

Military Coups in West Africa: the African "Phenomenon" That is Self-Inflicted

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of independence in the late 50's and early 60's euphoria and new hopes swept through West Africa as nation after nation attained self-government. There were new dreams and expectations as the colonial masters packed their bags and handed over the instruments of power to the indigenous peoples. To most West Africans this was the end of a long freedom struggle in which so many had suffered. It was the end of slavery, human degradation and exploitation.

The wind of change, as Mr. Harold McMillan, a British Prime Minister later called it, started sweeping through the colonial Anglophone and Francophone West Africa in the early 1950's. Suddenly, there was this realization that the sub-continent had to be free--free from colonial domination and exploitation. Blowing through West Africa just like the rest of Africa was a new fervour for revolt and nationalism. The revolt which was mainly spiritual was meant to drive the colonial masters from the African soil; the nationalism to mobilize the masses to the forefront in a fight for self-determination, liberty and human dignity. The astonishing success of the anti-colonialist crusade in India, led by Mahatma Gandhi was to become a major driving force and a great source of inspiration to African nationalists. India became independent in 1947.

PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

As the spirit of nationalism gained momentum throughout the continent the colonial rulers started accepting realities. Change was inevitable. The various national political parties and their leaders started getting recognition from the colonial administration. Political activities, which previously meant jail, detention or banishment, were now being authorized and licensed under the watchful eye of the police. Nationalists and party leaders could organize and address political rallies so long as they did not engage in anti-government subversion or sabotage. The political organizers during this period were later to emerge as either Heads of State or major political figures in their own countries. There was the fiery Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, the nationalistic Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone, Azikiwe and Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria, and the list goes on. All these and others were men who were instrumental in shaping the destinies of their respective countries.

In the Anglophone West African countries, the British started easing off control and slowly but gradually relinquishing power by the establishment of interim governments. National elections were held with all the registered political parties being represented. The interim government was then formed with ministers from the majority party, with the party leader becoming the Chief Minister. The entire government was overseen by a British Governor and this was the British idea of 'self-government'. On attaining full independence a prime minister was then appointed and the British officially handed over the instruments of government. This was the time that the colonial flag would go down for the last time and a new national flag hoisted--hoisted for the first time. It was an occasion that was received with much excitement, pride and joy. The day of independence was a day celebrated with much pomp and pageantry and nationwide festivities. This excitement, however, was not to last long as so many West African countries were to later find out.

The colonial military set up was a different issue. On a nationalistic level and from a patriotic standpoint the military was viewed by the indigenous peoples as a bird of a totally different feather. The colonial legacy left military organizations that were not fully accepted in the African society. During the sensitive days of struggle for freedom and independence the general populace and the local politicians had developed an almost allergic fear and mistrust for soldiers. As very well observed by W.F. Gutteridge:

Nationalist politicians saw them as agents of imperial rule suppressing political demonstrations and protecting European property. Though they had won glory by serving overseas in the two world wars, their imperial activities caused them to be regarded in some quarters as armies of occupation or at best as mercenaries in the

service of a foreign power. This impression was assisted by a recruitment policy that preferred subjectively defined 'martial races' or those who were 'worthwhile soldiers'.

The ensuing tribal imbalance necessarily made more difficult than it would otherwise have been the army's achievement of national status as an institution.¹

To politicians therefore, the military had no positive role in the process of the freedom struggle and soldiers did not therefore need to be rewarded or accorded any special considerations. It is not surprising as a result, that some African leaders preferred to retain expatriate officers to go on commanding predominantly African troops. The Africanization process was given priority in the areas of civil administration. West Africans took over senior civil servant posts that were previously held by Europeans. This initial failure to Africanize the command hierarchy in the Armed Forces was later to become a major area for concern and a source of military grievances that were to turn catastrophic in most newly independent West African nations.

POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

At the time of independence in March 1957, Ghana had probably the highest standard of education in the entire black Africa. In spite of this impressive position, however, only a mere 10% of the commissioned officers were local.

The post-independence era found many fledgling West African governments groping in the dark for stability and direction. Soon, many governments found out that the new state of nationhood meant much more than just the creation of a national flag, the composition of a national anthem and the election of a president. The military, which the nationalist politicians had grown to despise and mistrust during the pre-independence era, had to be moulded and blended into this new national image. There were those politicians at the time, of course, who viewed the military as a force or tool to be utilized in subduing political opponents and in projecting personal power across the country. This tendency by politicians to use the military for personal political gain was viewed negatively in professional military circles. It was seen as gross interference of the very fibre that holds the military together--professionalism. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana probably contributed to his own downfall by his undue meddling in the professional integrity of his army both at home and abroad. A case in point, was when President Nkrumah made the decision to send Ghanaians to the Congo in 1960 as part of the UN contingent. On several occasions Nkrumah issued his own instructions to the Ghana contingent, and in the process contradicting what had already been issued by the United Nations Command. This practice frustrated the Ghanaian soldiers who saw it as an unnecessary intrusion of their professional responsibilities.

The newly independent West African nations took over what were essentially colonial armies. In the majority of the cases the army was relatively small and ill-equipped. One major priority was to eliminate the colonial mentality that existed in the military by giving the armed forces a more national outlook. This obviously called for instituting clearly visible changes. The uniforms had to be redesigned to reflect a more national character. The names of the regiments, the names of the barracks and even the tunes of martial music had all to be modified to identify with the new nation. As pointed out earlier, there existed a noticeable tribal imbalance in the national make-up of the military as a result of the colonialists' belief in 'martial tribes' or natural warriors.

“Preference for a culture and the recruitment of speakers of a language that discouraged literacy in Western technology and education, produced the legacy of an educational and technological vacuum in the army, and helped to spawn serious political consequences in the polity after colonialism.”²

In order to rectify this situation recruitment had to be conducted on a national scale with every tribe represented, on a pro rata basis, according to the known population figures at the time. Only in this way could tribal tension and rivalry be minimized. It was humanly impracticable, certainly, to totally eradicate tribalism due the ethnic customs and traditions so permanently intra-woven in African society. This inherent African character of tribalism that is so much imbedded in local culture is a potentially explosive social phenomenon that was later to cause civil war in Nigeria.

As the military was struggling to attain a national character in order to gain national acceptance, the politicians were becoming more self-seeking, power-hungry and ambitious. Some were out seeking instant wealth for themselves, their friends and relatives. Nepotism became rampant, commonplace and a norm. Others were out experimenting on new and foreign ideologies in the name of African socialism. These were ideologies that had no bearing or relevance to the improvement of the lives of the ordinary man. Some of these governments started openly courting the Eastern bloc for advice and guidance. It did not take the ordinary citizens long to realize that

these so-called progressive governments were not delivering the goods fast enough. Corruption had become an accepted way of life. Mismanagement of the economy coupled with sheer incompetence had led to runaway inflation and unaffordable prices. Unemployment and crime rates were on the increase. Yet the greedy get-rich-quick politicians continued getting richer. These were the kind of situations to be found in Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea and other countries when their governments fell to the military.

In the majority of the coups that have occurred, the military has deemed it a national and patriotic obligation to rescue the country from total collapse and thereby restore lost national prestige. Although these coups d'etat have been executed in the guise of national interest and patriotic duty, more often than not, military regimes have turned out to be more corrupt, oppressive and downright inefficient than the civilian governments they deposed.

HARVEST OF COUPS

The period between 1960 and 1970 and slightly beyond has generally been called the decade of coups' in Africa. Once coups started in West Africa they became like a wild African bushfire. They swept through the entire sub-continent at an alarmingly high speed. They leapt through national borders as if those boundaries did not exist anymore. The scoreboard read something like this:

Benin

- 1963–Oct 28th: Christophe Soglo overthrows Hubert Maga
- 1965–Nov 27th: Christophe Soglo overthrows Sourou-Migan Apithy
- 1967–Dec 16th: Maurice Kouandété overthrows Christophe Soglo
- 1972–Oct 26th: Mathieu Kérékou overthrows Justin Ahomadégbé-Tomêtin

Burkina Faso

- 1966–Jan 3rd: Sangoulé Lamizana overthrows Maurice Yaméogo
- 1980–Nov 25th: Saye Zerbo overthrows Sangoulé Lamizana
- 1982–Nov 7th: Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo overthrows Saye Zerbo
- 1983–Aug 4th: Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré overthrow Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo
- 1987–Oct 15th: Blaise Compaoré overthrows Thomas Sankara

Chad

- 1975–Apr 13th: Noël Milarew Odingar overthrows François Tombalbaye
- 1982–Jun 7th: Hissène Habré overthrows Goukouni Oueddei
- 1990–Dec 1st: Idriss Déby overthrows Hissène Habré

Côte d'Ivoire

- 1999–Dec 24th: Robert Guéï overthrows Henri Konan Bédié
- 2011-Apr 11th: Alassane Ouattara overthrows Laurent Gbagbo

Gambia

- 1994–Jul 22nd: Yahya Jammeh overthrows Dawda Jawara

Ghana

- 1966–Feb 24th: Joseph Arthur Ankrah overthrows Kwame Nkrumah
- 1972–Jan 13th: Ignatius Kutu Acheampong overthrows Kofi Abrefa Busia
- 1978–Jul 5th: Fred Akuffo overthrows Ignatius Kutu Acheampong
- 1979–Jun 4th: Jerry John Rawlings overthrows Fred Akuffo

- 1981–Dec 31st: Jerry John Rawlings overthrows Hilla Limann

Guinea

- 1984–Apr 3rd: Lansana Conté overthrows Louis Lansana Beavogui
- 2008–Dec 24th: Moussa Dadis Camara overthrows Aboubacar Sompore

Guinea-Bissau

- 1980–Nov 14: João Bernardo Vieira overthrows Luís Cabral
- 1999–May 7: Ansumane Mané overthrows João Bernardo Vieira
- 2003–Sep 14: Veríssimo Correia Seabra overthrows Kumba Iala
- 2012–April 12: Army overthrows the government.

Liberia

- 1980–Apr 12th: Staff Sergeant Samuel K. Doe overthrows President William R. Tolbert, Jr.
- 1990–Sep 9th: Prince Johnson overthrows President Samuel K. Doe

Mali

- 1968–Nov 19th: Moussa Traoré overthrows Modibo Keita
- 1991–Mar 26th: Amadou Toumani Touré overthrows Moussa Traoré
- 2012–Mar 22nd: Military overthrows Amadou Toumani Touré

Mauritania

- 1978–Jul 10th: Mustafa Ould Salek overthrows Moktar Ould Daddah
- 1979–Apr 6th: Ahmad Ould Bouceif and Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrow Mustafa Ould Salek
- 1980–Jan 4th: Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrows Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly
- 1984–Dec 12th: Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya overthrows Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah
- 2005–Aug 3rd: Ely Ould Mohamed Vall overthrows Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya
- 2008–Aug 6th: Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz overthrows Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi

Niger

- 1974–Apr 15th: Seyni Kountché overthrows Hamani Diori
- 1996–Jan 27th: Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara overthrows Mahamane Ousmane
- 1999–Apr 9th: Daouda Malam Wanke overthrows Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara
- 2010–Feb 18th: Salou Djibo overthrows Mamadou Tandja

Nigeria

- 1966–Jan 15th: Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu overthrows Abubakar Tafawa Balewa
- 1966–Jul 29th: Yakubu Gowon overthrows Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi
- 1975–Jul 29th: Murtala Mohammed overthrows Yakubu Gowon
- 1983–Dec 31st: Muhammadu Buhari overthrows Shehu Shagari
- 1985–Aug 27th: Ibrahim Babangida overthrows Muhammadu Buhari
- 1993–Nov 17th: Sani Abacha overthrows Ernest Shonekan

São Tomé and Príncipe

- 1995–Aug 15th: Manuel Quintas de Almeida overthrows Miguel Trovoada for 6 days
- 2003–Jul 16th: Fernando Pereira (major) overthrows Fradique de Menezes for 7 days

Sierra Leone

- 1967–Mar 21st: David Lansana overthrows Siaka Stevens
- 1968–Apr 19th: John Amadu Bangura overthrows Andrew Juxon-Smith
- 1992–Apr 29th: Valentine Strasser overthrows Joseph Saidu Momoh
- 1996–Jan 16th: Julius Maada Bio overthrows Valentine Strasser
- 1997–May 25: Johnny Paul Koroma overthrows Ahmed Tejan Kabbah
- 1998–Feb 12th: ECOMOG overthrows Johnny Paul Koroma

Togo

- 1963–Jan 13th: Étienne Eyadéma and Emmanuel Bodjolle overthrow Sylvanus Olympio
- 1967–Jan 13th: Étienne Eyadéma and Kléber Dadjo overthrow Nicolas Grunitzky

TRENDS IN WEST AFRICA

By 1985, approximately half of the sub-continent's states were led by military or civil-military governments. Other states also had records of predatory attacks by their military forces.³ No doubt, the coup d'etat and the military regime have become the most prevalent political phenomena in West Africa just like in the rest of the continent.

In an effort to justify the overthrow of the government one African officer is reputed to have claimed that a military take over and rule by officers never constitutes a revolution in tropical Africa but rather a limited modification of existing arrangements. This reasoning tends to border on naivety. What then has led to such an apparently endless spate of coups? Looking at the entire sub-continent, there appears to emerge some causes that share general commonality in the majority of the states. A protracted economic crisis has in most cases led to the failure of the political leadership. When faced with runaway inflation some of the more common measures have been price control, strict currency control, increased taxes and devaluation. Unfortunately these have not always been popular measures and have instead tended to generate countrywide dissatisfaction and national outrage. Military intervention has often occurred in these circumstances.

Political squabbling, whereby the civilian leaders have been unable to resolve their differences in the interest of the nation, has led to military coups. Internal political problems within the ruling elite has had the outward effect of leading the masses into disappointment, disillusion and loss of faith in the government.

The inefficiency of the civilian government, coupled with corruption and maladministration has been a common factor. After independence, the people expected their own government to be more familiar with their problems and be able to find solutions to them. This has not always been so.

A problem that is not likely to be resolved easily in West Africa is 'tribalism' or the ethnic factor. Ethnic groupings have created more national disunity than any other single factor. Governments have tended to be more tribal than national in structure, with inter-tribal oppression becoming common practice. This in effect has created more societal tension and turmoil.

Military intervention has not always been conducted to 'rescue' the nation from political ills. Coups have been linked directly or indirectly with personal ambitions and the craving for power by some specific key players.⁴ This was in fact the case in Dahomey (now Republic of Benin) in 1965. In other instances, officers have led coups to regain lost prestige or to pre-empt an impending purge. Coupled with this, interpersonal clashes have occurred between the civilian and military elites and thereby provoking takeovers. Cases in point have been Togo in 1963 and several others.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the results of military rule in West Africa have been very disappointing indeed. Besides being unable to solve the problems they set out to solve in the first place, military regimes in some cases have created situations that did not exist with civilian governments. Military rule has not necessarily been free of incompetence, corruption and maladministration that their civilian predecessors were alleged to have encouraged. Soldiers have been known to be more of wealth-seekers, property grabbers and bribe-takers. They have openly engaged themselves in self enrichment activities through the barrel of the gun and through intimidation. They have become better embezzlers than their forerunners.

Today, the coup d'etat phenomenon still looms over West Africa. The coup has not improved the West African economic conditions. The coup has not been a source for political stability. Rather than solve contemporary political and socio-economic problems, military coups d'etat in West Africa have tended to drive the sub-continent into even further suffering and turmoil. And then there is that aura of insecurity and uncertainty. When and where is the next one going to be? More so now than ever before, West African political systems remain unpredictable.

Ostracizing military regimes didn't automatically lead to any improvement in governance. Outlawing military coups is one thing, and scrutinizing civilian governments and making them respect their own constitutions and democratic principles is quite another. Many civilian governments that rose to power through 'democratic' elections have acted in a weird way, changing constitutions and introducing new laws that make it a lot harder to effect peaceful transfer of political power. In many instances it led to political crisis and anarchy. Probably this explains why the 2010 coup in Niger and the recent development in Mali didn't arouse bitter resentment against the Junta. The regional grouping, the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) did not outrightly condemn the coup, instead asked that the coup leaders act "quickly to restore civilian rule".

But one thing is certain. As long as there is economic and political instability military coups will continue to occur; and as long as military regimes exist, counter-coups will continue to occur. For it is a mistake to suppose that everything civilian or an elected government alone will save us from conflict and from the abuses of power to which it inevitably leads? West Africa is not completely out of the woods!

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