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The role of the military in political transitions: from the 18th century to the present day

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MILITARY, SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF MILITARY COUPS: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Recent years have seen a resurgence of military coups d'état around the world. After defining the notion of coup d'état and offering a preliminary typology, I shall explore military, political and socio-economic determinants of (the growth of) military coups d'état.

In doing so, I shall focus in the first place on domestic conditions, such as the prevalence of coups in the past, state fragility, misrule and corruption, and the decline of regime legitimacy as well as the disappointing results of young democracies. I shall also pay attention to colonial history, the nature of the armed forces and civil-military relations. National and regional insecurity may also lead to coups d' état. Finally, I discuss economic decline as a potential factor leading to coups.

Next I provide a brief overview of major coup outcomes and discuss the question whether and how coups can be prevented or managed. Here the issue of international censure and the application of sanctions is of relevance, as well as the possibility of domestic political or economic reform.

This chapter is based on a perusal of selected academic and policy literature. Especially in the field of international relations, Africa studies and conflict studies there is a

wide literature on the topic which makes it impossible to provide something like a comprehensive overview. Instead I focus on recent scholarship of the last few years. Most of those sources concern recent coups on the African continent, but this does not imply that coups are an exclusively African phenomenon.

Keywords: military coups, coups d' état, Africa, sanctions

Introduction: A resurgence of coups d'état?

The 50st commemoration of the military take-over and peaceful and sustainable transition to democracy in Portugal, known as the Carnation Revolution, is not the only reason to dwell on the topic of military coups d'état. It is in fact the contemporary prevalence of military coups d'état that necessitates further attention and scholarly analysis. As of recent, academics have noted "a resurgence of military power"[1], "resurgent militarism" or "a new wave of militarism"[2], "a spate of coups"[3] and even a "pandemic of coups"[4], mainly on the African continent but also globally. In October 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres assailed what he called " an epidemic of coup d'états" and urged the Security Council to act to effectively deter them.[5] Akwei et al. report that only within the last three years [2020-2023], eleven coup attempts took place in Africa, seven of them successful.[6] These quotes should not detract from recognizing that coups have been a fact of life for much longer. Rosenje and Kolapo remind us that the 1960s were once called the "military decade in Africa". They state that in the 1960s and 1970s three-quarters of African leaders were assassinated or forced from office by coups d'état and -quoting Greenblatt (2012)[7]- that only five countries in Africa held competitive elections on a regular basis.[8] Akwei et al. add that since the years of

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1 . M.O. Rosenje and S. J. Kolapo. "Military Resurgence and Liberal Democracy in Africa." *Journal of Political Discourse* Vol. 2, Issue 2, No. 1, (June 2024).

2 . A. Mohammed and M. Adamu. "Resurgent Militarism in Africa: Causes, Consequences, and Implications." *The Journal of Politics and International Affairs* 16(2), (2022).

3 . P.M. Silva and I. P. Oliveira. "Diplomatic Quagmire: An In-Depth Exploration Of Causes, Consequences, And Global Reactions To Policy-Induced Coups In Francophone Africa." *International Journal of Political and Social Sciences* Vol. 9, Issue 1, (January-February 2024): 38.

4 . K. Zulueta-Fülscher and T. Noël. "The 2021 Coup Pandemic: Post-Coup Transitions and International Responses". *Annual Review of Constitution-Building.* Stockholm: International IDEA (2021)..

5 . Source: https://www.reuters.com/world/an-epidemic-coups-un-chief-laments-urging-security-council-act-2021-10-26/; accessed 27-08-2024

6 . Akwei, B., B. A. Machar and P. Mnyandu. "'Debris' of Coups D'état: Electoral Democracy, Election Violence, Political Vigilantism, and Elections Securitizations in Africa." *South Asian Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* Volume 5 (3) (May-June 2023): 66.

7 . A. Greenblatt. "Democracy steadily takes root in Africa." National Public Radio (2012) http://www.npr.org

8 . Rosenje and Kolapo. "Military Resurgence," 126.

independence, Africa has experienced more than 200 military coups, counting both successful and failed coup attempts.[9]

This spate of coups begs the question of what caused these coups to emerge, what they imply and whether there is any remedy or way to deal with them. Before looking at their determinants, explanations and possible remedies, I shall first deal with the issue of defining coups d'états, discussing existing typologies, and the spread of coups around the world (their epidemiology).

Definition, typology and epidemiology of coups d'état

Definition

Though coups appear in different forms and shapes, there is fairly broad scholarly consensus about their definition. The Cline Center Coup d'État Project Dataset of the University of Illinois defines coups d'état as "… organized efforts to effect sudden and irregular (e.g. illegal, or extra-legal) removal of the incumbent executive authority of a national government, or to displace the authority of the highest levels of one or more branches of government."[10] Anyoko-Shaba states that "Military coup d'état alludes to the sudden, forcible and unconstitutional removal of an existing government by the military usually with violence."[11] Bennett et al say: "During a coup some group, typically within the political elite or the military, attempts to take power through illegal, and often violent means."[12] Chin et al note that: "A coup d'état occurs when the incumbent ruling regime or leader is ousted (or a presumptive regime leader is blocked) from power due to concrete, observable, and unconstitutional actions by one or more current, active civilian or military members of the incumbent ruling regime."[13] So we see a number common elements in those definitions: 1) It is an organized event; 2) Mostly with military involvement. Though a coup can, in principle, be carried out by civilians, according to the Colpus dataset nonmilitary coups account only for 3.5% of all cases. (Hence, we limit our analysis here to military coups d'état.) 3) Often with the use of violence. There have been examples of coups that were carried out in a peaceful manner. So, the use of violence is not necessary to speak of a coup, but even if not openly used, coups nearly always entail a latent threat of violence, as observed by Bjørnskov and Rode.[14]

9. Akwei, Machar and Mnyandu. "'Debris' of Coups D'état," 66.

10. Cline Center for Advanced Social Research. "Cline Center Coup d'État Project Dataset Codebook (v2.1.3)." (27 February, 2024): 3.

11. O. Anyoko-Shaba, "The Resurgence of Military Coups d'état in African Politics and the Reversal of Democracy." *University of Nigeria Journal of Political Economy,* Volume 12, number 1 (2022): 126.

12. D.L. Bennett, C. Bjørnskov and S. F. Gohmann. "Coups, regime transitions, and institutional consequences." *Journal of Comparative Economics* 49, (2021): 627.

13. J.J. Chin, D.B. Carter and J.G. Wright. "The Varieties of Coups D'état: Introducing the Colpus Dataset." *International Studies Quarterly* 65, (2021): 1042.

14. C. Bjørnskov and M. Rode. "Regime types and regime change: A new dataset on democracy, coups, and political

4) Coups are illegal or unconstitutional, as they distort the peaceful transfer of power by legal means, usually democratic elections.

There are some authors that seem to de-emphasize the illegal or unconstitutional side of coups or military takeovers to argue that coups can, in fact, be beneficial. Olaffson, for example, submits that in some cases it is desirable to reassess military coups by bringing in the notion of social justice. For military coups to be considered socially just, Olaffson uses four criteria: redistribution of power, popular support, lack of retribution and acting in the interest of the nation (2020).[15] She concludes that one could see coups as:

> "… a potential preservation mechanism for the state itself from possible infractions from those in power. Further inquiries into this area … perhaps help the military community be seen as a resource for those who suffer from systemic political, economic, and social oppression."[16]

Along similar lines, Norman suggests to take an alternative look at coups as attempts to arrest the abuse of sovereignty, restore democracy and reinstall good governance. He argues that: "Coup d'états are not sudden eruptions of military violence. They are deliberate and well-thought-out interventions to prevent further deterioration of the financial, economic, and social well-being of the nation and to preserve the sanctity of the homeland."[17] The success of coups, he suggests, should be measured by the contribution they make to improve the lives of the population and the nation as a whole.[18] Ikome suggests to distinguish between 'bad' and 'good' coups.[19]

Though one cannot deny there are indeed cases where coups resulted in political progress or initiated a democratization process, mainstream views maintain they comprise an unconstitutional and illegal act to effect change and, moreover, more often than not result in autocracy, repression, human rights violations, decline and abuse of power. This is also the view embedded in international conventions and the international (security) architecture, such as with the United Nations, the African Union or regional organizations like ECOWAS. Hence, coups are discouraged and sanctioned in the international realm.

institutions." *The Review of International Organizations* 15, (2020): 540.

15. N. Olafsson, "When Military Coups d'état Become Acts of Social Justice." E-International Relations. https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/17/when-military-coups-detat-become-acts-of-social-justice/, (2020)

16. Olafsson, "When Military Coups", 4.

17. I.D. Norman, "Commentary. Coup d'états in Africa: A cure or prophylactic for good governance?," *International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5(1), (2024): 229. DOI: 10.25082/IJAH.2024.01.004

18. Norman, "Commentary. Coup d'états in Africa", 232

19. F.N. Ikome, "Good Coups and Bad Coups. The limits of the African Union's injunction on unconstitutional changes of power in Africa", Occasional paper no. 55. Johannesburg: Institute for Global Dialogue (2007).

Typology

As already referred to above, coups d'état appear in many forms and shades and they can be defined, arranged or categorized along different dimensions and in different ways. Any categorization inevitably implies a level of arbitrariness. The Cline Center Coup d'État Project Dataset distinguishes, for example, the following types:

Box 1: Typology of coups

Military Coup - Coups initiated by military actors who are not a formal part of the governing apparatus.

Dissident Coup - Coups initiated by a small group of discontents to include ex-military leaders, religious leaders, former government leaders, members of a legislature/parliament, and civilians.

Rebel Coup - Coups initiated by organized, militarized groups that have broken with the existing government and are actively contesting government forces.

Palace Coup - Coups initiated by members of a faction within the existing government.

Foreign-backed Coup - Coups with a foreign power as the force behind the event … [in order to] install a government more sympathetic to its interests.

Auto Coups - Coups where the existing chief executive takes extreme measures to eliminate other government components or assumes extraordinary powers in an illegal or extra-legal manner.

Forced Resignations - A soft coup where the chief executive resigns under the imminent threat of illegal or extra-legal removal.

Popular Revolt - An irregular regime change driven by widespread popular / large-scale civil unrest.

Counter Coup - A coup where the newly installed, post-coup leadership is removed by members of the prior regime.

Source: Cline Center Coup d'État Project Dataset Codebook (v2.1.3), 2024 : 5-**6.**

The Colpus dataset distinguishes:

> "… leader reshuffling coups, or "coups de chef" that seek to oust the regime leader but mostly preserve the existing regime structure and the elites that benefit from it, and *regime change coups*, or "coups de regime" in which the plotters seek to topple the regime and change the group of elites from which leaders are chosen."[20]

Examples of the latter are the Portuguese Carnation revolution and the attempted Arabic Spring changes of government. The authors argue that the effects and factors associated with these two coup types are starkly different.

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20. Chin, Carter and Wright, "The Varieties of Coups D'état", 1041.

Another type that does not appear in the Colpus dataset is what is commonly referred to as a constitutional coup. Rosende and Kolapo state:

> " … consolidation of democracy in Africa … has been challenged by the emerging phenomenon of "constitutional coups" to further entrench or protect personal rule and undermine the functioning of genuine democracy. Elected presidents have devised means of reinventing personal rule in Africa earlier rejected through democratization by seeking to amend their constitutions to extend executive term limits. …. It is widely referred to as " third term" in the continent. More than 24 countries in sub-Saharan Africa have tried this with 18 successful cases against three failed attempts."[21]

A last dataset is finally the DD (Democracy-Dictatorship) database that has been updated to include data on all verifiable coup attempts (successful or failed) since 1950. The authors distinguish three types: coups led by the military, civilians and members of the royal family.[22]

The different existing datasets provide a variety of data of the coups identified per country, such as success/failure, type, date, coup leadership, regime type (target) and the resulting distributions.

Epidemiology

As indicated earlier, the prevailing datasets provide different numbers and yield different outcomes. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all these intricacies in-depth, and it will suffice to present a few overall data to indicate the general prevalence of coups d'état.

The Colpus dataset identified 550 coup attempts in 94 independent countries with populations over 1 million people over the 1946 to 2020 period.[23] Most coup events took place in the 1960s and 1970s.[24] The DD arrives at similar figure of 537 coup attempts since 1950.[25] Colpus further reveals that most coups took place in the Americas (34%), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (29%), the Middle East and North Africa (16%), and Asia (14%) and Europe (7%).[26] These are numbers covering the post-World War II period. Most recent coups were in Africa, but not exclusively.

Many scholars have tried to explain why coups occur and this has resulted in a flurry of publications that all emphasize variegated aspects. It has to be emphasized

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21. Rosenje and Kolapo. "Military Resurgence," 123.

22. Bjørnskov and Rode. "Regime types and regime change," 540.

23. Chin, Carter and Wright, "The Varieties of Coups D'état", 1045.

24. Chin, Carter and Wright, "The Varieties of Coups D'état", 1045.

25. Bjørnskov and Rode. "Regime types and regime change," 541.

26. Chin, Carter and Wright, "The Varieties of Coups D'état", 1046.

that there is understandably no agreement on any single dominant determining factor. The vast amount of cases in widely differing geographic, political and socio-economic conditions would make this also highly unlikely. In addition, also the scholarship has been differentiated over time and with respect to types of analysis and explanatory variables discerned. Akwei et al. provide a succinct and useful overview of the main literature with regard to coups on the African continent with determinants varying from features of military cliques, to social mobilization, "modernization", cultural pluralism, and political party systems and mass participation. Again other authors stress personal greed and rent-seeking. Yet, there are some recurring issues that are worth mentioning. I cannot do justice to this vast literature, but discuss a small selection of more recent scholarship to highlight the most prominent factors. I divide these - rather roughly - in military, political, and socioeconomic factors.

Military factors influencing coups d'état

There is an obvious need to look at military factors as these are virtually per definition involved in carrying out military coups. As the monopoly of violence rests with the security forces and they avail of the means and capabilities to use violence, coups without their involvement are difficult to imagine, though a very small minority of coups classify as civilian.

Preventing military involvement in politics and coups boils down in principle to the careful and judicious management of civil-military relations. However, Bove et al. explain:

> "The civil–military relations paradox is as theoretically simple as politically crucial: state armed actors in command of state survival and national security have the muscle to prey on society, influence the policymaking process, and remove executive authorities by force or the threat of force."[27]

They quote Feaver: "… because the military must face enemies, it must have coercive power, the ability to force its will on others. But coercive power often gives it the capability to enforce its will on the community that created it."[28]

But military factors may also play a deeper role in creating a background that allows or drives a coup. Anani, for example, argues that the existence of far-reaching military and cooperation agreements between France and its earlier colonies led to resentment in a number of Francophone countries in Africa about what was seen as restricted local autonomy and sovereignty.[29] These military agreements led to a continuous

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27 . V. Bove, M. Rivera and C. Ruffa. "Beyond coups: terrorism and military involvement in politics." *European Journal of International Relation*. Volume 26 Issue 1, (March 2020): 265.

28 . P.D. Feaver, "Civil-military relations." *Annual Review of Political Science* 2(1), (1999): 214.

29 . G. Anani, "International policy coups d'état in Francophone African countries causes, consequences and international responses." *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* Vol. 17(4) (October-December 2023): 55.

French military presence in the region and guaranteed the right of the French army "to circulate freely in the territory, airspace and territorial waters of the signatory states and to use port, railway, road and air infrastructure and the post and telecommunication networks."[30] Anani analyses the spate of recent coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger as an attempt to reassess and redefine neocolonial relations and effect the withdrawal of French troops in the respective territories. He states:

> "In essence, there is a growing chorus of voices within Africa and among international scholars who share the belief that Africa should assert its independence, challenge historical legacies, and pursue its own path toward development and self-determination. These perspectives collectively call for addressing the complex challenges facing the continent and nurturing its potential for autonomy and growth."[31].

Such calls may translate into popular protests against dysfunctional political elites and engender military coups or takeovers. In Portugal, the frustration among the military about the endless and seemingly hopeless continuation of colonial wars in the Portuguese African and Asian territories formed a strong stimulus for the military coup against the regime.[32]

A second external factor that promotes military involvement in politics is terrorism. Bove et al. discern two mechanisms at work:

> "… (1) government authorities demand military expertise to fight terrorism and strengthen national security and "pull" the armed forces into politics, and (2) state armed actors exploit their informational advantage over civilian authorities to "push" their way into politics and policy-making."[33]

These authors argue that terrorist attacks or threats provide a window of opportunity for the military to get involved in politics.

Political determinants of coups d'état

Akwei et al. focus mainly on the shortcomings of, or crisis in, electoral democracy in Africa to explain the occurrence of coups. They argue that:

> "… democracy in Africa in its broader context goes beyond the traditional precepts of citizens' rights to make political preferences and accountability from the political elites through institutional mechanisms, but also involves high stakes political control of natural resources and state

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30. M. Ligot, "Les Accords de coopération entre la France et les états africains et malgache d'expression française." FeniXX (1964).

31. Anani, "International policy coups d'état in Francophone African countries", 61.

32. A. Telo, "The Military and regime change in Portugal." Keynote speech presented at the XLIX International Congress of Military History, , Lisbon, Portugal (2 September 2024): 11.

33. Bove, Rivera and Ruffa. "Beyond coups", 263.

institutions which serve as arena for the extraction of public resources for private gains and to benefit domestic and foreign solidarities."[34]

More specifically, several authors have noted that the "third wave of democratization" after independence of colonial states has not or not fully delivered on its promises to the population, and as a result they are disappointed and disgruntled.[35] Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël state that:

> "… the perception that leaders in government are losing legitimacy in the eyes of a majority of the population may … contribute to unconstitutional changes of power. This loss of legitimacy may be due to the inability of the government to provide services, including security, to its citizens. [In nearly all countries they discussed], growing levels of discontent among civil society and political opposition, but also the general public, were finding expression in public demonstrations and protests directed against incumbent governments before the respective coup took place."[36]

In fact, inequitable economic growth, uneven economic development and resulting disparity, rampant corruption, abuse of power often exacerbate an already problematic situation. Coups that aim or claim to improve people's conditions in such societies are offering a promising alternative compared to a deficient and failed democracy.[37] As stated by Rosenje & Kolapo:

> "Leadership deficits and poor governance increased the vulnerability of these states to military coups and popular protests against democratic governance. In Africa and West Africa specifically, it is pertinent to note that the recurring or the resurgence of military coups do not imply that democracy has failed, it simply means that democratically elected leaders have failed. Therefore, the coups (whether invited by the people or willful intervention by the military) are unfortunate but an expression of disappointment by members of the political community."[38]

Socio-economic factors explaining coups d'état

Not only are a dire economic situation and lack of prospects troubling large sections of the population, but their feeling of deprivation is worsened by corruption and the abuse of power by the political elites. Anani, for example, confirms the bad impact of corruption:

> "Corruption is a pervasive societal ill with multifaceted detrimental impacts. … This predicament extends across sectors such as healthcare, edu-

34. Akwei, Machar and Mnyandu. "'Debris' of Coups D'état," 68.

35. S. Huntington, *Democracy: The God That Failed*. (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

36. Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, "The 2021 Coup Pandemic", 88.

37. Anyoko-Shaba, "The Resurgence of Military Coups d'état" 129 and 132.

38. Rosenje and Kolapo. "Military Resurgence," 123-124.

cation, the judicial system, and even mundane undertakings like procuring a driver's license or business permit. This corrupt modus operandi not only erodes trust in government institutions but also engenders a society wherein the attainment of justice and public services becomes contorted by the omnipotence of financial incentives."[39] (2023: 56-57).

He concludes: "This pervasive corruption may very well serve as a pivotal factor contributing to the recurrent coups witnessed in these regions."[40]

Consequences

Each coup d'état has of course its own particular characteristics and consequences depending on its own context and circumstances. To make an inventory of those would require a broad and in-depth study of a large set of case studies. This is beyond the scope of this chapter. Yet, a number of more general, statistically significant major consequences of coups have been established in large-N studies. I shall discuss briefly the major consequences identified in those studies.

- **Restrictions or abolition of democracy and emergence of autocratic regimes**

Though a few coups have led to political transitions from autocracy to democracy, the general trend is opposite. Apart from the fact that a coup itself is in the short term an undemocratic mechanism to effect political change, it is the longer term change that is finally decisive where the society concerned is heading. In their discussion of the 2021 coup pandemic and post-coup transitions, Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël note that "… past experience indicates that even when coups are directed against autocratic leaders and may sometimes lead to a process of democratization, more often than not they install a new autocratic leader who will increase levels of repression against the population."[41] They state that coups are more likely in countries where they have taken place in the past.[42] First observes that once the political sanctuary or political realm has been violated by coups, the military will always attempt to come back to power.[43]

While most coup leaders claim their intentions are to replace corrupt or incompetent governments, and give power back to the people, as observed by Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, for many of them the inducements of control are tempting and they devise ways and means to stay in power which "… increases the likelihood that coup leaders veer towards autocracy and seek support from authoritarian third countries."[44] This leads

39 . Anani, "International policy coups d'état in Francophone African countries", 56-57.

40 . Anani, "International policy coups d'état in Francophone African countries", 57.

41 . Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, "The 2021 Coup Pandemic", 88.

42 . Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, "The 2021 Coup Pandemic", 88.

43 . R. First, *The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'Etat*. (London: The Penguin Press, 1970).

44 . Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, "The 2021 Coup Pandemic", 89.

not rarely to longer-term military involvement in politics, combined with continued state-sponsored repression and human and civil right violations. In this connection Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël assert that:

> " … even in those cases where large parts of the population demonstrated against the pre-coup government, such as Chad, Guinea and Mali, the discontent often quickly turned against the coup leaders, particularly once their determination to stay in power as long as possible became clear. …. In Myanmar and Sudan (after the October 2021 coup), the fact that the coup leaders were there to stay was immediately apparent, and the population promptly and vociferously demonstrated against the coup. In both cases, the authorities violently cracked down against mostly peaceful demonstrators, injuring and killing large numbers of them and thereby adding to their already long list of crimes and violations."[45]

- **Corruption**

In their study of a large panel of countries including data on 537 successful or failed coups Bennett et al. look at institutional quality, asserting that:

> "While many coup-makers over the years have claimed that their aim was to oust corrupt regimes and improve on often very poor institutions, the subsequent development after coups succeeded has typically been disappointing. …. Our results show that overall political corruption is significantly worsened as a result of successful military coups, an effect that is more precisely identified for military coups led by high-ranking military officers."[46]

- **Curtailing of judicial institutions**

Bennett et al. also report that:

> "… that successful military coups typically lead to substantial reductions in judicial constraints (i.e., institutional safeguards to protect the independence of the courts from political influence). These results are driven primarily by successful coups by the military and are robust to controlling for whether a country has democratic institutions and the level of economic development."[47]

Managing coups d'état

What to do? Are coups a fact of life we have to live with, or are there ways and means to deal with them? There are obviously no simple answers. Military effectively have the capability to use force and there may be reasons or inducements for them -real or imagined- to do so. A first logical answer is to promote military professionalism and instill

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45 . Zulueta-Fülscher and Noël, "The 2021 Coup Pandemic", 91.

46 . Bennett, Bjørnskov and Gohmann, "Coups, regime transitions, and institutional consequences", 642.

47 . Bennett, Bjørnskov and Gohmann, "Coups, regime transitions, and institutional consequences", 628 and 642.

respect for the civilian imperative and democratic values by training and socialization. This can be supported through the membership of international or regional security organizations and alliances. However, this task is of a tall order, especially in view of the state of many military forces in the countries concerned. In his book on military forces in African states, Howe, for example, notes that: "…many of African security forces are unprofessional, lacking both technical expertise for combat and political responsibility to the state."[48] The assumption here is that: "…national political structures and values help determine a force's character and that Africa's prevailing system of personal, rather than institutional, rule has proven incompatible with military professionalism."[49] During the last few decades, security sector reform programs have been attempting to help reform and professionalize problematic militaries. Though there are some evaluations of those programs, there is so far too little substantive evidence to conclusively determine whether and how they work, especially with regard to the prevention of military coups or more generally of military involvement in civil affairs.

Another route, i.e. to change the troubling political and socio-economic conditions that give rise to coups, as discussed above, is equally problematic and challenging. Perhaps countries need to add term limits to their constitution and criminalize any attempts at tenure elongation, as suggested by Rosenje & Kolapo.[50] However, few leaders will voluntarily take steps to curtail their own powers. To fight corruption, failing leadership, presidential misrule, nepotism and a whole set of other endemic societal ills, is no easy task. In fact, such social and developmental engineering has not a very promising record. Though so-called good governance programs, including democracy support and conditional development cooperation, may have provided some impetus, most of these changes require domestic reforms that are difficult to steer and take a long time before showing results, as studies by the donor community and e.g. the World Bank have shown.

A third way of effecting positive change is diplomacy, international pressure, censure, sanctions or other forms of negative conditioning of the regimes that entered power through coups. When such sanctions or conditions are applied to erstwhile colonies, they may backfire. As we have seen earlier, coups or regime changes may have been done, especially out of a desire to reduce neo-colonial dependencies or even sever ties with earlier colonial masters. However, when diplomatic measures or economic sanctions are installed by regional organizations, such as ECOWAS or the African Union, they could be more effective as documented among others by Silva and Oliveira.[51] In this connection, it may be recalled there are a number of African initiatives to promote democracy and internal stability. The Charter of the OAU, the 2000 Lomé Declaration, and the AU's Charter of Democracy and Governance all underline the unconstitutional

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48. H.M. Howe. *Ambiguous order: Military Forces in African States. (*Boulder Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001): 9.

49. Howe, H.M. *Ambiguous order,* 9.

50. Rosenje and Kolapo. "Military Resurgence," 133.

51. Silva and Oliveira. "Diplomatic Quagmire," 48-50; Anyoko-Shaba, "The Resurgence of Military Coups d'état," 133

and illegal nature of military coups and set normative frameworks for the member states and also provide entry points for intervention. In 2022 the Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa was adopted. In this declaration, the AU reaffirmed its strong condemnation of all forms of unconstitutional changes of government in Africa and its appeal, among others, to use available legal mechanisms to find solutions to political concerns (article 1), "to finalise and adopt the AU guidelines on the amendment of constitutions in Africa" (article 16), and "to develop a comprehensive framework establishing different categories of sanctions that may be gradually applied … in accordance with the gravity of the violation or threat to the constitutional order without compromising the well-being of ordinary … citizens" (article 19).[52] In practice the application of these norms and frameworks is not always done systematically and coherently or decided on an ad-hoc basis. Yet, there are also sufficient examples where military take-overs and governments have not been recognized and sanctioned by bodies such as the AU and ECOWAS.[53]

Conclusions

• Coups are a persistent and pervasive phenomenon occurring worldwide. Since WWII there were over 500 coups or coup attempts. Whereas over this period most coups have happened in the Americas, as of recent the majority of them occur in Africa.

• There is a broad agreement on the definition of coups as an illegal or unconstitutional organized event to oust an incumbent ruling regime or leader, mostly by the military with the use or threat of force.

• A variety of approaches and datasets provide a fairly clear-cut and consistent typology and epidemiology of coups.

• Coups are generally complex phenomena that have multiple interrelated military, political and socio-economic causes necessitating a comprehensive analysis. Major factors include dysfunctional militaries and lack of military professionalism, personal rule and clientelism, failed democracies, corruption and economic decline.

• Though some coups may have beneficial outcomes, a large majority of them have negative short and long-term consequences in terms of institutional quality, democracy, governance, human rights, judicial guarantees and corruption.

• There are three major ways to deal with (*the threat of*) coups: military reform, improved military professionalism and sound civil-military relations; tackling underlying political and socio-economic causes; international condemnation and

52. African Union. "Accra Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa," 17 March 2022.

53. A.O. Akinola, and R. Makombe. "Rethinking the Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* (2024) https://doi-org.utrechtuniversity.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/00219096231224680

imposition of sanctions. None of these measures are easy to apply or can deliver quick results. Sanctions may involve risks of backfiring, especially if perceived as part of a neo-colonial relationship. Yet, there are instances where they worked. This is often the case, when they are applied by regional organizations, such as the African Union or ECOWAS.

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