



Briefing paper – Security and Disarmament Council (Advanced)

Topic: The issue of a rising number of coups in Africa

Overview:

The takeover in Gabon is just the latest in a string of coups that have taken place in recent years and comes just a month after soldiers took control in Niger.

There were two in Burkina Faso in 2022 as well as failed coup attempts in Guinea Bissau, The Gambia and the island nation of Sao Tome and Principe.

In 2021, there were six coup attempts in Africa, four of them successful.

Last year, a senior African Union official, Moussa Faki Mahamat about "the resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government".

A coup can be defined as an illegal and overt attempt by the military - or by other civilian officials - to unseat sitting leaders.

A study by two US researchers, Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne, has identified over 200 such attempts in Africa since the 1950s. About half of these have been successful.

In April 2021 after the death of Chadian leader, Idriss Deby, the army installed his son as interim president, leading a transitional military council. His opponents called it a "dynastic coup".

In the years after 2000, there was a noticeable decline in military interventions.

It's only in the last couple of years that coups have become more prevalent.

In 2020, there was just one coup (in Mali).

Then in 2021 five countries experienced military interventions (Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Niger).

In 2022, there were also five attempts, with two - both in Burkina Faso - succeeding.

Sudan has had the most coups and attempted takeovers amounting to 17 - six of them successful.

In 2019, long-serving leader Omar al-Bashir was removed from power following months of protests. Bashir himself had taken over in a military coup in 1989.

Burkina Faso in West Africa has had the most successful coups, with nine takeovers and one failed coup.

Nigeria had a reputation for military coups following independence with eight between January 1966 and the takeover by Gen Sani Abacha in 1993. However, since 1999 transfers of power in Africa's most populous nation have been by democratic election.

Burundi's history has been marked by eleven separate coups, mostly driven by the tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities.

Sierra Leone experienced three coups between 1967 and 1968, and another one in 1971. Between 1992 and 1997, it experienced five further coup attempts.

Ghana has also had its share of military coups, with eight in two decades. The first was in 1966, when Kwame Nkrumah was removed from power, and in the following year there was an unsuccessful attempt by junior army officers.

In 2021, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres said that "military coups are back," adding that "geo-political divisions are undermining international co-operation and sense of impunity is taking hold," he said.

Overall, Africa has experienced more coups than any other continent. Of the 18 coups recorded globally since 2017, all but one - Myanmar in 2021 - have been in Africa.

BBC - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-46783600#>

Niger - On July 26, 2023, the military announced that they had overthrown President Mohamed Bazoum. General Abdourahamane Tiani becomes the new strongman of the country. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) announced on August 10 its intention to deploy a regional force to "restore constitutional order", while continuing to favor the diplomatic route. The military proposes a transition period of "three years" maximum before returning power to civilians.

- Burkina Faso: two putsches in 8 months - On January 24, 2022, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was ousted from power by the military, Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was inaugurated president in February. On September 30, Damiba was in turn dismissed from his position by the military, Captain Ibrahim Traoré was invested as transitional president until a presidential election scheduled for July 2024.

- Sudan - On October 25, 2021, soldiers led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhane chased out the transitional civilian leaders, who were supposed to lead the country towards democracy after 30 years of dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir, himself deposed in 2019. Since April 15, 2023, a war due to a power struggle between General Burhane and his former deputy Mohamed Hamdane Daglo has killed at least 5,000 people in the country.

- Guinea - On September 5, 2021, President Alpha Condé was overthrown by a military coup. On October 1, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya became president. The military has promised to return the place to elected civilians by the end of 2024.

- Mali: two coups in 9 months - On August 18, 2020, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was overthrown by the military, a transitional government was formed in October. But on May 24, 2021, the military arrested the president and the Prime Minister. Colonel Assimi Goïta was inaugurated in June as transitional president. The junta has committed to returning the place to civilians after the elections scheduled for February 2024.

Africa News - <https://www.africanews.com/2023/08/30/africa-the-7-military-coups-over-the-last-three-years//>

Though military coups tend to have some common elements, Gabon's doesn't exactly fit the pattern of other recent coups in western Africa; there were no serious security threats like the Islamist terror that plagues Mali and Burkina Faso in particular — meaning there's no justification for the coup from a security standpoint. And the ousted President Ali Bongo was part of a dynastic dictatorship that had ruled the country for four decades, unlike in Niger,

Burkina Faso, and Mali, which had at various points in the past four decades made strides toward democratic civilian rule.

Coup leaders from Gabon's presidential guard, in particular Gen. Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema, took advantage of the Bongo family's corruption and disputed election results declaring another win for 64-year-old Ali Bongo. The Bongo family and its close associates have long profited off of Gabon's oil wealth, but didn't invest it into state institutions like healthcare, education, or infrastructure — rather, the ruling elites hoarded that wealth and left the vast majority of the population poor.

But rather than change that system, experts told Vox that Gabon's coup leaders have undertaken a continuity coup, in which very little will change other than the figurehead benefiting from the state's resources.

So yes, while there have been a lot of coups in Africa lately, they're not all related, and they're not all the same. And though these events often pop up on Twitter feeds or news alerts only to be forgotten days later, it's worth examining the patterns of coup dynamics. As Americans know, this is not a phenomenon relegated to Latin America or the Sahel; January 6, 2021 showed that insurrection is possible even in a country with supposedly strong democratic institutions. Furthermore, understanding how these undemocratic transitions of power happen — their differences and similarities, the actors and forces driving them, and the context in which they happen — is a way to understand the countries themselves, as well as our global political moment.

Gabon's coup has close parallels with Zimbabwe's coup in 2017 which ousted longtime authoritarian President Robert Mugabe in favour of Emmerson Mnangagwa, a close ally of Mugabe who represents a continuation of Mugabe's ZANU-PF party. In both cases, a major change to the system, like instituting true democratic reforms and holding free and fair elections, would actually harm the interests of the ruling elite.

That's a similar situation to Thailand, which has had a high number of military coups in recent decades. There, the putsches on the part of the military are to protect the power of the Thai monarchy and essentially keep progressive democracy from being able to develop — and thus threaten the establishment's access to power and resources.

Even if the junta in Gabon does implement civilian rule, that's not the same thing as democracy, as other post-coup governments have shown.

In Zimbabwe, where the ruling ZANU-PF party just won the national elections and gave Mnangagwa his second term in office, it's difficult to argue that holding elections means that the country is actually functioning based on democratic norms, Joseph Siegle, head of the research and strategic communications program at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies, told Vox in an interview. "There's really no pretense there," of having competitive elections carried out by a robust electoral body. "They're just going through the motions."

But often, that's good enough for Western and international bodies who provide aid to support democracies in developing nations, Powell said. Over time, entities like the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as Western powers like the US "became more tolerant of really just any sort of a post-coup election, just so long as you had an election," he told Vox. "Just so long as whoever won that election was wearing a suit instead of a military uniform, that would be enough to get sanctions lifted" and aid would flow back to the country in question.

That's not to say that democratization never happens after a military coup; Niger and Mali are actually themselves examples of that. But that's often "just an accident," Powell told Vox. "In some cases, they might have specifically not wanted to have a democracy, but just because of various different things going on — social pressures, international pressure and things like that, the military finds themselves in a situation where they basically have to step back and allow a bonafide civilian government to take over."

Furthermore, in polarized societies, it becomes that much more difficult to build civilian institutions like labor or civic organizations that have the capability to push back against military rule, and to negotiate with governments to get people's needs met.

"The risk of these kinds of coup situations or onset of armed conflict are highest in situations where the local population is strongly divided," Marshall said. "We call it polarization — it's become a buzzword in this country these days. But polarization is a symptom of societal disintegration and for democracy to work, you need the society to be fully integrated."

Vox - <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2023/9/10/23866908/africa-coup-gabon-niger-mali-burkina-faso>

For over a decade, Moscow has been the largest arms seller to more than eighteen African countries in the continent, with just under half of Africa's total military imports being Russia's attractive, cheap, and low-premise weapons.

The biggest arms buyers are Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Morocco, and Uganda. Companies like Rosoboronexport have signed billion-dollar contracts.

It appears that Russia's use of private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, with about 40 African sovereign defense and security partnerships, providing various training and operational services have also been useful for establishing more economic relations with African countries as various African governments wish to maintain peace and ensure border security against both tribal factions and the threat of Islamic militancy.

<https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-africa-2023-24-trade-and-development-prospects.html/>

Since the coup, there has been a war of words between the military and the West. Mr Bazoum was a staunch ally of the West in the fight against militant Islamists and was a strong economic partner as well. Niger hosts a French military base and is the world's seventh biggest producer of uranium. The fuel is vital for nuclear power with a quarter of it going to Europe, especially former colonial power France. Since General Abdourahamane Tchiani overthrew the president in a coup on 26 July, Russian colours have suddenly appeared on the streets. Thousands took part in a protest in the capital Niamey on Sunday, with some waving Russian flags and even attacking the French embassy.

It now seems this "movement" is spreading across the country.

The businessman, based 800km (500 miles) away in the central city of Zinder, didn't want to give his name for safety reasons and asked that we blur his face.

"I'm pro-Russian and I don't like France," he said. "Since childhood, I've been opposed to France.

"They've exploited all the riches of my country such as uranium, petrol and gold. The poorest Nigeriens are unable to eat three times a day because of France."

The businessman said thousands had taken part in Monday's protest in Zinder in support of the military takeover.

He said he had asked a local tailor to take material in the Russian colours of white, blue and red and make an outfit for him, denying that it had been paid for by pro-Russian groups.

Niger is home to 24.4 million people where two in every five live in extreme poverty, on less than \$2.15 a day.

Other articles:

Washington post - <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/30/map-gabon-coup-africa-instability/>

HoC library - <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9861/>

ABC - <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-01/west-and-central-africa-recent-coups-explained/102797750>

Al Jazeera - <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/28/white-hands-the-rise-of-private-militaries-in-african-conflict>

BBC - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-66654965>

<https://www.ft.com/content/9884b948-91f6-4f25-b4fa-46e3db686a35#post-f9591221-054d-4f0d-97b0-8c29a5af9d8e>