# Towards a Better Understanding of the Underlying Conditions of Coups in Africa

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On Sunday, 5 September 5 2021, news broke of a coup in Guinea. An elite group in Guinea's military had ousted the country's president of eleven years, Alpha Condé. The usual condemnations flew in as many Guineans jubilated in the streets. The African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) expelled Guinea and imposed sanctions. The latter froze financial assets and placed a travel ban on the putschists. Guinea's coup is one of many recent cases of the army intervening in national politics, after many African countries are expected to have significantly democratised, post-Cold War, from the early 1990s. This has alarmed democracy watchers, and analysts are binging – with an air of surprise – on why coups are making a comeback or rising in the continent. This question, however, assumes that the conditions that fueled "old" coups left the continent in the first place.

**A tale of many – or different? – coups**

Africa led in coups between 1950 and 2010, accounting for 36.5% of all coups globally. According to one report, since the first coup in Togo in 1963, there have been over 200 coups and attempted coups in Africa. In each decade between 1958 and 2008, West Africa, designated as a "coup-belt", had the highest number of coups in the continent, accounting for 44.4%. Condé's ousting is one of four coups and attempted coups in the sub-region in less than nine months – after two coups in Mali (September 2020 and May 2021) and one attempted in Niger (March 2021). These figures take the continental count to nine coups and 29 attempts since 2010, excluding the attempted coup in Sudan few days ago.

The number of coups has however reduced. There has been an average of two coups since 2019, a decline from an average of four between 1960 and 2000. This statistic suggests an improvement, but it also shows that military takeovers in Africa are a present danger. Many of the recent coups have the DNA of old coups. Of much concern, however, are cases of "coups that are not coups". They come in the form of "soft coups" as happened in Zimbabwe in 2017, "dynastic coups" as happened in Chad last April, and the so-called "constitutional coups".

The last involves elongating constitutional term limits by sitting presidents. Instead of getting access to power by crushing through the gates of governments from the outside, these "different" coups entail negotiating one's way to power, including through legal means, and staging a "coup" from the inside. These coups appear to have a higher probability of success since they are staged from a position of relative or ultimate power. They seem to hurt democratic sensitivities less. Hence they are more "acceptable" by the international community. They are not accorded, at least overtly, the seriousness to which old coups are subjected.

Counting Guinea, there are at least 14 countries in which sitting presidents have tampered with constitutional terms to stay longer in power, in just a little over a decade. In another five, sitting presidents have attempted, but failed, to do so.

**Africa's "democracy": one step forward, two steps back**

Much of the analyses point to recent coups as returning on the heels of African democracies in reverse gear.

However, this line of argument seems to accept that neoliberal democracy in Africa made a forward move, in the first place – a move significant enough to prevent coups from happening again. There are enough reasons to say otherwise. Noam Chomsky suggests in *Who Rules the World* that we live in the same ugly world merely punctuated by one historical moment after another. Imperial and corporate interests largely survive across these moments. Despite the move from Cold War to post-Cold War, and recently to post-9/11 politics, it appears not much has changed in Africa's domestic and global politics.

Claims of democratic progress in Africa are overrated. Despite some emergent developments in the right direction, a more accurate picture of democracy in the continent is that of one step forward, followed by two back. In one assessment, for example, researchers conclude that democratisation in Africa between 1990 and 2010 saw progress but also setbacks. It found democracy in the continent to be 'increasingly illegitimate'. Within that period, there were regular elections but also democratic rollbacks; democratic institutionalisation but also endemic corruption; institutionalisation of political parties but also widespread ethnic voting and violent politics; increased number of civil societies but also local realities of incivility and violence; and political freedoms and economic growth but also political controls and inequality.

A survey of voting intentions in 16 African countries found that, in countries with few dominant parties, voters preferred certain parties to avoid post-election retribution. Another study concludes that,

(political) succession in African states indicate trends towards illegitimate and unpopular self-succession, hereditary trends, the appointment of proxies and only a few instances of emerging liberal democratic regimes.

Across the continent, one of the world's leading democracy researchers, Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, finds that,

the exercise of authority enjoyed by presidents and their appointees effectively negates the voice of the people, as expressed via elections, print and electronic media, and even lawsuits.

He adds that the proportion of Africans who believe they live in a democracy falls almost every year since mid-2000. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance shows that democratic progress in Africa is below citizens' expectations. There is also a decline in people's trust in key institutions. These may be problems that a more consolidated democracy could eventually address. However, they also represent an affront on the validity and desirability of current democratic principles in the continent.

The above account of democracy in the continent, for example, raises many questions. One of which is whether democracy should be assessed against qualitative indicators, like the actual substance of popular participation and suffrage, and not against quantitative benchmarks alone – such as the sheer number of public institutions, regular elections and voter turnouts. Arguably, the above offers a general overview of democracy, and specific country cases may present better or worse cases. And, as Nigerian Political Scientist Claude Ake noted some 20 years ago, 'Africa is by no means the only part of the world where the prospect of democracy is in question'. His observation is accurate even now as democracy in the world is said to be backsliding.

Yet, for the most part, neoliberal democratic project in Africa was largely an external imposition in the image of post-Cold War politics. Some three decades later, the fate of that project requires a rethink to suit local circumstances, irrespective of the prospects of democracy elsewhere. Moreover, history seems to show that political developments in Africa are better not analysed in silos, but from the vantage point of the sum of the continent's position in world politics.

**The prying eyes of external powers**

Conditions that motivated old coups were not only found in national politics. The prying eyes of external interests were ferociously at work. In the first four decades of independence, coups were set against destructive Cold War politics. The twoglobal powers, the Soviet Union (now Russia) and the United States (U.S.) raced against each other for space and resources on the continent. African elites were appropriated into that politics to do the bidding of global

powers. The results were many coups, and glorified dictators. Given that history, and the observation that shifting global orders do not necessarily bring significant changes in international political and economic behaviour, external interests cannot be absolved in recent coups.

According to one report, sources in the Malian army confirm that putschists who removed Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita spent most of the year training in Russia before returning to force out the elected leader. Russia is also mentioned in the second Malian coup in nine months, which saw Assimi Goita become interim leader of the Sahelian country. These facts do not conclusively implicate Russia, as Goita and several participants in the latest Malian mutiny also received U.S. training and assistance. Still, they raise questions about whether the coups are attributable to domestic politics or, as some say, to foreign interests.

Just like we see in Libya and other places, Russian mercenary groups, for example, appear to play a deeper role in conflicts on the continent than meets the eye. Connections have been drawn between these so-called private groups and the activities of Russia and France in Mali, and between Russian mercenaries and conflict in the Central African Republic.

Any Russian geopolitical success in Mali is a loss for the country's former colonialist, France. For instance, while the latter criticised the military junta in Mali, it supported the dynastic coup by Mahamat Déby in Chad.Francophone Africa has a not-so-impressive reputation regarding coups. Between 1958 and 2008, most coups in Africa occurred in former French colonies. Owing to many former French colonies opting for neo-colonial ties to France, the Elysée cannot be ruled out as influencing, if not sponsoring, many of these coups.

As Jonathan Holslag maintains, China's strategy in Africa is more about adapting to political realities than shaping them. Yet, the Guinea coup has been analysed by some as being orchestrated by the U.S. to neutralise China, whose trade with Africa has increased 40-fold over the past two decades. The U.S. is also circumstantially implicated in the coup as a video showed some American soldiers celebrating the fall of Condé. Coup plotters also left a base where they received U.S. training and headed for Conakry immediately before the coup.

All these may not be conclusive evidence of external influence or sponsorship. The U.S., for instance, has flatly denied any involvement in the Guinea coup. However, add the above circumstantial evidence of foreign interference, to contemporary events in Africa's relationship with the external world since the slave trade, and what you have is an almost unambiguous answer: recent coups in Africa have foreign fingerprints.

The above position does not reduce African agency into lump of soft wax for external actors to mould into shape. Rather, it restates a fact of history in which foreign interests have attempted, and mostly succeeded, in doing the moulding. Global powers, for instance, are currently repositioning in the context of the "new Cold War" between Beijing and Washington, as U.S. and allied influence in the continent wane. As global powers reposition themselves in Africa as part of the so-called "new scramble", they appear to be continuing the Cold War practice of subcontracting external interests to national elites who could grab power, or cling to it.

**The way forward**

As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes, whatever happens in Africa must be understood in the context of 'the entire modern world system and its shifting global orders'. Why coups are (re)occurring in any part of Africa must thus be assessed against prevailing conditions on all levels of the international system. Whether one looks at the issue inwardly (towards national politics) or outwardly (towards global politics), the structures and motivations behind coups have not changed much. The conditions that incited old coups are still present. Only that they now operate in a different post-9//11 and, perhaps, Covid-19 historical moments.

On the one hand, democracy has not made much progress in national politics as to prevent a return to authoritarianism in the continent. On the other, and consequently, foreign interests are at play, as always. Subsequently, national leaders are (still) circumventing the cosmetic democratic structures present in their countries. Global powers are (still) using their every advantage to shift goalposts in their favour. For example, in Mali and

Guinea, rich deposits of minerals like Uranium, Iron Ore, and Bauxite are among the obvious trophies.

Contrary to one argument, therefore, African leaders are not 'the only actors who truly have the power to reverse this worrying trend' of recent coups. The coup in Guinea will not be the last – indeed, there is another attempted a few days ago in Sudan! – unless African countries qualitatively democratise, and global powers rethink their centuries-old tradition of shaping and shaking African spaces in their favour.

Stopping coups in Africa will also require Africa to take charge of truly decolonising the continent. That should involve answering hard moral questions about coups, including whether they are all necessarily bad as the dominant view suggests. Or they could be understood as "good" liberatory political statements against dictators or abuses of constitutional power, especially in the face of the functional incapacity of intergovernmental bodies such as ECOWAS, in the case of West Africa, to prevent incumbent abuses.

National, sub-regional and continental bodies must also redefine when a coup is coup. Currently, a coup is an illegal attempt to unseat a sitting leader by military or civilian officials. This definition must be stretched to include all actions – hard or soft; whether within incumbent regimes and governments or not; and whether they are from a position of power or not – to unseat a leader or take power in a condition of a political vacuum. The effective application of this comprehensive definition, using relevant punitive legal, political and diplomatic instruments, could forestall future coups.

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