsches in the region occurred in Guinea (2008), Niger (2010), Mali (2012), Guinea-Bissau (2012) and Burkina Faso (2014 and 2015) and Mali (2020).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been confounded by this renewed trend despite the existence of regional norms against unconstitutional changes of governments. Where did it all go wrong? What has been triggering the recent coups that have taken place in West Africa the last couple of years? The fact is that coup d'états and unconstitutional regime changes, much like conflicts and

insecurity, do tend to have a contagion effect, if not checked very quickly. Is coup risk higher in Africa now than it was during the wave of democracy in the early 1990s?

This policy brief seeks to answer these questions, and argues that West Africa is not out of the woods with regards to unconstitutional changes in government as the region is increasingly witnessing crises of governance and democratic reversals. Even countries that have been touted as being on the path to democratic consolidation arguably remain at risk of coups d'états as they are yet to effectively transform their post-authoritarian armed forces and defence sectors generally. The military, as an important state institution with the monopoly over legitimate violence remains a very strong political actor in the region.¹ Recent examples of coups d'états the region, therefore, should give cause for concern and motivate national, regional and international actors into urgent and concerted action.

¹ Birikorang, E. (2013). Coups d'état in Africa – A Thing of the Past? KA IPTC Policy Brief, Issue 3; Salihu, N. (2016). The Colonial Legacy of Civil-Military Relations and Democratic Stability in West Africa. *Conflict Trends*, Issue 4, pp. 50-56.



Crowds cheer Malian soldiers who launched a coup to topple President Keita of Mali. Photo Credit: Moussa Kalapo/REUTERS

Democratic Reversal and Unending Coups in West Africa?

The roots of West Africa's crises lie in decades of autocratic governance, political exclusion, and unrepresentative institutions. These are precisely the areas in which the task of constructing a secure and stable foundation for the region's long-term security architecture must begin.² The problem of governance is obviously not a new threat to security in Africa. However, the persistent challenge it poses to human security on the continent give cause for concern.

Is the recent phenomenon of coup d'états, uprisings and unconstitutional regime changes an indication of the failure of democracy in West Africa? Democracy has been interpreted and applied in different ways throughout Africa, as Africa's political leaders seem averse to following established rules and engage in a less principled form of politics. It is this application of democracy in different ways, according to the whims of politicians and ruling elites that has caused significant discontent among many African people. Most African states dabble between democratic, semi-democratic and authoritarian regimes. Diamond et al,³ define a democracy as a regime in which: (i) meaningful and extensive competition exists among individuals and organized groups for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force;

(ii) a highly inclusive level of political participation exists in the selection of leaders and policies, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and (iii) a sufficient level of civil and political liberties exists to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation. They also define a semi-democratic regime as one in which a substantial degree of political competition and freedom exist, but where the effective power of elected officials is so limited, or political competition is so restricted, or the freedom and fairness of elections are so compromised that electoral outcomes, while competitive, still deviate significantly from popular references, and/or civil and political liberties are so limited that some political orientations and interests are unable to organize and express themselves. Additionally, an authoritarian regime exists where little or no meaningful political competition or freedom exists.

While many African states can lay claim to having accepted democracy, in reality, the majority of them are a mix of authoritarian and democratic elements. In other words, most of them are semi-democratic regimes. They have accepted democracy, but democratic principles of freedom of speech, human rights, free and transparent elections, among others, are not being adhered to. Thus, even though most African people embraced democracy (at the end of the Cold War) as opposed to military rule and had great expectations of

² Adebajo, A. (ed) (2004). *West Africa's Security Challenges; Building Peace in a Troubled Region*, Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner, p. 387; Aning, K. and Salihu, N. (2013). "The African Security Predicament", in Heinz J. (Ed) *Routledge Handbook on*

African Security. London: Routledge, pp.9-20

³ Diamond, L., Linz, J and Seymour, S.M. (1990). (eds) *Democracy in Developing Countries: Latin America*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, pp xvi-xvii

it, in some states, democracy has not brought the much-expected rewards, especially in terms of the guarantee of human security. To the extent that large segments of the population in developing countries remain poor, and faith falters in the ability of democratic regimes to improve living standards and provide security, historical memories about the failures of military rule are likely to fade and it will once again become a plausible alternative.⁴

Therein lies the danger. The reason why most regime changes in the past were successful was the level of popular support, both at the local and the international levels. However, is public opinion and support enough justification for organizing a coup? What options do citizens have when they are unable to democratically remove a bad president or head of state? Are coups the only available option? What roles do regional and international organizations have to play to prevent this desperation of some African people? The lack of options will result in both open and tacit support for unconstitutional change in governments. But this should not be the only solution to removing non-conforming rulers.

Another interesting aspect of unconstitutional regime change is the role of the military in democracy. Once the wave of democracy began in Africa, this gave way to the perception that the military had succumbed their hold on African political affairs to civilians. In some cases, the military lay claim to the birth right principle by which the armed forces consider themselves as guardians of a nation's core principles and basic values and used this as excuses to seize political power.⁵ The recent coups in Africa, as has been witnessed in Sudan, and more recently in Mali, have been organized with the 'intention' of breaking with the difficult constitutional order for a limited period of time in order to reform the existing form of democracy which has supposedly been corrupted by ruling civilian elites/governments.

This proves that one of the great historical obstacles to the stability of democracy in developing countries has been subordinating the military to civilian rule.⁶ These cases demonstrate that military coup is not just a problem of the political past, but a continuing danger, even for electoral democracies that have persisted for over a decade.⁷ This calls for a rethink in the supposed roles that armed forces have appropriated for themselves in the restoration of constitutional order. What about the situation in countries

such as la Cote d'Ivoire, Benin and Guinea where the ruling government is pursuing a third term in office, which in itself is a threat to democracy and against regional norms? If these presidents are deposed by the military because of these actions, will it elicit the necessary condemnation or maybe such an action will receive some tacit support from external actors, amidst the rhetoric of condemnation and temporary sanctions? Where there continue to be little action and consequence for coup plotters, the practice will continue. Even in cases where armed forces take over power and promise to hand it back to civilians after elections, there is always the likelihood of their wanting to hold on to power for a little bit longer. Therefore, military incursion into politics and power remains problematic, even through periods of semi-democratic rule by civilians.

History Repeated in Mali?

The events of 18 August 2020 in Mali therefore, falls within the larger crises of governance which have been a major source of insecurity in Mali. The country, despite its turbulent past was once considered a beacon of democracy.⁸ Until the 2012 coup, it was seen as one of the most stable democracies in the region. This coup led to the fall of northern Mali to Al Qaeda-linked groups. Yet, the country has a checkered history of coups, having recorded four successful coups after independence in 1960. Since 2012, there have been several regional and international efforts at dealing with the surge of extremism in parts of the country. President Keita was thus, elected in 2013 with a mandate to pursue peace talks. A peace deal signed in 2015 with some rebel groups, granted the sparsely populated north greater autonomy. However, the deal excluded other armed factions such as Islamist extremist groups—some linked to al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State—who seized on the chaos of the Tuareg insurgency to launch their own attacks, as well as local militias that had formed to defend themselves in the worsening security vacuum.⁹ Since 2015, Mali's central regions of Mopti and Ségou have become insecure hotspots for jihadism, military operations, inter communal violence, and conflicts between pastoralists and farmers.¹⁰

Mali remains among the least developed countries in the region with widespread poverty. The crumbling economy, dependent largely on gold and cotton has been badly affected by the worsening security situation and the

⁴ Barrack, S. (2007). Military Coup in the Post-Cold War Era: Pakistan, Ecuador and Venezuela. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp 137-154.

⁵ Koonings, K. and Kruijt, D. (2002). "Military Politics and the Mission of Nation-Building", In: *Political Armies: the Military and Nation Building in the Age of Democracy*, Koonings, K. and Kruijt, D.(eds). 9-32. London: Zed Books

⁶ Barracca, (2007). Op. cit.

⁷ Ibid, p. 138

⁸ Wing, S.D. (2013). Mali's Precarious Democracy and the Causes of Conflict, *Special Report*, Washington: DC. United States Institute of Peace.

⁹ Aljazeera, (2020). "Explainer: What has caused Mali's political unrest? 18 August", Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/08/explainer-caused-mali-political-unrest-200818140716328.html>

¹⁰ Bodian, M., Tobie, A. and Marending, M. (2020). The Challenges of Governance, Development and Security in the Central Regions of Mali, *SIPRI Background Paper*, No. 2020/4 March



ECOWAS Chairperson, President Nana Akufo-Addo meets junta leader in Ghana. Photo Credit: The Presidency, Republic of Ghana.

coronavirus pandemic. President Keita's re-election in August 2018 aggravated the simmering tensions as the polls were marred by low turnout and allegations of fraud. Again, in March 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, the government pushed ahead with a legislative election even though the polls, initially due in November 2019 were postponed several times. The March polls with a run-off in April 2020 were marked by an atmosphere of fear and insecurity and recorded low voter turnout. Following allegations of electoral malpractice, the Constitutional Court overturned 31 of the results giving Keita's party 10 more parliamentary seats and the largest bloc. The opposition claimed this decision unfairly helped members of Keita's party remain in office. In addition, in March 2020, unidentified gunmen abducted Mali's main opposition leader, Soumaila Cisse, while on a campaign tour in the country's volatile centre.¹¹

These developments coupled with existing dissatisfaction among the public, particularly the country's youth, opposition supporters, culminated into months of popular protests calling for the president's resignation. Among the key grievances included corruption in the political system, lack of

economic opportunity, and growing insecurity. An opposition coalition known as the June 5 Movement (M5-RFP), under the leadership of prominent cleric Mahmoud Dicko led these protests. The protests turned violent in July 2020 where clashes between security forces and protesters lead to the death of 11 people. Several opposition leaders were also briefly detained.¹² However, Mr Keita refused to step down. He had been without a government since April 2020, when his prime minister and the rest of his government resigned. He subsequently formed a new cabinet in late July 2020 in an attempt to resolve the political crisis. These events therefore precipitated the August coup d'état.

Regional and International Responses

Since July 2020, ECOWAS has been involved in preventive diplomacy and mediation efforts led by the former president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan. As a solution to the widespread protests, ECOWAS had earlier proposed the formation of a unity government, the resignations of lawmakers whose elections were called into question, and new elections. The bloc also threatened sanctions against opposition groups who

¹¹ Aljazeera, (2020), op. cit.

¹² Aljazeera, (2020). "West African mediation fails to reach deal to end Mali crisis",

July 24. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/west-african-mediation-fails-reach-deal-mali-crisis-200724062121106.html>

hinder a resolution to the crisis. Other proposals included the appointment of new judges to the Constitutional Court, which had already been dissolved by Keita in a bid to calm unrest.¹³ However, these proposals were deemed unsatisfactory, and protests continued until the coup on 18 August 2020. The military junta, the National Committee for the Salvation of the People, have proposed an 18 months transitional period. Following mediation by ECOWAS, an interim president, a retired colonel and former defence minister, Ba N'Daou, with the coup leader, Colonel Assimi Goita as Vice President have been selected. This development point to the fact that the military is still in control of the transition process. The propensity to allow the military to play a role in the ensuing transitional arrangements incentivizes coup leaders for their extra-constitutional actions that only invites future coups as seen in Mali and elsewhere in Africa.¹⁴

ECOWAS has since intensified its mediation and classically rejected the unconstitutional change in power, and called for a swift return to civilian rule with threats of sanctions.¹⁵ Similarly the African Union suspended Mali's membership in the midst of international condemnation from the UN, EU and other global powers such as US and France. The ECOWAS interventions and condemnations are in line with its established norm of rejecting unconstitutional changes to government. This was the focus of ECOWAS' peace and security architecture enumerated in the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, as well as the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.¹⁶

In the latter, constitutional convergence principles are supposed to be shared by all member states of ECOWAS, in which they agreed on the following, *inter alia*:

- Separation of power – the Executive, Legislature and Judiciary (Article 1a)
- Empowerment and strengthening of parliaments and guarantee of parliamentary immunity (Article 1a)
- Independence of the Judiciary (Article 1a)
- Freedom of members of the Bar shall be guaranteed (Article 1a)
- Every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections (Article 1b)
- Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means (Article 1c)

- Popular participation in decision-making, strict adherence to democratic principles and decentralization of power at all levels of governance (Article 1d)
- The armed forces must be apolitical and must be under the command of a legally constituted political authority; no serving member of the armed forces may seek to run for elective office (Article 1e)
- The freedom of association and the right to meet and organize peaceful demonstrations shall be guaranteed (Article 1j).

In practice however, not all member states or political leaders in the region have demonstrated commitments towards adherence to these protocols and principles. It is the contravention of these convergence principles that has resulted in the governance crises in West Africa, as is evidenced in the case of Mali. Additionally, under Article 2(1) of the Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, member states agreed that 'no substantial modification shall be made to the electoral laws in the last six months before an election, except with the consent of a majority of political actors.' Yet these norms are being contravened by some leaders in the region, with worrying signs for countries such as Benin, Togo, Guinea and la Cote d'Ivoire. It is essential that lessons are taken from recent events in Mali, as coups d'état, political uprisings and unconstitutional regime changes tend to have a contagion effect.

Conclusion

As crises of governance and democratic reversals are evident in most African states, the dividends of democracy are increasingly becoming elusive in the region. Widespread protests of the Arab spring led to the exit of some of the longest-ruling despots in the region from Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya though with varied outcomes in terms of the ensuing governance systems. The region has also seen Arab Spring-like protests in other countries like Burkina Faso, Sudan, and now Mali whose outcomes are military coups. The military has taken opportunistic advantage of peoples' demands for good governance to perpetuate political power grab often based on a claim of a tacit social contract between citizens and the army. In most cases, these coups are welcomed by the people who are dissatisfied with the deposed civilian governments. However, most of these military governments have not performed much better than the civilian administrations they removed.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Siegle, J. and Daniel Eizenga, D. (2020). "Mali coup offers lessons in democracy building — but junta must go". Available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/516599-mali-coup-offers-lessons-in-democracy-building-but-junta-must-go>

¹⁵ ECOWAS Commission, (2020). Communique: Meeting of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government with the National Committee for the Salvation of the People of Mali, Accra, 14 August.

¹⁶ ECOWAS Commission (1999). Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security.

This demonstrates that overthrowing an inept or corrupt government does not always provide quick fixes to the larger crises of governance in the region. It often leads to the cycle of insecurity and coups as the case of Mali has shown. Despite new norms of good governance which calls for a total rejection of coups and other unconstitutional regime changes, coups do occur and will continue in the region so long as the crisis of governance is not addressed. More so, the contagion effects of coups give cause for concern due to the widespread democratic reversal in the region.

Recommendations

1. Regional and international actors need to pay closer attention to political unrests in la Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea and Benin;
2. Sanctions need not be applied only when the military takeover has occurred. States could be threatened with sanctions and sanctioned when civilian authorities fail to abide by democratic principles;
3. Mediation efforts from the grassroots to the highest decision making levels need to be strengthened;
4. Other African states need to take lessons from recent developments in order to avoid the contagion of unconstitutional regime changes;
5. Military incursion into civilian rule should be condemned and discouraged. However, citizens need to have options when faced with political crisis orchestrated by civilian administrators.

About the Authors

Emma Birikorang (PhD) is the Deputy Director at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre.

Naila Salihu (PhD) is a Research Fellow with the Peace and Security Studies Programme at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KA IPTC). She holds a PhD in Defence and Security from Cranfield University, UK. Her research interests are on security sector governance in Africa.

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