

Regional Organizations and Combating Coups: Is African Union Getting it Right?

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Abstract: Recent years have witnessed increasing military coups in African countries with Niger being the latest victim and the Africa Union (AU) responded by suspending the country. This article sought to explore whether the regional organizations intervention strategies are effective in deterring further coups. We observe in literature the AU's efforts are evident through its short-term strategies, but it is interesting to see whether there will be newer strategies. In many of the recent coups, military leaders have claimed to have intervened to 'save democracy', typically by removing presidents who did not adhere to term limits from power. This article suggests that the growing military coups in the region demand unique approaches that look beyond just membership suspension and sanctions but strategies that focus on structural issues.

Keywords: Coup, regional organization, military

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INTRODUCTION

On 26th July 2023, Niger became the latest victim of a coup d'état when President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted. This followed similar military takeovers in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, and Chad among others but to mention a few. According to Sany (2022) these upheavals reinforce assertions that Africa is center of a global crisis because poor and authoritarian regimes tend to breed extremism and transnational crimes that undermine the region's peace and stability. Moreover, coups present one of the complex risks confronting democratic and stable economies across the world (Hohlstein, 2022). While it is easy to fixate on such alarming issues, recent coups have raised debate on how regional organizations combat rising coup cases in the region. In this case, given the increased constitutional role vested in regional organizations such as African Union (AU), it is still interesting that coups continue at this rate. The African Union has essentially responded to and intervened in all of these military takeovers, but its failure to suspend some countries after soldiers seized power has led to numerous criticisms of the AU for its perceived double standards and inconsistency.

Most scholars differentiate coups from other processes arguing that it is always perpetuated against the president (Marsteintredet & Malamud, (2020). According to Gleditch et al., (2002) rebellion seeks to overthrow the entire regime and replace the entire government and form a new state. This is notable in a

recent takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 by Taliban who replaced the entire governance structure with their own or people who believed in Islamic ideologies (Sakhi, 2022). Although rebellion, mutinies, and others such as anti-regime activities (protests) are related to coups, it becomes necessary for scholars to distinctively study coups because they target mainly the presidency. Powell and Thyne (2011) describe coup as illegal and over attempts by the military to unseat a sitting executive. This article explores the role of regional organizations in combating coups and possible reasons for continued coups in Africa. Scholars have utilized several methodologies in explaining coups with most studies concentrating in Africa since the 1950s and this area is still interesting (Powell, Lasley & Schiel, 2016; Trithart, 2016; Miller, Joseph & Ohl, 2018).

Why coups in Africa

We have witnessed about five coups in four years occurring on African soil (Niger, 2023; Burkina Faso, 2022; Mali 2020; Chad, 2021 and Guinea, 2021). This raises the question – Why the trend? The commonly held view now is that all of black-ruled sub-Sahara Africa is prone to military coups and that the continent is endemic to coups (Abdoulie, 2017). Furthermore, Baturo, and Elgie (2019) coups are more likely to happen anywhere in Africa

because of the fundamental and lasting characteristics of political life. Most certainly if what happened in some countries in the past few years, such assertions could be true. For example, in 2017, Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos stepped down after thirty-eight years in office, and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe was forced from office after thirty-seven years by a military coup. Two years later, Sudan's Omar al-Bashir was ousted after three decades in power (Klobucista, 2021). In 2021, Chad's Idriss Deby, who also ruled for thirty years, died following a battlefield clash with rebels.

Pryce, and Time (2023) identify several factors that can contribute to military coups, and these include weak political and institutional structures, inequalities in military based on tribes in the nation-state and the ruling government is civilian rather than military. However, Collier, and Hoeffler (2005) do not find significant influence of political repression and economic inequality on military coups but the incentives for a violent challenge to the state are some combination of 'greed and grievance' – the capture of resources, or the rectification of wrongs. McGowan, (2003) who studied African military coups d'état between 1956 and 2001 with particular focus on frequency, trends and distribution found that military factionalism often leads to more coup behaviour and there was no difference in 1956–79 and 1980–2001. What is notable is the fact that West Africa predominantly the centre of coup activity in sub-Saharan Africa (Musavengane, & Zhou, 2021). Souare, (2014) explores the role of the African Union in military coups d'état in Africa that have occurred from 1952 to 2012, a period that witnessed 88 successful military coups. Interestingly, Souare Issaka observes that the success of the AU in the significant reduction of coups in the region is attributed to the support from external actors and cites the Lomé Declaration of July 2000 which banned military coups and adopted sanctions against regimes under coup leaders (Dersso, 2017).

Poweel and Lasely (2016) believe that since coup-plotters are rational actors who understand the cost and benefit, regional organization such as the AU should increase short-term interventions. This means the organizations can be effective when considering penalties mainly for the perpetrators. One of the approaches that has been widely researched is use of sanctions by regional organizations to force coup-plotters to return to democratic space. The organization's membership allows them to easily prioritize and address common problems specific to regions (Karns & Mingst, 2004). While coups have been a recurring issue in Africa, it might be interesting to study since the AU and other organizations have the mandate to intervene. However, some internal issues within the regional organizations such as political survival through what Omorogbe (2011) terms as 'club of

incumbents' suggesting that some AU leaders are heads of states for some countries facing coups.

AU suspensions and its implications

On August 22, 2023, the AU suspended Niger from its activities following the military coup in July 2023 but what does this mean for the coup plotters? This comes at a time when there are global fears over the growing of terrorism in the region and possibly Russian influence, with which Western countries are not comfortable (Hinz & Monastyrenko, 2022). Consequently, the coup in Niger has attracted scholarly attention with some trying to offer accounts of the 2023 Coup (Moses, I & Ige, 2023; risks leading to long-term instability and Western security policy (Oxford Analytica, 2023). Before proceeding, it is worth acknowledging the AU's efforts in Niger but that is not enough as many would view this from different perceptives. One would argue that the AU might be trying to persuade the international community for assistants or trying to deter coup-plotters so that they decline further coup activities.

The AU's sanctions can successfully deter the actors from pursuing further actions and also the organization is using the prospect of sanctions to deter would-be coup plotters from acting. This article argues that it is the adoption of formal provisions that specifically document the act to be sanctioned and advertise the associated penalties for transgressions that will deter coup plotters (Powell & Lasley, 2011). Most certainly, the rising cases of coups in Africa call for newer approaches for the AU to achieve its agenda for 2063 particularly aspirations number four on peaceful and secure Africa. Initially, the AU had projected that dialogue-centered conflict prevention and resolution approach would have resulted in the silence of guns by 2020. Ani, (2021) studied the complexities of popular uprisings in Africa and the AU's challenge in managing the situation argues that the AU faces a dilemma in containing coups in the region. Earlier, they had suspended Sudan's membership following the military takeover yet they continue working with it. This may have been a necessary compromise, but it could have emboldened disgruntled soldiers watching carefully from elsewhere. A second difficulty arises from the fact that the AU is inconsistent when it comes to unconstitutional violations. The body actually recognizes various types of unconstitutional changes in government. One is the overthrow of an elected government by the military, mercenaries, or rebels. Also, Africa has witnessed more constitutional coups where incumbents manipulated the constitutional framework to extend their terms in office. This happened in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire (2020) and in Tunisia the incumbent president governs through decrees, without any institutional checks on his power (De Bruin, 2022).

Table 1: List of coups in Africa and AU's actions

Country	Year
Central African Republic	2003
Mauritania	2005, 2008
Madagascar	2009
Niger	2010, 2023
Mali	2012
Guinea-Bissau	2012
Central African Republic	2013
Egypt	2013
Burkina Faso	2015
Guinea	2021
Mali	2021
Sudan	2019

suggest that Africa is less safe and secure than 10 years ago, the rule of law has weakened in the last five years (Ibrahim Index of African Governance, 2023). As shown in Table 1 above,

Source: African Union Database (2023).

Based on the coup trends, it is worth noting that although recent reports most of the coups in Africa mainly occurred in the Sahel region, with Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan experiencing the largest number of successful coups (Ibid). Adem K. Abebe, strongly believes that the AU has a credibility problem arguing that the organization and its leaders have not denounced leaders who flout laws to hold on to power; they complain only when the military seizes it. The recent coups in the region highlight two significant issues with the AU framework on unconstitutional changes of government (UCG). First off, despite praise for the AU for supposedly becoming less tolerant of military takeovers, the group has been less attentive to the unconstitutional holding on to power. As leaders' disregard for the institutions that gave them the ability to rule the continent has increased, the loss of popular legitimacy has either served as the primary impetus for coups against increasingly dictatorial incumbents or provided them with a veneer of legitimacy. Second, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the forerunner of the AU, had occasionally shown more acquiescence to military coups in recent years.

CONCLUSION

This article reviewed literature on whether regional organizations particularly the AU can combat rising cases of military coups on the African continent. While some countries are vulnerable to coups, it appears AU is unable to offer strong intervention measures to deter further military coups. Every time there is a coup, the AU immediately responds by suspending the country and the recurrence of more coups challenges the core approach adopted by the organization. In principle, the organization

is required to anticipate and prevent disputes and conflicts in advance, as well as policies that may lead to genocide and crimes against humanity.

In literature, the AU has condemned several coups. Its policy is clear but its reactions to leaders who tend to extend their powers have been an area of concern. One would argue that rather than waiting to sanction coup plotters, the AU needs to have a strong mechanism through which to monitor structural problems that have become ingredients in military coups on the African continent. The African Union (AU), cognizant of the threats an unconstitutional change of government poses to the continent's overall security and stability, has devised several strategies to address this unfavorable and unconstitutional method of governing, often achieved through military coups. While this article cannot make conclusion on factors that may affect AU's responses to military coups, and also limited data, it has laid foundation for debate on what effective approaches AU can use.

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