



The Resurgence of Military Coups and Democratic Relapse in Africa

Edited by
Adeoye Akinola

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Preface

This edited volume interrogates the pressing issue of the resurgence of military coups in Africa, examining the nexus between these coups and democratic reversals across the continent. This pertinent phenomenon has captivated the attention of both scholars and policymakers engrossed in the realms of African democratisation, governance, and security architectures. Despite notable instances of political transformation, many African nations continue to struggle beyond the superficiality of periodic elections and intermittent political transitions. The fragility of these democratic institutions has been laid bare by recurring military coups and interventions, which have witnessed a notable upswing in recent years.

Since August 2021, the Sahel region has borne witness to eight military interventions in six countries, indicative of a broader trend. This underscores the unfulfilled promises of liberal democracy in significant parts of Africa. Such unfulfillment has precipitated a situation characterised by structural violence stemming from inadequate governance, institutional deficiencies, and exclusionary politics. Consequently, numerous African citizens languish beneath the poverty threshold, while various societies are ensnared by religious extremism, resource-driven militant entities, and local militias, holding the Sahel region hostage.

The resurgence of military coups in several African countries has further complicated the pursuit of effective governance and security. This

has also underscored the persistent involvement of the military in African political landscapes. The surge in military regimes poses a palpable threat to the democratisation process on the continent. Historically tasked with safeguarding lives, property, and the constitutional fabric of states, the military's increasing tendency to meddle in politics and democratic mechanisms portends dire consequences, including the militarisation of societies and fundamental human rights abuses. As reinforced in the book, this intrusion is facilitated by the shortcomings of Africa's political elite, driven by their penchant for unconstitutional tenure elongations and aggressive power consolidation, and exacerbated by inherent states' fragility. These factors have made military coups an increasingly accepted recourse to combat poor governance, economic malaise, and protracted violent conflicts.

This book embarks on a comprehensive exploration of the militarisation of African politics and societies by both military and insurgent groups. It delves into the political economy of military coups, employing a case study methodology to furnish a nuanced analysis of the detrimental aftermath of such coups in Africa. While military coups are traditionally perceived as setbacks to democracy, the book critically unpacks the autocratic tendencies inherent in Africa's political elite, who manipulate constitutional provisions to extend their tenures. This autocratic complexion often fuels military interventions, serving as a motivation for their incursion into political affairs. A pivotal moment in this conundrum materialised in Mali in August 2020 when President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was deposed, culminating in the installation of Bah Ndaw under the leadership of Colonel Assimi Goïta. This incident catalysed a series of coups in the Sahel region, notably Sudan, where two military leaders plunged the nation into chaos. This trend starkly contrasts the African Union's (AU) ambitious agenda of achieving regional peace and security and *Silencing the Guns* by 2030.

In addition, the book meticulously dissects the roles of key regional organisations such as the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in thwarting coups. It also evaluates the complicity of foreign powers and Private Military Companies (PMCs) in the fragile security architectures of vulnerable African states. Ultimately, the book proffers sustainable policy frameworks for political development,

military professionalism, and the disentanglement of the military from African politics. Beyond its policy implications, this edited volume stands as an invaluable resource for researchers probing African democratisation projects, political transition, peace, security, and security sector reform. Given the changing dynamics, particularly the waning influence of France and Western powers in the Sahel, the book provides a discerning perspective on the emerging influences of non-Western actors such as China and Russia on the Sahel's trajectory.

Johannesburg, South Africa

Adeoye Akinola

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Political Economy of Coup d'états and Spectre of the Domino Effect in Africa in the 2020s

N. Oluwafemi 'Femi' Mimiko

1 The Context: Political Economy Framework

Political economy is a multidisciplinary framework of inquiry in the social sciences, predicated upon the assumption that development outcomes are a function of the complex interaction of multiple factors. It avers that not only economic indexes are critical for understanding the workings of economic policies, but also meta-economic (institutional) forces. It therefore affirms that a robust understanding of the development enterprise can only be obtained through holistic examination of the intersection of politics and economics. Thus, political economy as an approach seeks to integrate 'both political and social factors as explanatory elements in economic analysis' (Aina, 1986, p. 10), in the process underscoring the 'enduring relationship between economic activities and their social and political contexts' (ibid.). It emphasises the 'reciprocal

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interaction between economics and politics' (Gilpin, 2003, p. 404), treating 'social life and material existence in their relatedness' (Ake, 1989).

The etymology of political economy is locatable in the Greek *polis*, meaning 'city' or 'state', and *oikonomos* or 'one who manages a household or estate'. This is why, shorn of all conceptual facades, political economy speaks to the study of the management or governance of a country—the public household writ large, 'taking into account both political and economic (factors)' (*Britannica*, 2023a).

Political economy is often deployed in its three basic dimensions—as a framework of analysis; as a representation of the workings of specific social formations; and in its international context. As an analytical framework, political economy explicates the ways in which economic motives shape perspectives, inform choices, and demonstrate the nature of social phenomena. As a concept, it approximates the interplay between politics and economics; state and market; growth and development; patterns of wealth creation and appropriation (production, distribution, and exchange); and power relations in social formations. It is to this extent taken as an inquiry into political-economic models of states ('economic models of political processes') or, practically, how 'the public's household' is managed. When deployed in its international dimension, political economy explores the intersection of politics and economics in the global space. Here, it facilitates an understanding of the fundamental economic motives behind choices and actions of both state and non-state actors in the global system, and how these shape and define the general tenor of the latter.

The political economy framework has its roots in Marxism, but beyond giving primacy to the material (substructure), it goes further to compel 'the integration of economic and meta-economic forces as a basis for constructing and appreciating the true nature of social phenomena, including the nature of power relations pertaining to every social formation' (Mimiko, 1998, pp. 64–88). It is in this specific context as 'a broad concept that looks for economic motives behind political and social actions', thereby establishing 'the interconnection between economic and political structures in social formations' (Alozieuwa, 2010, pp. 18–31, in McLoughlin & Bouchat, 2013), that the concept is invoked in this discourse. It thus, first, identifies 'political, economic, social, and cultural

factors' that propel coup d'états, especially at these times, in Africa. Secondly, it defines adequate responses to the coup d'état phenomenon, in terms of what needs to be done to stanch it, and to manage the consequential reality of the existence of military juntas across the continent, to the ends of reinstating constitutional governance.

This invariably must dovetail into an interrogation of the nature, evolution, and character of the African state, or, more appropriately, state formations in the countries where coups have taken place, knowing that the conception of Africa as a monolith is invalid (Mimiko, 2022a, pp. 649–671), especially for a study of this nature, which must of necessity be country-specific. Such an approach also conforms to the sense that no political economy analysis is intelligible without 'an analysis of the crucial role the state plays in the economy' (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1998, in Mimiko, 1998a, pp. 162–177). It is in this regard that, following this conceptual interrogation on the nature of political economy itself, this chapter undertakes a broad political economy analysis of Africa, as a general backdrop to the explication of the reality of the coup d'état phenomenon on the continent. This is followed by a discussion of what needs to be done to stanch the coup 'epidemic' currently underway in Africa, from which some general postulations relevant to an agenda for theorising the return of military coup d'états in Africa are provided.

2 State–Society Interaction in Africa: A Political Economy Analysis

2.1 Pre-Colonial State Formation Processes

In his pioneering effort, Weber (2015, pp. 129–198) describes a state as that 'human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence within a given territory'. It has as its most basic intrinsic values territoriality, population, and legitimate claim to deployment of violence. For him, the state is the most complex abstraction of social organisation. Contextually, a state is conceived as a contraption, which equates the collective will of a people to organised habitation of a

spatial entity, embedded with structures of engagement, including those for enforcement of rules for regulating the same, and capacity for sustenance of the autonomous existence by which its uniqueness is defined (Mimiko, 2013, pp. 119–237, 2020, pp. 141–168). While perspectives on the evolution of the state in the literature are legion, it suffices to underscore its social contract foundation, which follows its description by John Locke (1981) as a framework for the protection of property—‘lives, liberties, and estates’—of a human community. A state enjoys the latitude to continue to exist as long as it discharges this primary responsibility. Failure to do so is regarded as a legitimate basis for its dissolution. The foregoing provides the framework for an interrogation of the nature, patterns of evolution, and character of the African state.

The African continent was far from being a tabula rasa of governance structures before it was subjected colonialism. The existing governance system in communities across the continent at the time was rudimentary, yet sophisticated enough to discharge the most critical responsibilities of a state. There was much vitality in the cultural milieu, with the average African community exhibiting sets of shared values that held society together. Among these were the extended family system in much of West Africa, and *Ubuntu* in much of the eastern, central, and southern parts of the continent.

These early structures of governance in Africa were comparable with and not too distinct from what existed elsewhere. Thus, the German city states, which Otto von Bismarck forcefully brought together into a German nation, were quite similar in social structure to the Zulu nation, which Shaka the Zulu strived to forge from a mosaic of linguistically related nations in the Southern African region. Such was the comprehensive reach and depth of indigenous governance frameworks across Africa that scarcely any community existed untouched by colonialism without some form of such structures in place. This provided the basis for Ralph Linton’s averment that in terms of organisation of society, many pre-colonial African societies were noted to have presented something far better than the best in Europe circa the fifteenth century (Linton, 1955). According to him, ‘It is not too much to say that in their home territory the African Negroes have shown a genius for state-building unsurpassed

by any other people, except possibly the Incas of Peru' (Fay-Cooper Cole, 1956, p. 188).

In the old Oyo Empire—the preeminent social formation among the Yoruba of what came to be known as Nigeria—there was the elaborate *alaafin* governance structure, which was supposedly an all-powerful monarchy, but in all practicality exhibited evidence of democratic commitment in governance. The forms of governance structure that existed in the swatches of territory that became defined as northern Nigeria were found worthy to be preserved by the British and calibrated as the very bedrock of the Indirect Rule system. The republican system in many parts of pre-colonial Africa, including the Igbo heartland in southeast Nigeria, was functional and effective and provided a structural form for the cultural outlook of the people.

The prognosis on the viability of these rudimentary state forms is validated by the fact that the intruding colonists had to enter into agreements and treaties with several of them, while levying war against some, whose cooperation they could not otherwise obtain. An example of this was the Benin Empire, whose monarch, Ovoramwen Nogbaisi, was actually dethroned upon the sacking of the empire and the brutal violation and despoliation of its splendor by the invading colonists. A similar fate befell Shaka the Zulu in Southern Africa.

In most African societies, the economic system was functional, albeit subsistent. It was mostly driven by agriculture, hunting, and animal husbandry. The cash crop phenomenon was a latter-day introduction by the colonial powers, to provide the critical supply base for several factories located in Europe.

The foregoing list of accomplishments of the pre-colonial African society and state systems notwithstanding, what the continent presented in this regard was fundamentally wanting. The state system failed to mature and advance into modernity, a reality that shaped the nature of power relations with other cultures upon their arrival on the continent. The most important factor in this was the advantage conferred upon the foreign (later colonial) powers by the invention in Europe and the subsequent introduction of the Maxim gun into the African theatre, effective

from 1893.¹ The weaponry system used against the African communities dramatically changed the pattern of engagement between Europe and Africa forever, against the African communities. The relatively more advanced culture of the colonial powers provided the basis of the incorporation and subjugation of African societies by Europe.

The introduction of the Maxim gun followed several years of interne-cine wars in Africa, largely driven by the imperative of expansion by the small city states, and the need by the bigger ones, plundering hitherto settled communities for human captives to sell, first, to the Arab slave traders from the Arabian Peninsula, and later, into the more damaging and sustained Atlantic slave trade. These inter-community armed expeditions that went on across the continent had considerably weakened the communities' capacity to resist foreign intrusion when it came, especially as conducted with a much more advanced and efficient technology of war, the Maxim gun.

The weak and closed leadership structure obtained in several African states provided a basis for internal decay, which unwittingly facilitated the ability of the invading culture to recruit a critical mass in the service of its emergent colonial economy and governance system. The tendency for unrestrained romanticisation of the African past, which is quite prevalent in the literature, may therefore, on the basis of the foregoing mapping of the pre-colonial African governance forms, lack an objective basis. Even this does not detract from the remarkable dimensions and grandeur of many of such pre-colonial states. Extant interrogation of indigenous knowledge systems as a basis for the reconstruction of the African essence is also an acknowledgement that there are knowledge bases from the African pre-colonial era worthy of adaptation for addressing prevailing governance challenges on the continent.

¹The Maxim gun is a recoil-operated machine gun, invented in 1884 by the American, Hiram Stevens Maxim, and regarded as the first fully automatic machine gun ever produced (*Britannica*, 2023b).

2.2 Colonial State Formation and Orientation

Exploitation was the primary motivation of the colonial state, and the end to which all colonial activities were directed. It was a most rewarding enterprise for the coloniser, but equated to massive disruption and despoliation for the colonised. In these circumstances, most of the colonial powers were very reluctant to decolonise. When it became obvious that colonialism was not going to endure, however, each of these powers made spirited efforts to decolonise on their own terms, emplacing structures that would continue to service the interest of the metropolis, even after formal political independence. Such a neo-colonial agenda conditioned the patterns of governance handed over to the nationalists after independence. In some other colonies over which the metropole was insistent on the sustenance of formal colonisation, the latter was practically forced out, almost everywhere through the use of arms, epitomised in the guerilla warfare strategy, which became the template for decolonisation in places like Algeria at the northern tip of the continent; Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde in West Africa; and Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and ultimately South Africa in the Eastern/Southern African sub-region.

The disruption to the evolutionary state formation process in these mostly Portuguese colonies also impacted the ability of the post-liberation ruling elites to redirect the new states from the patterns established through at least one century of unbroken violation and despoliation basic to colonialism (Mimiko, 2022b, pp. v–ix). Thus, more than three decades after liberation, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa has not been able to dismantle the solid structures of the apartheid economy, which it chose to tolerate in order to sustain the highly productive orientation of the economy. This has meant that the legitimate expectations of the Black community for expeditious improvement in their quality of life upon the defeat of apartheid remain largely a forlorn hope (Mimiko, 2021, pp. 1–37).

It was within this crucible that what became the post-colonial state in Africa was forged. It was created by colonialism to serve the exploitative agenda of the coloniser. This was the context in which the averment is

unimpeachable that colonialism shaped the African past, gave context to the present, and will continue to influence the future. Its continuing impact, even after close to a century of decolonisation, must not be lost, given the extensive and ramifying nature of the phenomenon. The reality in which the continent of Africa thus reels is that the dysfunctional (neo-colonial) state midwived by colonialism, as well as the attendant decolonisation process, was designed for and continues to reproduce the types of governance structures on the continent which are virtually incapable of administering either welfare or security, the very essence, indeed the *raison d'être*, of the modern state. As it was with the preceding era of the colonial state, exploitation remains the main driver of the post-colonial state in Africa. The only difference is that in the latter epoch, local comprador elements had stepped in, taken over, and reinvented the apparatuses of domination, oppression, repression, and exploitation, inherited from colonialism. This is the principal factor in the inability of the post-colonial state to function maximally.

2.3 Post-Colonial State

In summary, the character and orientation of the extant African state and society, and the peculiar relationship they share, are a function of the years of asymmetrical trade—completely skewed against the African communities—which defined the relationship between pre-colonial Africa and external forces; four hundred years of slave trade; and a century of the colonial enterprise. Thus, today, with a population of 1.4 billion people, or 17 per cent of the world's total, and about 60 per cent of the world's arable land, Africa suffers from unmitigated food insecurity. Its subsistent but functional agricultural system of the pre-colonial era was distorted via the imposition of a cash crop economy that was not meant to expand the profile of the continent's local population-sustaining production, but existed in the service of the industries of Europe and North America. It was the only continent where the Millennium Development Goals' (MDG) objective of halving global poverty was not met. Its political system is defined by instability and a very weak state that is not capable of advancing the interests of the population or of

protecting them from sundry challenges with which they deal on a daily basis. The economy lacks integration, such that intra-African trade accounts for only 17 per cent of African exports, as against 59 per cent in Asia and 68 per cent in Europe.

Until the 'third wave' of democracy of the 1990s, Africa was one of the more undemocratic continents of the world. What looked like the relative stability of the democratic enterprise across the continent from the 1990s began to atrophy; and one after the other, the tentative democratic regimes began to fail, such that there were two coup d'états (Mali and Central African Republic, attempted) on the continent in 2020. The number grew to four successful coups in 2021—Chad, Mali, Guinea, and Sudan, excluding the two other countries, Niger and Sudan, where similar attempts by the military to subvert constitutional government were defeated by loyal officers of the military. The implication, as noted by *The Economist* of London, was that Africa saw more coups in 2021 than in the previous five years combined (cited in Powell & Hammou, 2021). This reality validated Al Jazeera's characterisation of the year as the one in which 'military coups returned to the stage in Africa' (Durmaz, on Al Jazeera, 28 December 2021). Two coups were recorded in Burkina Faso in 2022, while attempts to forcefully take over the government in Guinea Bissau, The Gambia, and São Tomé and Príncipe in the same year failed (Mwai, in *BBC*, 4 January 2023). As noted by a BBC report (4 January 2023), of the 16 coups recorded globally since 2017, all but the one in Myanmar in 2021 took place in Africa. The rapidity with which these constitutional reversals took place was such that it elicited their characterisation by United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on October 26, 2021, a day after the military took power in Sudan, as 'an epidemic of coup d'état' on the African continent. Significantly, the coups did not happen on a single day, but sequentially, raising the question whether, indeed, the continent was experiencing some form of domino effect in the transition from constitutionalism to military rule.

3 The Domino Effect Thesis

The *Cambridge Dictionary* conceives ‘the domino effect’ as ‘the situation in which something, usually something bad, happens, causing other similar events to happen’. For *Merriam Webster* (2023), it is ‘a cumulative effect produced when one event initiates a succession of similar events’. For the purpose of this discourse, the domino effect is conceptualised as a situation in which an event—usually considered negative—in one location catalyses similar events within the same or other locations, when one bad situation triggers a sequence of similar occurrences either internally or in other locations. The domino effect is akin to, yet conceptually different from, Rosenau’s Linkage Theory, which is about autonomous or semi-autonomous entities—actors, in International Relations literature—reacting or responding to developments in other locations (Rosenau, 1969).

Countries in the West African sub-region are considerably similar in their demographic configuration, political systems, economic structures, and sociological composition, among others. The forces that propelled coup d’états in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Niger, and Burkina Faso in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region are also not peculiar to these five countries. Rather, this also defines the political economy of virtually all states in the region. This would imply that if the same conditions that made for coup d’états, in quick succession, in the five countries are also prevalent everywhere in the region, the possibilities are high that the latter’s attempts at democratisation may also be truncated by coup d’états if the relevant trigger factors, akin to those in the countries where the military have intervened, are activated. There is thus the possibility of the domino effect being activated, in which the wave of coup d’états in Africa could be taken as one coup impacting on (emulation possibility) another country; or more appropriately, that a political event (coup d’état) in one country could trigger another one in the same country, or a neighbouring one. This is in sync with Mimiko’s (1999) emulation possibilities thesis—a situation in which circumstances as well as policy directions and programming in one jurisdiction are adaptable elsewhere. Ruth First (1970) puts this concern more succinctly:

‘what the military of one state do today, their confrères next door may do tomorrow’. It is the reality of what O.S. Kamanu describes as ‘reciprocal influence across national frontiers’ (cited in First, 1970).

Thus, it is apt to aver that a factor in the ‘coup contagion’ thesis that is, the swiftness with which coup d'états follow each other from the year 2020, speaks to what elsewhere are referred to as ‘patterns at emulation of anti-democratic acts of soldiers in one country by another country’s troops’ (Mimiko, 2022c). Also, ‘the phenomenon of “coup within coup” is a product of an informal learning process that has seen the pattern evolve from the Sudan through Mali’ (Mimiko, 2022c), validating the thesis by Kamanu that such ‘reciprocal influence across national frontiers’ is a critical propellant of coups in Africa (cited in Powell & Hammou, 2021).

The problematic of this chapter comes into bolder relief from the foregoing. Why is there now a resurgence of military coup d'états—an epidemic of coup d'états’ as it were—in Africa? What is the nature of these coups, and what are the factors propelling them? How can constitutional governments be sustained across the African continent, even in the face of extant trends in the subversion of the same by elements within the militaries? It is important to surmise here, as we unpack the complexity attendant upon these inquiries, that like every social phenomenon, coups are multi-causal, the product of the interaction of multiple forces—internal and external. Thus, no single reason would explain the coups, indeed any single coup, on the continent. What is certain, however, is that we can draw some commonalities across countries where coups have taken place in recent times, and consider the possibility of issuing some generalisations, on the pathway to theorisation on the coup d'état phenomenon. In this regard, the political economy framework provides a most suitable tool, as it affords us the possibility of robust interrogation of the coup d'états phenomenon in Africa. It further demonstrates how contextual factors—economic, political, cultural, and so on—shape developments in the direction of a forceful takeover of government by the armed forces in the African milieu.

This gives the study a considerable outlook on policy, which is sorely needed in light of the changing profile of politics and governance on the continent. Thus, to the extent that political economy analysis helps in identifying the impact of political, economic, social, and cultural

influences on extant political development in African countries, it establishes ‘a more politically informed approach to working, (to wit), thinking and working politically (TWP)’ (Lane and Martinko, in USAID, 2018). Attendant to this are three core principles: ‘strong political analysis, insight, and understanding; detailed appreciation of, and response to, the local context; and flexibility and adaptability in programme design and implementation’ (ibid.). The impact of this schema on policy programming for stanching and ultimately stamping out the incipient ‘coup epidemic’ in Africa cannot be overemphasised.

4 Resurgence of Coup d’états in Africa

A review of the patterns of coup d’états in Africa in the 2020s enables a highlighting of the primary propellants of the phenomenon: irresponsiveness, in fact dysfunctionality, of the nascent democratic system; shrinking economic opportunities for the populace, especially the youth demographic; terrorism and insurgency, made so debilitating by the limited capacity of state structures to rein them in; and environmental factors that detract from the possibilities of normal living and livelihood for a preponderance of the population. Others are limited conflict management skills on the part of state officials at all levels, corruption, in its multiple dimensions, and social exclusion. The place of foreign influence and geopolitics in the coup trajectory can also not be discounted. While the manner in which each of these forces plays out may differ, they nevertheless can be disaggregated into four broad areas: political, economic, social, and external factors. This taxonomy acknowledges the overlapping nature of the factors and makes for a robust analysis. Standing out among the coup facilitators, however, is the pervasive crisis of state legitimacy in Africa, which is, for all intents and purposes, the condition common to coup d’états everywhere on the continent. It is the fulcrum around which all the other factors revolve, and is therefore discussed in some detail here.