

COMMENTARY

Coup d'états in Africa: A cure or prophylactic for good governance?

Ishmael D. Norman

Institute for Security, Disaster and Emergency Studies, Sandpiper Place, Langma, Ghana



Correspondence to: Ishmael D. Norman, Institute for Security, Disaster and Emergency Studies, Sandpiper Place, Langma, Ghana;
E-mail: ishmael.norman@isdesghana.org

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Abstract: Military Coups in Africa share a “cause-and-effect” relationship with civilian mal-administration, by way of the military auditing, disrupting and helping to arrest or capture, and re-organize defective governance system in politically sick-nations. This aim appears consistent with the mandate of the Military to serve, protect and defend the national interests, therefore, turning coups into constitutional cure and prophylactic? The analysis in this paper is conducted under the concept of *Military-Coup-Symbiosis*: consisting of *mutualism, commensalism and parasitism*. Military-Coup-Symbiosis espouses the cyclical nature of military-takeovers, and the beneficial effects on democracy in general. It also rationalizes the justification why coups are bound to co-exist with civilian governments, for as long as political leaders continue to support and engage in De-democratization processes, exhibiting inimical conducts such as neopatrimonialism, and non-meritorious job recruitment and promotions. This paper investigates the possible curative qualities of military coups on good governance by posing as perpetual threat caution to democracy, and the normative values as political prophylactic to arrest and prevent potential leadership abuses. The ultimate question is how military interventions in politics can be harnessed to clean up mal-administration in politically sick-nations?

Keywords: military coup d'états, mal-administration, neopatrimonialism, politically sick-nations

1 Evolving nature of coup d'états in Africa since 1956 to the present

Military coups were not always a feature of democratic governance in Africa, until the overthrow of King Farouk by Egyptian Military in 1952 and thus introducing the military as active participants in African politics, although military coups had happened previously in France, under Napoleon Bonaparte, 1799, Chile in 1973 and in Argentina in 1976 (Huntington, 1957; Mahdi et al., 2023). The important question to raise in analyzing coups in Africa is why? The answer appears simple, though not quite. Military coups became part of the integration of democracy in Africa when the populations of the newly independent nations became dissatisfied with the way and manner that democracy was being translated on the ground. It is part of the processes leading to greater level of self-determination and national self-actualization (Amoateng, 2022). It appears from the first coup d'état in Africa, it assumed imperative characteristics as a tool to be used to cause the renewal of leadership commitment to good governance, and to compel the moral commitment of the citizens and parliaments to pursue the modalities that would lead to changing overdue constitutional amendments; or through the re-writing of new constitutions, and to correct the mistakes of the past.

Coups appear to help, even if temporarily, to enhance respect for the rule of law by civilian administrations, at least, within period immediately preceding the handing over of power by the military. Using Ghana as a case, it appears to encourage the implementation of prescriptive constitutional provisions, promote freedom and justice as well as the promotion of patriotism and nationalism, when power reverts to a new cohort of politicians (Powell & Thyne, 2011). After the nation returned to constitutional rule in 1992, it appears, there is a greater emphasis on individual freedoms, the rule of law, despite the perceived judiciary corruption and corruption in genera. Coups for want of a better expression, provide the checks and balances for power dynamics in emerging nations. Powell put it in a more realistic tone that the underlying causes of coups are present and worsening. Until these domestic dynamics improve, or regional or global actors can provide a solution, there is no reason to think coups should go away (Ibid., 2011).

2 Developing the Military-Coup-Symbiosis as analytical concept

The analysis in this paper is conducted under the concept of *Military-Coup-Symbiosis*: consisting of *mutualism*, *commensalism* and *parasitism*, with the understanding that not all coups are necessarily negative or bad. Some are mutually beneficially to all parties, and creates the environment for politicians to review their conduct and the military to assess whether they are protecting the interests of the nation from the enemies within. Under *mutualism* of coups, power ultimately returns to the civilian hands with euphoria and praise for the military intervention and the transfer of power to a new civilian leadership. As part of unintended consequences, Military coups provide preemptive estoppel against mass protests and demonstrations, which often become confrontational with regime security services effort to suppress the citizen's right to public demonstrations and protest. In assessing the *commensalism* of military coups, it helps the key actors in government to re-organize their policies, their approaches within democratic governance system without destroying the political cohort, or judiciary as well as the overall quest for leadership in that given nation. Some military takeovers are constructive with "guardianship and breakthroughs", where there is the renewal of patriotism, commitment to democracy, and national development. Others are not only disruptive or *parasitic* but inure unto themselves excessive veto powers that often lead to the destruction of the constitutional design and systems of a nation (Ikome, 2007; Huntington, 1957).

The interest of this author is to discuss the redeeming qualities of coup d'états as symbiotic catalyst to greater manifestation of democratic principles in Africa's civilian governments. Secondly, the author discusses the possibility of coups being used, perhaps, as perpetual caution agents against civilian governments' political infractions; indiscipline; criminal conduct and moral turpitude as well as to mend the disconnect between members of the various constituencies and their parliamentary representatives. Third, the author seeks to evaluate the negatives of coup d'états in dispassionate light so as to gain deeper understanding of the growing uptick of coups in Africa. This evaluation is set against the dwindling fortunes of African nations due to central government's corruption and run-away government spending leading to imbalances in international liquidity and burdening the population with huge national debts arising out of irresponsible borrowing. It discusses the implications of nepotistic practices in job recruitment, retention and promotions, the outright mismanagement of the national purse, and so many other ills that have brought hardships on the populace.

The blame for the underdevelopment of Africa can be conveniently placed on the government, the elite members of the society with common ethnic and political identities with the president, and the tacit support of some members of the top brass of the military and other security agencies in African nations, coupled with the ambivalence and pretensions of development partners towards domestic corrupt practices. These factors are real, and can be objectively or empirically assessed to determine their deteriorative roles, which invariably arouse interest in coup d'états in some military officers. As a social observer and active participant, this author took note of the fact that, in the third and last quarters of 2023 and into the first two quarters of 2024, some citizens in Ghana for example, were publicly calling for military intervention in the affairs of Ghana due to the uptick in official corruption, nepotistic job placement and promotion and the burden of a huge national debt due to irresponsible government spending, erratic power supply and deplorable road conditions in the nation. Such calls led the Chief of Defence Staff, Vice Admiral Seth Amoama to denounce coups in Ghana during a meeting with the Ghana Journalist Association in September, 2023. He was reported to have said that, "when it comes to coups and things like that, Ghanaians should be assured that the Ghana Armed Forces is not interested," (Osei, 2023). Obviously, the CDS cannot know what every soldier, whether Commissioned or Non-Commissioned thinks of the state of affairs of the nation and the way to handle it.

3 Defining coup d'états or military takeovers

Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2023, p. 4) defines coup or coup d'état as "a sudden and often violent or illegal seizure of political power or government control by a group of individuals, typically within the military or other influential factions of a country". Other researchers also define coups as "any seizure of State apparatuses by extra-legal tactics (unconstitutional means according to African Union) may be considered a coup" (Ikome, 2011; 2007; Powell & Thyne, 2011; Momen & Markony, 2019). By this admission, the African Union appears to suggest

that some coups are within the constitutional framework of the affected nation. The literature on military coups in Africa is inundated with the apparent simplistic, and biased definition of coups in Africa, and perhaps, in the world. More specifically, Powell & Thyne (2011), defined a coup to be “an illegal and overt attempt by the military or other elites within the State apparatus to unseat the sitting executive”. This casts the coup leaders as shallow, power-hungry, gold diggers in military uniform, with no other motivation other than to sit on the leadership seat of his or her nation. The professional soldier would not sacrifice his or her life to stage a coup just to unseat a sitting executive. These definitions ignore the symbiotic relationship between bad civilian administration and the intervention by the military to restore hope and help to cure the weaknesses of corruption, ineptitude and lack of focus on national development. For these reasons, the author draws from the previous and existing definitions of coups or coup d'états in Africa or any other place, but provides a unique, perhaps, refreshing working definition of coups or coup d'états for this paper. As further observation of the existing definition of coup or coup d'état in the literature, a coup or coup d'état has never been or will never be a “sudden seizure of political power or government control by either the military or any other group” (Ikome, 2011; 2007; Powell & Thyne, 2011; Momen & Markony, 2019).

In this paper, a military coup is a planned military operation or activity to arrest or capture run-away government's legitimacy or power and the resulting abuse of the sovereignty of the people in all of its corrupt dimensions; and install the rule of law; equitable wealth distribution within a true patrimonial system, where the ruler is beholding to the ruled and vice versa, and build the resiliency of the population towards the greatest manifestation of democratic values within the norms of international politics, human rights and national development.

In such instance, power may be retained by the military leaders to provide the template of what good governance means or ought to be, guided by moral and ethical values of beneficence (promotion of good conduct), doing no harm, truth-telling (being truthful, accountable with the public and accepting responsibility) in the use or misuse of government asset, probity, accountability and transparency. Coup leaders who do not observe and protect civil liberties of the ruled, who lord it over the ruled, who abuse their legitimacy through intimidation, rent-seeking behaviors, violence and abuse of autonomy of others, deny the citizenry due process and justice: - replaces the civilian administrators they overthrew and become monstrous replicas of those leaders. Coups leaders under the working definition of coups for this paper, should not measure their success by the number of days or weeks and even years they retain power, but the quantum of real changes made in the nation towards greater dividends in development, national prosperity and improvement in international liquidity, lowering of the national debt burden, and enhancing the functioning and capabilities of the population and their agency. It is only when coup leaders are able to show the correct way to run a nation that military coups can be justified post facto. That is to say, the success of the aims and objective of a military coup, cannot be measured by the number of days the military leaders stay in power; but by the contributions they make to improve the lives of the population and the nation as a whole.

4 Motivations for military takeovers or coup d'états in Africa

Coups can be motivated by a variety of reasons, “ranging from political grievances and power struggles to ideological or social concerns”. Not all the recorded motivations in the literature are very pertinent to the phenomenon. For example, Mo Ibrahim Foundation's assessment in Western Africa, asserted that “coups in Western Africa” are due to “the collapse of Libya in 2011” which led to “the influx of both foreign and returning fighters from Libya as well as significant arms-trafficking through porous State borders in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger” (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023, pp. 3-5, para 2). Bear in mind that even before the collapse of Libya, there were coups in Africa. At any rate, from such assertion, the Foundation's piece digressed into the influence of insurgency, ISIS and Al-Qaeda militancy and landed on geopolitical competition between “France, the US and Russia providing physical military presence and military support”, (Ibid, p. 5). Such digression into the already known security threats in the region to explain the motivations for military coups in the region, diminishes the contributions of the Foundation's paper to the phenomenon. In fact, the indicators articulated by the same paper as the rational motivations for coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, and Niger were captured on page 8 in the Ibrahim Index of Africa Governance, (IIAG) spanning from 2017 through 2021 are more on point than all the other claims for coups in Western Africa. Even so, the Foundation's writers did not make any linkage to those indicators as part of the underlying reasons for coups in those nations in that study. Yet, during the period of

the five-year assessment of IIAG of the economic performances of those nations, “all four nations (that experienced coups) declined in overall governance, security and the rule of law, participation in economic affairs, human rights and social inclusion”. In addition, there were marked decline in personal security and safety, anti-corruption, equity, equality, and labor affairs (ibid, pp. 8-17). That is to say, coups are deliberate acts which are staged due to conflation of; or the convergence; of factors, namely, economic, political, social, military, environmental, and all the conventional aspirations of domestic government to enhance the functioning and capabilities of its population. “It may be actuated by genuine concern for the national interests and the public good” (Ikome, 2007; Derpanopoulos, 2016).

Economic hardships and incidence of political corruption tend to have negative effect on the sense of well-being, happiness, sense of ownership, education, professional development, promotion, patriotism, nepotism, cronyism and even general health of the population. The effect on the Military is just as valid as it is felt by civilians. In some jurisdictions, the top brass of the military, to avoid the economic hardships, close their eyes to the machinations and political shenanigans of governments. “They allowed themselves to be seduced by the trappings of power, meddled in political affairs of the nation and actively became the agents of political dogma and practice” (Norman, 2024). From the foregoing, some of the influences for a military takeover could be lodged in the civilianization of the military to the point where the military becomes a tool of both the government and the elites. Particularly when there is abuse of oligarchic power and repression of the populace by both the government and the elite; due to the integration and cooperation between the Military, Political elites and (a portion of) the Citizenry” (Schiff, 1995). Historically, the engagement of the military in governance as Heads of States of nations made some nations in Africa adopt a new approach to how the relationship between the civilian administration and the military should be designed.

Previous disruptions or military takeovers to civilian administrations in a nation like Ghana caused by the military interventions, compelled the framers of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana to discard “objective military control” in favor of “subjective military control” under constitutional rule, because by this time, the past military leaders themselves had “civilianized the military” (Huntington, 1956). For example, “in the eight-year rule of Ex-President Rawlings, (as a serving Military Officer), other serving military officers were appointed to government positions, and soldiers continued to engage in partisan politics” (Agyeman-Duah, 2002; Hutchful, 1997a; Nartey, 2019). Additionally, “Rawlings continued to rely on the personal loyalty of one section of the military, the specially trained and better equipped 64th Regiment, as an instrument of control both within the military and of the civilian population. Rawlings “seemed more committed to upholding the supremacy of the military and its abrasive tradition than subjecting the institution to democratic control” (Agyeman-Duah, 2002; Norman, 2024).

After the military taste the fruits of leadership in a nation bedeviled with corruption, it is difficult for some to withdraw to the barracks and become subservient to civil leadership. This may be the period when the military leadership allow themselves to sink deeper into duplicitous conduct, corruption and parasitic economic crimes which had formed the basis of the rationale for the coup d'état in the first instant. The longer they subsist in this milieu the more autocratic, even despotic and abusive the military regime becomes, having lost sight of the patriotism, humanitarian and supererogational motivations to salvage the nation from the hands of civilian tyranny and economic oppression in the first place.

5 African union's definition of unconstitutional change of government

The African Union Resolution ACHR/Res.515 (LXX) (2022) on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Africa proffers that coup d'états go against democratically elected government. Other conducts that also go against democracy are: - refusal of incumbents to relinquish power to the winner of their latest free and fair elections, amending the constitution to prolong the stay in office of incumbents and other articulations of poor governance. It offered that “unconstitutional changes of government impinge various rights guaranteed in the African Charter, including life, liberty and personal security, due process of the law, freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, the right to participate, the right to self-determination and the right to peace and security” (AU Res. 515, 2022, para. 5). Although a liberal reading of the Constitutive Act of 2005, Articles 4 and 23 condemn military seizure of power, implicit in particularly Article

4, is the silent support of military action that is executed in defence of the constitution to restore the rights of the citizenry. This is further evidenced by the apparent indemnification of the leaders of military coups, provided “the transitional processes (to civilian rule are) conducted with full compliance with the requirements of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, including the need for those involved in the transitional military leaderships not to participate in elections held at the end of the transitions for restoring constitutional order” (AU Res. 515, 2022, para. 6).

While many scholars, researchers and government operatives as well as a significant number of the military personnel consider military takeovers as unconstitutional (Huntington, 1957; 1968; Ikome, 2007; Powell & Thyne, 2011; Derpanopoulous et al., 2016; Momen & Markony, 2019; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2023), it is important to bear in mind that, each national constitution in Africa delineates the modalities by which power can be acquired and exercised. It also shows the pathways through which a coup d'état may be cloaked with exceptionalism, and thus, justified either by the military or rag-tag defenders of the homeland. For example, “the framers of Ghana’s 1992 Constitution took due cognizance of the fact that “democracy” as a philosophy of life and governance is not yet entrenched in Ghana, the first black African nation to gain political independence in 1957, let alone those nations that gained their independence from colonial rule after Ghana. Even if Ghana is presumed to be ‘democratic’, its brand of democracy and the rule of law are not dowered with the fruits of democracy such as the exercise of individual choice, autonomy, capacity, capability and wellbeing”. (. . .). “The framers of the 1992 Constitution did not want the citizens to be surprised by a rag-tag of soldiers to seize power, and for that matter, any cell, that might seek to overthrow the government and thus empowered the citizens to rise up in defense” in Articles 3 -5, should the unthinkable happen. By this admonition to the citizens, it is presumed and should be presumed that it included military men and women, who are, indeed, part of the citizens (Norman, 2017). In order for the citizens to render credible defense, it informs all citizens that they also have immunity against the exercise of their “right and duty” to “do all in their power to restore the Constitution after it has been suspended, overthrown, or abrogated”. This is a powerful charge, due to the lack of equivocation and simplicity of the charge. To articulate the import of this charge liberally would mean a call to military intervention when there are underlying reasons for the rights of the citizens and the sovereignty of the nation is under threat from the incumbent leadership” (ibid, p. 673). Writing specifically about the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, it does not appear to estop the seizure of power by the military or by any other unconstitutional means, if incumbent government fails to govern by the prescriptions of the national constitution, including those that alter or attempt to alter the constitutions without following the laid down constitutional procedures for such exercises but acting unconstitutionally. In reference to Latin American nations in the 1960s and 70s, Huntington’s book, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, (1968: 1-2) on comparative politics, offered that “military interventions are only one specific manifestation of a broader phenomenon”, . . . (which) “is the general politicization of social forces and institutions”. Therefore, it is “fallacious to attempt to explain military interventions in politics primarily by reference to the internal structure of the military or the social background of the officers doing the intervening” (ibid, pp. 7-8). In Huntington’s analysis of good coups and bad coups, what he labeled as ‘breakthrough’ “referred to the emergency of the middle class, constituting a new coalition”, coupled with a more open access to data and information, a well-educated class of young people, including “younger military officers, these collectively become the new coalition against oligarchic praetorianism”, identity politics and outright mismanagement of the national purse (Ikome, 2007). In paper of Ikome (2011), *Coup d'état; Constitutionality and Legitimacy: Good Coups and Bad Coups*, he offered that “because coups have always been seen as unfortunate events, efforts at evolving typologies of coups have traditionally not interrogated” the phenomenon on good or bad basis (ibid, p. 9). He further proffered that earlier theorist “saw coups (. . .) as the handiwork of the military” and “perceived coups as instrument of modernization” and “military takeover of State affairs as positive” (Ibid., p. 9). This view is supported by Momen & Markony (2019) in their paper, *Military Coups and Administrative Elites* that, “it is worth to mention that political and administrative reform as a result of coups in many countries (. . .) is a noticed reality, when coups leaders attempt to introduce meaningful reform or changes in the governance process . . .” although coups can lead to authoritarian regimes (Ibid, p. 2). There are times when military coups are supported by and welcome by different stakeholders in a State, especially when ordinary citizens see the coup as necessary for an improved political and economic environment”. Such coups are “considered by the people as the result of political fault and not the result of military interests” (Momen & Markony, 2019; Souare, 2014). In fact, military coups have helped to restored democracy in Ghana and Nigeria as well as other countries (Derpanopoulous et al., 2016).

6 Discussion and conclusion

As said before, this paper does not seek to promote military coups as conventional avenue for leadership selection, or even the desired template for good governance. This work considered alternative view points about coups and how, perhaps, the approach could be used to enhance the performative services of the political classes to the population, a factor which is often missing in Africa in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. According to former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, “the practice of democracy without integrity, bad governance, nepotism, and favoritism, amidst sit-tight syndrome, are fueling the recent spate of coup d’états in Africa,” and that (...) “the mal-administration of the African leaders was, however, making the citizens seek alternative liberators beyond the government of the day, hence this gale of military coup” (Taiwo, 2023). As a former African president, Mr. Obasanjo understands the underlying causes for popular discontent in a nation and should pay attention to his submission. The deficiencies in the various African nations, irrespective of whether or not they have experienced coups before; ought to be cured by the political and social elites, before the need may arise for the military to feel compelled by the plight of the population to salvage the dwindling fortunes of the nation and to help alleviate the suffering of the people. The idea that a section of the various militaries in Africa are willing to chance it all, to correct the mistakes of the civilian administrations that have undoubtedly created so much economic malaise and under-development for these rich African nations due to corruption, outright stealing of the national wealth, should serve as a prophylactic against political and financial shenanigans of the ruling class, their families and their friends. 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.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflicts of interest.

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