

The Military Coup in Gabon and Diminishing Status of Democratic Rules in Africa

By

¹Anas Sani Anka Ph.D and ²Suleiman Bello

Corresponding author : Anas SA

E-mail: anasankafugus@gmail.com

¹Department of History & International Studies, Federal University Gusau.
Email: anasankafugus@gmail.com
09166666652

²School of Consultancy Services, Zamfara State College of Arts and Science.
Email: suleiman5000@gmail.com
08039224461

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Abstract This paper examines in critical term the major reasons for the military intervention in the Republic of Gabon and how the successive military coups since 2020 continue to raise the fear of the African leaders above their comprehension that the military regimes had come to stay in Africa. It has made a critical examination of the failure of the African electoral reforms in addressing the crisis particularly the rising spate of insecurity, poverty, corruption, decay in education and health sector. It has enumerated some key lessons to be learned by the African leaders in the wake of successful military interventions in Nigeria. The objective of the paper was to capture the minds of the leaders in understanding how hazy the journey under the democratic system is in Africa. The paper adopted a mixed methodology of literature review and field interview in arriving at its findings.

Keywords: Military Coup, Gabon, diminishing Status, Democratic Rule, Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The recent military coup in Gabon which ouster the victory of President Ali Bango Odimba in the just concluded Presidential poll has further heightened the fear of the Africans that democratic rule is no more suitable for the continent. It is the number eight coup in the series that befalls the African countries since 2020 (Amir 2023). This development in Gabon is happening amidst serial complaints of poor quality of leadership and bad governance in Africa. The growing spates of poverty, unemployment, insecurity, killings and abductions for ransom, the rise of growing militancy and insurgency, corruption and implementation of heartless policies are some of the visible indicators that characterized the poor nature of democratic governance in Africa (Anka 2023).

Gabon is a country in West Central Africa sharing borders with Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo and Gulf of Guinea. History has shown that President Bongo came to power in a contentious 2009

election following the death of his father Omar Bongo who had also ruled the country for (42) years (Reuters 2023). It was alleged that the failure of the Bongo's ruling family to share the oil wealth generated through the decades leading to the serious under-development in the country is among the major reasons why the military believed they had brought an end to the rule of tyranny and institute a reform that will lead to the rapid development of the country (Amir 2023).

On the 30th of August 2023, a group of senior military officers in Gabon said they had seized power in the capital in order to overturn the results of the recent election and remove a leader whose family has held power for over (56) years (Simon 2023). The decision for the coup may not be unconnected with the outcome of the August 2023 Presidential polls which produced President Ali Bango Odimba as a winner after defeating his major contender Albert Ondo Ossa who got only 30.77 percent

from the polls. The mutineers stated “Our beautiful country Gabon has always been a haven of peace. Today the country is going through a serious institutional, political, economic and social crisis (Simon 2023). They argued that the conduct of the 26th August 2023 general elections did not meet the condition for a transparent, credible and inclusive election.

The coup in Gabon triggered a series of reactions as many believed unless democratically elected leaders in Africa had risen to the occasion to ensure sustainable development based on the popular will of the people the hurricane of the military coup would spread and consume the entire African continent. Contrary to the reasons adduced in the other previous coups in Africa since 2020, the coup in Gabon in the opinion of Sanusha Naidu, senior research fellow at the South African Think Tank, the Institute for the Global Dialogue “people dissatisfied with corruption, legacy leaders and mismanagement of their finances or mismanagement of their resources that don’t lead to real development.

One of the critical problems affecting the governance system in Africa is the conduct of disputed elections in the continent. Even before the election in Gabon, there had been continued cries as to the manner African leaders enforced themselves on the thrones of power in the name of election. Elections in Africa in the opinion of (Anka 2023) are always marred by serious irregularities and infractions with the richest among the politicians in the continent having it all through excessive funding of electioneering campaigns, vote buying and use of the powerful forces of the military and state police to rig election and sustain their joy for power. (Godblessed 2023) also argued, that election have become a do-or-die situation, with so many politicians in Africa using all means including unfair tactics to capture power.

The thirst for power among African leaders without the corresponding positive reforms in their respective countries is believed to be the basis for the military interventions in the African political system. As argued by (Moriki 2023), in some African countries, it is difficult to differentiate between military rule from that of civilians because their leaders have become despots and dictators in civilian attires. They are more tyrannically destructive than one if he is a military dictator. He added “For example, the (81) year-old Equatorial Guinea President Teodoro Obiang Nguema has been in power since 1979. In the year 2022 he won re-election for another seven-year term. He is currently the longest serving President in Africa”. Moriki added “his son Theodoro Nguema Mangue is now the Vice President of the country. His father has been the President for (44) years and now appoint him as the Vice President”. Looking at Rwanda also, in 2015 the constitution of the country was amended to allow Kagame to remain President until 2034. The 65-year-old President Kagame has been in power since 2000 and is one of Africa’s longest-serving Presidents.

African leaders including the head of ECOWAS and President Bola Ahmad Tinubu have warned that, “African

countries would suffer the consequences of forcible removal of democratically elected governments by soldiers if the big sticks were not wielded on the coupists”. He further stated “My fear has been confirmed in Gabon that copycats will start doing the same thing until it is stopped (Johnbosco 2023). African Union, ECOWAS, European Union and United Nations had all condemned the coup and called for the restoration of democratic rule in Gabon and other African countries where the military had intervened.

Some African leaders had also begun to act by shaking their military architectures through serious military shake-ups simply in order to ensure that, the tendency of having successful military coups in their respective countries have been aborted. President Paul Biya of Cameroon via a nationwide broadcast had announced a military reshuffle within the central administration of the defense Ministry. As captured by (Godblessed 2023), Biya who is (90) years old and has been in power since 1982 has made a number of changes to the military leadership. He added, “The reshuffle is seen as an attempt by Biya to consolidate his power and prevent a coup in Cameroon. (Claire 2023) also argued that the decision of Kagame and Biya to reshuffle their militaries came a few hours after soldiers seized power in Gabon punctuating the (53) year hold on the throne by President Ali Bango’s family.

Now the fear remains that unless democratic reforms are championed to address the growing rates of poverty, unemployment, socio-economic insecurity and over-reliance on the Western powers the continent of Africa will continue to see more of the military interventions. Observers of African political development also have the view that elections need to be conducted in such a way that the common people will feel satisfied that the leaders they have voted for have been given the chance to try their luck. This is even as observers believed the long-stay on the throne of power without anything to show as per how the resources of the people are utilized will continue to become an unwavering push factor for the military intervention in African politics (Anka 2023)

The objective of this paper is to ascertain the extent to which constant military interventions into the African politics will continue to constitute a serious setback to Africa’s democratic development. The papers also investigate the extent at which the high level of under-development among the African countries continue to become a reference point as to why citizens always welcome military juntas in the continent. The paper adopted a mixed research methodology of literature review and field interview with a view to be able to ascertain the extent to which the coup is exposing the weakness of the African continent in terms of poor leadership and bad governance.

Historical Background of the military coup in Gabon

On Saturday, August 26, Gabon went to the polls for the country's Presidential election. Early Wednesday, August 30, the country's national electoral authority announced that Bongo who had been in power for (14) years was re-elected for a third term with 64.27 percent of votes cast (Maina 2023). The major contender of the Ali Bongo Ondo Ossa denounced it and rejected the outcome of the polls and calls for the intervention of the International community. Soon after group of military soldiers appeared on national television announcing that they had seized power cancelling the election result and bringing an end to the democratic regime in the country. The soldiers in their broadcast stated that, they have taken over power on behalf of the "committee for the transition and restoration of the institutions". They have also announced that they suspended all the state's institutions including the government, the Senate, the National Assembly, the constitutional court, the economic, social and environmental council as well as the Gabonese election center. They announced that "the organization of the general elections of 26 August 2023 did not meet the condition for an acceptable election. Other reasons they have advanced for the military coup include, bad governance deterioration in social cohesion which may eventually lead to the massive destruction of Gabon as a country.

When the coup was executed in Gabon Aljazeera reported that "loud sounds of gunfire were heard in the city of Libreville the capital city of Gabon". It was also reported that citizens of Gabon came out in large numbers to celebrate the military junta showcasing their tiredness with the Bongo's regime. The military coup leaders also ensured that Ali Bongo the ousted President was put under detention. "President Ali Bongo is under house arrest, surrounded by his family and doctors" the army declared during the broadcast. In the wake of the military coup, the Presidential guards seem to have taken control of the Presidential palace and they have taken key positions around the National Assembly and the Senate (Maina 2023).

Growing Military Coup in Africa and Matters Arising

There has been growing panic among African leaders following the military coup that happened in Gabon. The response of the rulers in Rwanda and Cameroon showed recognition of the potential domino effect from the spate of coups in Africa (Business Day 2023). This fear is owing to the fact that some African leaders have stayed for long on power and without corresponding effects in terms of the desired transformation. The Rwandan President Paul Kagame for instance had been in power since the year 2000 and the 2015 constitutional amendment has empowered him to remain in power up to 2034. Despite the fact that Kagame

has done his best to develop Rwanda people believe his long stay in power has affected the anticipated transformation of the country (Maryam 2023).

The President of Equatorial Guinea Mr. Teodoro Obiang Nguema has also been in power since the year 1979 and his long rule in the country has been criticized so much so that citizens believed that he has muscle-out the anticipated development in the country. Apart from his over-stay as the President he has also imposed his son Teodoro Nguema Mangué as his Vice President. The President (81) years old and he has ruled the country for (44) years (Moriki 2023)

Paul Biya another longest-serving President of Cameroon has ruled the country for over (31) years. He came to power through a coup d'état in 1982 and he has ruled the country ever since. In the early years of his rule, he was known for being a repressive leader. In the 1990s he loosened his grip on the country and allowed for multi-party elections and since then he has been manipulating power through fraudulent electoral process. Denis Sassou is also another longest-serving African leader who has ruled the Republic of Congo for (36) years. He first came to power in 1979 and has since been re-elected three times. Sassou is currently among the oldest heads of state in Africa (Olaniyi 2023).

The reigns of King Mswati (111) and Yoweri Museveni are also tenures that are characterized by criticism especially in Africa's quest for sustainable democratic development. Eswatini Africa's last remaining absolute monarchy has been ruled by King Mswati (iii) for (36) years. He ascended to the throne in April 1986 at the age of (18). As for Yoweri Museveni the President of Uganda he has ruled the country for (35) years. He first came to power in 1986 and he was re-elected three times. He is adjudged to be the third oldest head of state in Africa and aged (79). There is also Mr. Isaias Afwerki the President of Eritrea who has ruled the country for (30) years. He first became the President of the country after leading the country to securing its independence from Ethiopia in 1993.

This crisis of over-stay on the throne of power by some African leaders has been a subject of criticism especially with the growing rate of social and economic degradation in the African continent. The coup in Gabon has lay-up the fear that more of these leaders who have overstayed on the throne of power may likely be swept by a similar military hurricane.

Immediately after the military coup in Gabon, Paul Kagame instructed the Rwandan Defense Forces to retire (12) generals and others in a move to reshuffle the military. Among those retired include: General James Kaberebe, General Fred Inbingira, Lt. General Charles Kayonga, Lt. Gen. Frank Mushyo Kamanzi, Maj. General Martins Nzaramba, Maj. Gen. Erik Murakore, Maj. Augustine Turagara, Maj. Gen. Charles Karamba, Maj. Gen. Albert Murasira, Brig. Gen. Chris Murari, Brig. Gen. Didace Ndahiro and Brig. Gen. Emmanuel Ndahiro (Channels TV 2023).

President Paul Biya has also effected some immediate changes to the Central Africa's Defense Ministry. He announced via a decree amendment which has been made public that the new Chief of Defense Staff is Major General Cyrille Atangana who replaces General Joseph Beti Assomo and Gen. Atanga is believed to be one of the close allies of President Paul Biya. Observers believed the reshuffle was a deliberate response to the development in Gabon and steps taken to abort the possible mutiny by the army in Cameroon. (Ghanaweb 2023) stated "Biya's reshuffle has been met with mixed reactions. Some people have welcomed the changes, saying that they are necessary to strengthen the military and prevent a coup. Others have criticized the reshuffle, saying that it is a sign of Biya's insecurity and that it will only alienate the military.

The fear of the Gabon military coup had also shocked the Nigerian army as the General Officer Commanding (81) division, Nigerian Army (NA) Major General Muhammad Tukuti Usman on Wednesday asked soldiers to be loyal to President Bola Ahmad Tinubu. (Peter 2023) reported the GOC as saying "While we are looking at the challenges and how to solve them, you have to be disciplined soldiers, you have to be loyal soldiers". "When I mean loyalty must start with the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces who is the President. That's first and then down the ladder. Loyalty to the Chief of Defense Staff, Chief of Army Staff down to your Brigade Commander". "You have to be loyal; there is no room for soldiers that are not loyal to the constituted authority. No, if you are not going to be loyal then leave go and do other work. But the armed forces cannot stand it if you are not loyal"

President Bola Ahmad Tinubu who doubled as the leader of the ECOWAS has raised alarm over the Gabon military intervention and said "he is working with the leaders of the African Union (AU) and other parts of the world on the worrying situation in Gabon" (Claire 2023). (Maryam 2023) also argued, the fear of the ECOWAS after the military intervention in Niger Republic has continued to rise high as the hurricane is blowing simultaneously across the region and Africa as a continent. Now that the military took over Gabon Tinubu on behalf of the ECOWAS warned that "African countries would suffer the consequences of forcible removal of democratically elected government by soldiers if the big stick were not wielded on the coupists" Johnbosco (2023). Tinubu further stated "My fear has been confirmed in the Gabon cats will start doing the same thing until it is stopped Johnbosco (2023).

Again the coup in Gabon has continued to prove the political hypothesis that the democratic systems in Africa are becoming both un-popular in efficient in addressing the socio-economic problems of the people. (Business Day 2023) reports, "The coup in the seven African countries has been described as a sign of failed democracies in the affected countries". Guinea, Burkina

Faso, Mali, Niger Republic, Chad, Sudan and now Gabon have all been hit by the military interregnum. Again several schools of thought had predicted that the development in Gabon is sending a serious fear that more military coups are on the way in Africa especially looking at how the democratic system is failing the expectations of the African citizens.

The recent development in Gabon is strongly making the chest of the African leaders to bit-on speed hence the democratic system that produces them has been rated as ill and defective and unless an urgent system review is made the coup will be spreading like a hurricane. As reported by (Business Day 2023) the clearest signal from Gabon is to these other tight-tight regimes including in neighboring Cameroon where President Biya's regime is deepening separatist dissatisfaction. For other part of the continents where election cycles are deteriorating, no matter how we choose to see or not see what has happened in Gabon, Ali Bongo's overthrow is also a notice. The fact remains that despite an agreement reached between African leaders and d'etat, the consciousness of the legitimacy of the government produced coupled with the ability of that government to do what is needed in terms of the provision of dividends of democracy will surely be the only saving grace for the African leaders.

The evidence of poverty increase, the collapse of industrialization, over dependent on exports production, the rise of militancy and insurgency, breeding of failed security institutions, lack of optional windows for job creation among millions of African youths, refusal of the African leaders to create an enabling environment for foreign direct investment, poor crisis and corruption will continue to remain the litmus grounds for the failure of a democratic system in Africa (Anka 2019).

There are other schools of thought that are of the opinion that the coup in Gabon has further raised a strong confirmation of the declining powers and status of France in its former African colonies. As argued by (Busari 2023) with the military coup in Gabon so far, eight of the ex-French colonies in West and Central Africa have fallen to the military rulers in just three years. Each one came with a wave of anti-France sentiment blamed on interference from the former colonial power. Currently Mali one of the former French colonies in Africa had driven out French soldiers and cut diplomatic ties with France. It has also changed its official language from French to Malian national languages. Senegal another French Colony had ensured that France's business interest had been frustrated. It was also evident that a large crowd of the citizens of Niger congregated to stage protest for the ouster of the French Ambassador to the Republic of Niger.

The system of government that the former French colonies had which was imposed by Paris is no longer fit the purpose in a country like Gabon. One family has ruled for about fifty years, that's not really a government that's

a kingdom and they are not an outlier” (Busari 2023). In the opinion of Chris Ogunmodede a foreign affairs analyst who lives in Dakar, Senegal told CNN. “French policy is not popular there are all these protests and people are attacking French businesses which to many people here represent French Neo-colonialism”. He added “thus phenomenon is not limited to Gabon alone, it resonates throughout Central Africa, where nations like Congo Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea have single leaders who have ruled for more than four decades. In Cameroon, Paul Biya who is (90) has been President since 1982 and split his time between France and Switzerland barely spending anytime in Cameroon the country he is supposed to govern (Busari 2023).

Challenge to Democratic Rule

There is no doubt that democracy is under trial in Africa and unless the leaders have sat down to look at the system and do justice to it by making life bearable for the people, the system will eventually diminish like water fallen out of the stream. The number one step to take is to ensure that the governance system is fixed. It is a unanimous consensus that a military coup has come to stay in Africa because of the failed democratic system the leaders of the continent chose to apply (Anka 2019). Apart from serial corruption and palpable pride in the mismanagement of public wealth by the African leaders, common people are beginning to be awakening realize that the governance system had to be fixed to suit the socio-economic needs of the people of the continent and also make the continent to be competitive with the rest. As argued by Christopher Orji, Security Analyst and former President of Crimes Reporters “Coup has come to stay in Africa because of leadership problem. There is a serious injustice in our democracy, our democratically elected leaders have disappointed their citizens, they rig election and lavish the commonwealth of the citizens while the citizens suffer”.

Corruption specifically is the masterpiece of the failed leadership in Africa and the manifest of the corruption in Africa’s leadership has continued to increase the fear that the system may be kicked away if the leadership failed to sit well and approach the will of the people (Anka 2019).” How can we watch the brazen bravado of our African leaders allocating money to themselves? How on earth will old people who have retired and tired perpetuate themselves in power and continue to deceive the youth that they are the future leaders when they can give them the opportunity to thrive. So unless the system of leadership is transformed and made to be in conformity with the global best practice and unless corruption is minimized if it can’t be eliminated and resources are channeled in the manner they would be used to revive education, create manufacturing and agro-based industries, power is made stable and health sector is

transformed African leaders should get ready for doom-days of military juntas.

There is also the need for the African leaders to reduce the high cost of governance since many people believe it is the cause root of sustainable corruption. (Egidi 2020) argued, that, they made our Presidential system in Africa an expensive one hence one required for instance over six hundred billion naira to win the Presidential election in Nigeria. The system of having bi-cameral legislation is also another tactical way of making the African system of governance more complex and expensive and unless this deliberate tactic are managed out of our democratic system, corruption will continue to take precedence in our democratic process in Africa.

Crisis in Africa’s electoral process is also believed to be another factor that is making democratic rule barely unsuccessful. The mutineers in Gabon had cited a lack of credibility in the nation’s electoral process as the key reason for overthrowing the regime in Gabon and that this crisis has become a norm in the continent’s electoral process. As argued by (ITUC-Africa), the election has increasingly become a do-or-die situation with politicians using all means including unfair tactics to capture power. The electioneering languages are increasingly becoming inciting and violent with less restraints and consideration. There is the notion that an election is a war and that only the winner is a good strategist. Those who lose are left to rule them loses and are treated as enemies of the government and the state. This development that characterized election in Africa has made our democratic processes very injurious as African politicians especially those in power are trained on the culture of not accepting defeat and instead of the losers working together with the winners to move the country forward they resorted to playing games of sabotage which at the end resulted to frustrating the anticipated and desired development. Unless the electoral processes in Africa are reformed the continent will continue to suffer in the hands of mutineers hence citizens will continue to search for better options that will better their lives.

It is no longer a subject of debate also that the level of reception that is accorded the majority of military juntas in Africa is not because the citizens are truly welcoming the military but because they are tired of long autocratic rules which were made hereditary in countries like Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Eritria, Rwanda, Chad and Cameroon. This thirst for overstay on the thrown which has infested the African leaders must be redressed to allow for more fair but active participation in the democratic selection process. As argued by (Anka 2023), taking a tour of all the African countries where the military juntas were instituted, citizens have been jubilating trooping to the streets to celebrate freedom in the hands of the autocratic democrats. The jubilation by Africans over military interventions in some countries of the continent in the opinion of (Business Day 2023) is not a declaration of support for the military but an opportunity to say that the government that has been overthrown is a

government that does not represent our interest. (Oditia 2023) argued, how can leaders refused to relinquish power and continue to perpetuate themselves in power? How can only our leaders, their family members and political allies be enjoying while the citizens watch with empty stomach? African leaders ruling their countries for two, three or even four decades and without anything to show as per what has been done with the public resources to transform their lives will continue to be one of the push factors that will usher in the military to take power in Africa (Anka 2019).

Lessons for the African Leaders

There are numerous but significant number of lessons African leaders should learn from the military in the coup in Gabon and indeed seven other African countries among which include:

- The need for the leaders in Africa to understand that democratic system is on the verge of diminishing if the principles of inclusivity, justice and fairness to citizens continue to be neglected.
- It is also for the African leaders to understand that their long years of corruption, embezzlement of public resources and embarking on flamboyant life while the majority of the citizens are wallowing in hunger and abject poverty will eventually if not surely attract them the anger of the military mutineers.
- The military coup in Gabon and some countries of Africa will also teach African leaders the lesson that sustainable electoral reforms that would guarantee free fair and credible election are the only ways in which their retention on the seat of power can be guaranteed.
- It is also for the African leaders to understand that, reshuffling the military or having an agreement with them is not a guarantee for avoiding a military coup hence the leader of the military that ousted the Gabon President is a family member of the President.
- It is also a lesson for the African leaders to understand that the freedom of consciousness of their citizens is the only performing tool that can guarantee their continuous stay on the throne of power.
- Lastly it is for the African leaders to understand that, having a formidable alliance with the Western powers may not be a guarantee for a stay on the throne hence the eight African countries that had the experience of the military coups since 2023 are those former colonies of French and despite the France influence over its former colonies it has failed to abort the successful military coups in the affected countries.

Conclusion

From the discussion so far, it has become apparently clear that military coups in Africa have come to stay in as per as leaders continue to rule their

respective countries not on the path of sustainable socio-economic development. The continued reforms in the army and other security architectures of the African countries may not be a reliable guarantee for the retention of bad institution of leadership in the continent. Sustainable reforms in the electoral processes in Africa and repositioning the selection methods for leadership recruitment, fighting corruption and laying a sustainable foundation for development in Africa remain the only working tools for the sustainability of democratic rules in Africa.

The collapse of the influence of the colonial powers in Africa just like the case with the former French colonies is an extension of the political hypothesis that established the simple fact that the independence of the African continent with or without democracy has come to stay. Leaders need to understand that, in Africa it is not the system that matters but leadership with productivity for results in education, security, health reforms, agricultural development, private sector inclusion and job creation.

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