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Military Coups in Former French West Africa and the Challenges of Democratic Governance in Twenty-First-Century Africa

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Abstract

Empirical evidence demonstrate that peace is a prerequisite for sustainable development. Countries in protracted conflict will therefore find it difficult to keep track in the development agenda. In former French colonies of Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Gabon, there has been a wave of military takeovers, hence raising the question of African democracy, and whether it has really represented the interests of the majority. While the coups have been largely bloodless, and there is a semblance of peace after these coups, it is not clear how long this was likely to hold, considering the threat of military action from ECOWAS to Niger, and the likelihood that coups are likely to create counter coups. Based on O'Donnell et al (1988) theory of loss of legitimacy, it argues that while selected West African countries experience some form of liberalization, they are often not fully democratized. As a result of its colonial past, and the underlying legacies in the postcolonial state, there is a challenge of maintaining the legitimacy of the state. Reviewing existing literature, data is thematically analyzed and while contemporary emerging issues are placed into focus. It concludes that while military takeovers in former French West Africa is grounded in their historical dynamics, contemporary domestic and foreign factors have made the ground ripe for coups, challenging the prospects of African democracy. While it envisages an African democracy, where the military and civilian population are perceived as pursuing and representing the interests of majority of the people, and where transition to civilian leadership will follow, it is cautious that military takeovers may be selfish, create dictatorships and may be highly unpopular with time.

Keywords: Françafrique; Coups; Liberalization; Democracy; Multipolar World; Postcolonial

1. Introduction

While most Africa countries became independent from European colonialism about six decades ago, and therefore ideally gained sovereignty to act independently, in reality many still grapple with neo-colonialism, and the legitimacy of the state often challenged. While some may argue that six decades is long enough to undo colonial legacies, and stop what could be termed as blame game and playing the victim card, the reality is that colonial legacies are deeply entrenched, institutionalized and subtle, hence not explicitly evident in daily experiences. These colonial legacies are more pronounced in former French colonies in Africa, where France maintained a tight control of the monetary, military and political culture of its former colonies, in what is termed as Françafrique, a France-Africa close working relationship. While Françafrique has defined the French-Africa relations post-independence, recent military takeovers, especially from the 2020's, which are accompanied by strong anti-French sentiments among the population indicate the tables are turning against France's influence in West Africa. With special reference to Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Gabon, it argues that while democracy was expected to progressively consolidate, the recent popularity of military coups puts to question the democracy project in Africa.

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2. Theoretical Framework

Descriptive model introduced by political scientists O'Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead (1986), there are three logical models and analytically distinct phases that can explain a transitional political process as well as the alternative development these phases may generate:

- After its appearance and consolidation, an authoritarian regime develops certain tendencies and characteristics that allow it to reach a certain level of equilibrium.
- Such level could be stable or unstable, depending on the degree of institutionalization achieved by the system.
- Once the capacity of the regime to face internal and system challenges decreases, there is generally a phase of unstable equilibrium that takes place, leading to situations of crisis which could ultimately spell the beginning of the transformation of the regime.

Two models of transition are likely to occur according to this model: a discontinued or a continued transition. A discontinued transition may lead a regime to two possible developments: (a) the regime may be well equipped to resolve the crisis through different political actions, including compromises or the use of overwhelming military force. (b) the beginning of the fall of the regime.

In a continued transition, an authoritarian regime tends to build a series of political coalitions, which are generally short-term and contradictory, hence revealing the regime's lack of commitment towards changes and its natural conservatory instinct. Generally, when confronted with such dilemma, an authoritarian regime tends to introduce gradual but very slow changes until its complete transformation. Maurice Duverger's stated that an authoritarian system usually tends to resist changes, reforms, or any other transformations a priori. However, when confronted with an inevitable, evolution imperative, such systems would more likely concede some of its characteristics while still trying to maintain the status quo. According to O'Donnell et al (1986), the principal causes of transformation from an authoritarian system to a democracy are essentially internal and external crises. Internal causes are those relative to the system's positive or negative response to its internal survival, including its organizational demands (i.e., gradual loss of power of the system's ideology, internal fights for political positions, etc.). External crises often are outcomes of the needs of the global society, including but not limited to:

- Growing and diversified social demands related to the quality of life, appearance of new social actors that increases the likelihood of new social and political demands.
- Gradual loss of support to the political system due to the organizational power of the new social actors and new methods of political demands.
- Incompatibility between social demands and the ideology of the political system, as well as the system's loss of moral values, inefficiency, and corruption of its bureaucracy.
- Beginning of an economic crisis capable of profoundly affecting the system's capacity to control and ensure the economic benefits of its main actors.
- Creation of alternate political projects capable of mobilizing and gaining popular support with potential to redefining political coalitions.
- External pressures or interventions, including military.

O'Donnell et al (1988) and others offer an explanatory theory they call Theory of the Loss of Legitimacy. This theory allows to analyze the transition process from authoritarianism to democracy in two phases:

1. Any political regime must be legitimate, have popular support or, at least, must be accepted to survive. 2. When the regime loses its legitimacy, it must regain it, otherwise it begins a self-destruction process (see Figure below).

Loss of Legitimacy → Reinvention → Renovation or Destruction → Transition

(Representation of the Theory of the Loss of Legitimacy)

Robert A. Dahl (1971) distinguishes two major stages that explain democratic changes: 1. Liberalization 2. Inclusion Liberalization is the stage at which an authoritarian system comes to acknowledges the growing power of the opposition force.

Inclusion is the stage at which a growing popular demand for rights to participate, control, and eventually oppose government behaviors appears. Dahl proposes five criteria for the evaluation of an effective democratic process:

- Effective participation, which is defined as the degree to which citizens are given appropriate and equal opportunities to express their views about decisions affecting them.
- Enhanced understanding, which is defined as the degree to which citizens are given appropriate and equal opportunities to know and approve/disapprove of decisions made by political leaders that may affect citizens' interests.
- Equity of vote, which is defined as the degree to which each citizen's vote is given equal chance to be counted.
- Control over government plan of action, which is defined as the degree to which government decisions reflect sovereign will of the citizens.
- Inclusion, which is defined as the degree to which citizens are included in the decision making process.

For Sartori (1991), a transition from authoritarian system to a democracy involves both the end of dictatorship, and access to democracy. Other authors, including Juan Linz (1991) emphasize the participation and political strategies as determinant factors in the understanding of a democratic process. For these authors, democratic processes are products of political actors who choose certain strategies leading changes, including political systems. Morlino (1998) distinguishes liberalization from democratization. Liberalization refers to a horizontal process by which political and civil rights are "offered" or "given" to the people by the governing elite, but in such a way that still allows the elite to maintain control over the society. Usually, the governing elite uses the strategy to overcome a crisis without any real intention to allow full democratization of the society. Democratization, on the other hand, refers to a process that recognizes a complete expression of political and civil rights, and the acceptance of social organizations of interests, including unions. A real democratization process is complete when the major democratic structures are in place, including:

- Realization and consolidation of democratic compromise by all political and civilian actors involved.
- Respect of the legal system by the governing elite and its allies.
- Neutralization of the military forces.
- Protection of the rights of economic groups.
- Role of political parties and unions.

The recent political events in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea are pointing to an increased concern for a return to military regimes, and perhaps authoritarian regimes in Africa. Most of Africa's democratic countries demonstrate patterns of liberalization, not full democratization.

2.1. Implications of *Françafrique* to Former French Colonies

While France has always claimed a special relationship with Africa, it has drawn criticism for its characteristics of paternalistic neo-colonialism. This is made manifest especially because of France's export of its identity and cultural values which has mainly characterized her African policy (Pantea, 2019). The term *Françafrique* was first used by Ivory Coast's first president Félix Boigny in 1955 in his reference to France-Ivory Coast relationship that he ostensibly referred to as amicable and close (Bovcon, 2013). As time went by, anti-*Françafrique* sentiments became louder, especially with the publication of *La Françafrique. Le plus long scandale de la République* by Verschave (1998), where he describes *Françafrique* as nothing but the longest scandal in the republic.

Although *Françafrique* has aided the France-Africa relations for a while, it is the recent upheavals in West Africa that have put to test the *Françafrique* policy and ideology that now seem to be in a transition face, where it either re-invents itself or get destroyed. Indeed, while president Macron of France has signaled a need for change in French policy in West Africa since 2017, many still see France as continuing its colonial policy in West Africa.

2.2. Economic and Monetary Implications

According to Deslandes (2019) *La Françafrique* established a French-Africa relationship where France was at the centre and with most privileges and strategic advantages while former French colonies were at the periphery, disadvantaged and lacking agency to independently tackle their challenges. This was especially the case with Franc des Colonies Françaises d'Afrique (franc of the French Colonies of Africa) CFA, which was tied to whatever currency France was using, and which gave France preferential trade agreements at the detriment of African countries. Established in 1945 by General de Gaulle under Article 3 of the Decree 45-0136, the CFA franc made former African French colonies subservient to the French monetary system, where exchange rates were determined at the French metropole, in what could be termed by Agbohohou (2015) as monetary Nazism. Hitler had imposed a similar financial system in occupied

territories in Europe (Agboh, 2015). The dominance of the French Monetary system also led to overpricing of French imports (Kohnert, 2022)

2.3. Political implications

While the French and few political elites managed to maintain some grip on the political stability of the West African region for a while, a wave of recent military coups, seemingly with the support of a larger section of the population suggest that France's influence could be waning. France had always offered political support to African leaders that were seen to be promoting or at least not threatening French interests. While this went on for a while, the propped up African leaders progressively became unpopular, being forced out of power either through elections or military coups.

At the global stage, countries like Russia and China are challenging USA hegemony, in what could be termed as creating an increasingly multipolar world. The presence of Russian military group Wagner in CAR is one such example. The ambitious China infrastructural developments in Africa under its China Roads and Belt initiative demonstrates China's increasing geopolitical interests in Africa. USA and allies are keen to counter these influence, and are actively seeking more robust ways and policies of engaging Africa

2.4. Military Implications

The decision by Mali to negotiate with terrorists, at the chagrin of France, has partly contributed to anti-French sentiments which progressively gained pace through implicating the French legionnaires (Amoah, 2023). While the decision by the Mali Junta to negotiate with terrorist goes against the French Legion's diktat, it was pragmatic as much as the ultimate outcome remains uncertain (Amoah, 2023). For Amoah (2023), the inability of the African Peace and Security Architecture to intervene when required, has promoted the use of Private Military Companies such as Wagner in the CAR. The disagreement between France and host states led to disengagements by France, re-igniting the Cold War East-West competition with the entry of Russian state-funded Wagner.

While France's military influence and presence in former French colonies in west Africa may be dwindling, the geopolitical realignments may see Russia assume a more active role militarily within that region. The waving of Russian flags by the coup supporters in Niger suggests the popularity of Russia as a potential partner in the region. While for some this may sound like jumping from the frying pan to the fire, for some it may amount to choosing a lesser evil.

France has maintained a military presence in Niger, Chad, Central Africa Republic (CAR), Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Togo, Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal, Mali and Madagascar (Alemahu, 2023). While the mandate of French military presence in Africa may differ from one country to another, there is no doubt that they are strategically stationed to promote and protect French interests. It is the presence of these militaries in the region, and their interests that is now being questioned by many Africans leading to the rebellion against governments that are seen to be pro-West. The liberalization that was evident in some of these countries were not able to consolidate into a democracy.

The assumption that western hegemony had emerged winner after the end of the Cold war led to the bastardization of African countries in matters international relations and has continued the glorification of western Europeans capitalist and liberal views as shaping and determining humanity. This has rendered irrelevant "theories of imperialism, dependency, uneven development and others that once sought to explore the political and institutional context of late-modern inequities between states, nations, classes and genders" (Grovoqui, 2001, p 426)

3. Conclusions

The democracy project is certainly facing a lot of challenges in West Africa. While democracy was expected to consolidate over time, there is a lot of democratic backsliding and emergence of coups that are supposedly popular with the populations. This has raised the question of whether democracies are able to represent the interests of the majority, and the role of militaries in democratic processes.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of ethical approval

This study was a desktop study and all references were attributed to authors.

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