

# Coups, insurgency, and imperialism in Africa

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**West Africa is in the grip of a wave of coups, popular protests and fierce geopolitical struggles. Amy Niang argues that declining western hegemony in the region goes hand to hand with intensified competition for access and control of Africa's natural resources. Furthermore, Niang states, the Russian occupation of Ukraine compels us to look at the importance of the country's growing presence in Africa.**

Across the Sahel, young people are restless. So are soldiers. The region is in the grip of an unprecedented wave of coups d'état that have followed each other within a short period of time: within a year or so, five coups d'état have successively rocked Mali, Chad, Guinea, and Burkina Faso in widespread unrest that risks destabilizing the entire region again.

Since the mid-1990s, coups had become exceptional events that occurred mainly during moments of perceived chaos, with the aim to disrupt the normal constitutional dispensation in order to restore order. Increasingly however, they occur as a form of political intervention designed to correct regular politics that has fallen into a permanent state of crisis and repression.

This moment is a historical shift but also a harbinger of an uncharted future. Not only are the recent coups not contested, but they are also seen as an opening into a new politics of liberation. They could signal a return to a long period of tumult, equally they could also be an opening for a different kind of politics.

The ongoing instability lays bare the accumulated effects of decades of aggressive neoliberal reforms that have eroded the social fabric, the growing significance of a politicized, young generation of Africans that do not share the same political culture as their elders, and the massive failure of the war against terror in the Sahel that has produced neither security nor stability. It also points to some of the ways in which fierce geopolitical battles are likely to wreak havoc in the African continent as Western hegemonic influences declines in the region.

In this long-read for roape.net, I want to argue that the present dilemma has to be seen as an inflection point in both the democratization and decolonization process in West Africa and Africa more generally.

## **A democratic impasse**

One cannot fully make sense of the recent coups d'état in Africa without a full understanding of concomitant popular uprisings that have been occurring on a regular albeit sporadic manner in different parts of the continent. The common impulse, from Mali to Sudan, from Guinea to Burkina Faso is a desire for change, meaningful change.

The much celebrated constitutional order has been discredited in a context where constitutions are routinely violated, regulating mechanisms are often neutralized, and incumbent presidents consistently violate term-limits. For instance, Cote d'Ivoire's President Alassane Ouattara and Guinea's Alpha Condé both violated constitutionally locked term-limits to run for presidential

elections. As the Nigerian writer Jibrin Ibrahim [demonstrates](#), under the current nominal democracy, elected Presidents have also perpetrated coups of an electoral or constitutional nature. In Tunisia, the government of President Kaïs Saïed has taken a de facto authoritarian turn in July 2021. Through rule by decree, Saïed has tempered the constitutional and judicial structure and therefore neutralized any meaningful checks and balance.

In the 1990s, the demand for democratic opening was externally driven by development aid partners and Bretton Woods and other multilateral agencies. The democratic norm was being pushed through as African states were also being pressured to cut public expenditure in education, health and other social services. Yet the ongoing demand for democracy is internal in kind, it is a popular demand for a different kind of politics and a different kind of democratic participation and not a 'performance' on the basis of the [Mo Ibrahim index](#) or similar instruments.

Yet, overwhelming media attention of the military government's standoff with the 'international community' muddies an understanding of very urgent crises that will not be resolved by another round of elections. As long as fundamental problems of economic sovereignty, of the state's capacity to raise financial resources internally, to provide security and social services to its population are unresolved, rushing to elections will merely enable a change of guards to run the same derelict institutions. The democratic struggle is first and foremost a struggle for a political model that is responsive to people's demands for basic public goods.

Popular uprisings are also an indictment of the failure of formal civil societies organizations that have either become too institutionalized if they are not entirely coopted by governments. Their ability to fully perform their responsibility as safeguards of people's rights against state excesses has been hampered by an attachment to the [orthodoxy of electoral liberalism](#). A major shortcoming has been its inability to harness into a cogent political project strident current popular demands for an alternative political order. The greatest insecurity that plagues Sahelian communities is linked to food security, and to limited human development.

It is clear to many careful observers of West African politics that something fundamentally different has been simmering over the past few years. The disconnect between governments and people has become more pronounced in the prolonged context of insecurity since 2012. The coronavirus pandemic has furthermore eroded public trust in governments' ability to deliver public goods or foster greater democratic opening.

There is a question that lingers in everybody's mind: has the specter of coups and countercoups returned to African politics? More specifically, is West Africa about to fall back into a vicious pattern of coups and countercoups without any seeming logic or order? The fear of a domino effect is real, and one cannot rule out the possibility of another elected government falling under another coup.

### **Linking coups and popular protests**

The five most recent coups in Africa have been directly or indirectly prompted by popular protests of insurgent magnitude. This is significant.

Between April-August 2020, massive crowds gathered in Bamako and in major Malian cities to denounce endemic misrule, a series of corruption scandals involving specifically the purchase of military equipment amid insecurity across the country. The government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita had also been marred by the accusation of massive fraud in the legislative elections of March 2020. Mali's security situation had deteriorated drastically since 2015. The country fell into a state of chronic instability with burgeoning violence coming not only from jihadist forces, but also from government-backed militias and self-defense groups. Following months-long popular mobilization led

by the M5 RFP coalition – the 5 June Mouvement and the Rally of Patriotic Forces – crowds literally escorted the military to the presidential palace. These are the circumstances that saw the takeover of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) military council.

In Burkina Faso, days of uninterrupted public protest preceded the putsch last year. On 14 November, 2021, the country experienced the most brutal attack on security forces. Fifty-three gendarmes were killed in [Inata](#). The public later learned with dismay that the exhausted gendarmes had been without food and supplies for days and could not withstand the ambush. Inata eventually sealed the fate of the president Roch Kaboré. This wasn't the first recent coup in Burkina Faso. In 2014, months-long street protests culminated into the resignation of 27 year-reigning Blaise Compaoré. Compaoré fled to Cote d'Ivoire where the Ouattara government offered a [safe haven](#) against demands for his extradition to Burkina Faso to face justice in the trial on the murder of Thomas Sankara. The military transition that ensued enabled the organization of relatively free elections for the first time in post-independence Burkina Faso.

Although every coup is different and responds to specific circumstances, the same causes can be said to have produced similar effects in both Burkina and Mali. Further, there are embedded historical inequities within armies themselves that mirror existing and widespread social inequities. Coups today may no longer be anchored in revolutionary nationalist or Pan-Africanist politics but some of them, like in Burkina Faso, articulate certain popular demands for social justice and democratic renewal. In the [speeches](#) of Paul-Henri Damiba – the interim president and coup leader – Sankara stands as an avatar of an aborted military-driven radical experiment. Army cadets are also politicized in a way that engraves the role of the military in ongoing struggles to reimagine social contracts across Africa. The fact that officers are fighting an internal battle that is also about repositioning a professional military hints at an enduring backdrop to recurrent coups.

It is important to note that public 'demand' for the disciplining authority of the military has often been a trojan horse that allows the military to 'rise up to their responsibility' as a now familiar, almost scripted ritual announcement that every new coup makes it a point to deliver.

In both Burkina Faso and Mali, transition military governments have initiated country-wide consultations ('assises nationales') to collect a wide-range of views from political formations and civil society on constitutional reform. To what extent the military's move to act democratic-like is likely to lead to substantive change is a different question altogether. If the strategy is quite unprecedented for a military government, the reason for the shift is to be found in the growing importance of struggle on the ground – from popular forces from below.

In toppling civilian governments and 'installing' the military, protestors often aim to trigger a speedy change outside of the ballot box. Needless to say, this also heralds an uncertain future that gives no guarantee of success. Military coups are rarely transformative. Further, the military itself is a institution in its own terms that has its own logic of power accumulation. Obviously, if the military was the solution, neither Burkina Faso nor Mali would have gone through multiple coups. Mali has experienced five coups since independence while Burkina holds a record of seven coups with a total of 47-years ruled under various military governments. At any rate, the gains of popular movements hang on a fragile thread that is constantly threatened by the encroaching logic of external internal intervention especially in countries whose natural resources are highly coveted.

In 2019, [Algerian and Sudanese decades-long regimes](#) fell through popular pressure. Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Omar al-Bashir were deposed by public pressure. In contrast to Mali and Burkina Faso, Sudan has a robust, deep-rooted tradition of political activism led by well-organized leftist movements, especially student movements. Not only have the Sudanese "resistance committees" been able to force concessions from the military, they proactively forged ahead with a [political](#)

[charter](#) for transition presented on 27 February, 2022. The Charter for the Establishment of the People's Authority seeks to reverse decades-long military-led governance and restricted civic participation.

Two dilemmas are apparent in the trends mentioned above. On the one hand, it is nearly impossible to assess the extent to which popular protests express representative, legitimate, and uncoerced grievances. On another, to read military coups from a liberal institutional framework which demarcates the 'civilian' and the 'military' as distinct spheres of action has time and again proven reductive. Such thinking does not allow us to consider solutions outside of injunctions to restore the normal 'constitutional order'. Neither does it take into account the specificity of the formation of African military systems within a colonial context and their development in postcolonial states.

### **Contested regional leadership**

The default reaction of the West African bloc ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) to the recent coups has been to distribute sanctions on account of 'norms' uncritically enforced in a bureaucratic and uncreative approach. The coup policy of both the African Union's Lomé Declaration of 1999 and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ADC) is systematic sanctions against unconstitutional changes of government even when these are the outcome of compelling popular protests. However, the continental body has neither been consistent nor impartial in its approach. In Chad for instance, the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) determined that the country was under threat of destabilization from Libya and did not therefore enforce sanctions against the Transitional Military Council. Although the dislocation of Libya has had tremendous consequences in the subsequent destabilization of the Sahel, more specifically Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the AU security assessment is all the more surprising as Chad has been relatively unaffected by the Libyan civil war. However, Chad remains France and the West's staunchest ally in the Sahel in the fight against terrorism. For many observers, the AU [buried its legitimacy](#) in Chad by endorsing both a military coup and a dynastic takeover.

The AU is not the only discredited regional institution. ECOWAS has long been seen as a club of the malleable who speak with one tutored voice. Never before has ECOWAS been so disconnected from its populations. Having turned the other way over a series of constitutional coups which paved the way for military coups for instance in Guinea, ECOWAS has emerged as a discredited entity.

According to the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM), the West African bloc [violated its own statutory rules](#) in imposing sanctions that fall outside of its normative instruments, most specifically the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. Besides, the region's economies are already badly affected by the coronavirus pandemic and sanctions imposed on Mali have consequences for other ECOWAS members. For instance, Mali accounts for 20% of Senegal's trade volume; most export goods destined to Mali transit through the port in Dakar.

### **Waning Western tutelage**

One could almost speak of an anachronism between on the one hand the perception of post-colonial stagnation in which the Sahelian region is believed to be steeped and the way in which 'partnership' continues to be discussed as the framework of engagement that structures the Sahel's relations with the former colonial power France. France specifically appears like a stubborn guest that stays on when the party is over.

At the request of the government of Mali fearful that Jihadists were advancing towards Bamako, France launched Operation Serval which led a swift 'victory' in early 2013. The succeeding Operation Barkhane - a 5000 strong force that constitutes the backbone of French counter-terrorist

intervention in the Sahel, over the years fell into a predictable pattern. In other words, it became locked into its own narrow logic, merely responding to French understanding of its strategic security interests in the Sahel. Despite France announcing a drawdown of Barkhane, as a result of intense pressure in Mali itself, it categorically opposed Mali's seeking support from other governments to help it restore stability across the country.

The government of Assimi Goïta – who has been serving as interim president since May last year – has always shown suspicion regarding French ambivalence towards Tuareg's desire of autonomy. After all, the French army command enforced a de-facto partition of Mali by preventing the national army from access to the Tuareg rebellion stronghold in Kidal and used its hegemony as leverage against the Bamako government. There is another reason for the French to seek to institute a buffer zone in Northern Mali. Kidal is about 300 km from Arlit where French giant ORAN (former AREVA) exploits uranium yellowcake. There are also important uranium reserves to the south of Arlit in addition to strategic minerals, arable land and water. The maintenance of military forces in Northern Mali therefore becomes the condition for continuing to supply its nuclear plants.

Furthermore, the Taoudeni Basin – from Mauritania to Algeria and north Mali – is a much-coveted oil basin as the world moves towards a period of depletion of oil resources. Mali itself has large limestone, salt and gold deposits in addition to oil, iron ore and bauxite minerals that are largely unexploited. Given all this, France puts tremendous pressure on WAEMU (West African Economic and Monetary Union) leaders to apply sanctions on Mali. Further, taking advantage of the rotating presidency of the EU, the French President has been lobbying other EU members for support. On 19 January this year, at his inaugural speech as rotating President, Emmanuel Macron [declared](#) in no uncertain terms: "It is in Africa that global upheaval is partially being played out, and a part of the future of this [European] continent and its youth [...] and our future".

France is neither ready nor willing to deal with its former African colonies on equal footing. For a long time, it has relied upon clientelist relations to ensure sustained access to African minerals for an unfair price. The maintenance of compliant regimes was always the condition for unimpeded access and control.

The ongoing geopolitical struggle with Russia in fact comes down to this: the argument about delayed elections and democratic governance in reality masks strategic and security interests that France is keen to protect at any cost. Declining western hegemony in the region goes hand in hand with intensified competition for access and control over Africa's mineral and natural resources. Whereas the security crisis is real across Mali and the Sahel, the crisis that emerged out of disagreement over the presence of French troops and so-called Russian mercenaries has been engineered. Despite much noise about famed Wagner Group, there is little factual information about its presence or operations in Mali. Even so, there is nothing unusual about states using mercenary units for 'special operations'. One recalls that France itself developed the Foreign Legion – a traditional pathway for citizenship for individual adventurers hired to serve unorthodox French operations around the world, in Africa in particular.

The ongoing stand-off between the West and Russia over the occupation of Ukraine throws into stark relief the importance of Russia's growing presence in Africa. Russia supplies weapons and military equipment to 30 African countries. Russia is said to be [the largest supplier of weapons to Africa](#) of the past few years.

It would be a mistake to see in the thousands of young Africans occupying the streets of Bamako, Kayes and Ouahigouya or blocking French military convoys anarchic crowds that are neither rooted in a solid political culture nor hold a clear vision of what they are yearning for. It would equally be a mistake to see in the popular protests against French military presence in the Sahel as some kind of



reactionary resentment of the subaltern or a revanchist postcolonial fury. Underlying the protesters' outburst is a widespread pursuit of a sovereignty most imagine to have been lacking in their countries since the time of independence. Young people's demand for 'meaningful sovereignty' is explicitly framed against a postcolonial condition that maintains their countries under neocolonial control. Theirs is a struggle for a second independence.

## **A foundering war**

The Sahel was poised to become the new cauldron of the war on terrorism following the France and NATO-led armed intervention in Libya in 2011 and the latter's subsequent disintegration. The securitarian logic pursued by Sahelian states and intervention forces had two predictable consequences. Firstly, as armed groups and militias proliferated in response to perceived arbitrary injustice in relation to both the state and jihadist groups, the state could label any peripheral or dissenting group 'terrorist' and thus give itself license to kill legitimately. Secondly, the fabric of state-society relations has deteriorated in the process as the fight against terrorism came to trump all other economic and social objectives.

Counterterrorist policies have in the main reinforced the repressive capacities of Sahelian states. As many a [report](#) have shown, more civilians have died in the hands of Sahelian states and Operation Barkhane than they have under terrorist violence. Yet, the overwhelming majority of so-called militants in the various insurgent groups operating in the Sahel are Malians and Burkinabè nationals from villages and communities known to their neighbors. They need to be engaged through dialogue and concertation.

Dwindling resources under the accelerating effects of climate change have led to deteriorating standards of living and compounded conflicts amongst communities over access to scarce resources. The Sahel faces frequent droughts and food shortages. Embattled and impoverished populations are leaving villages and those that can afford it have fled further afield into neighboring countries if they are not risking their lives in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe. Further, at a time when Sahelian states have also become the enforcers of EU border policies, some youth are treated like trespassers and criminals in their own states.

In their unqualified commitment to the fight against 'terrorism', it would seem that Sahelian countries have delivered more insecurity than they have delivered jobs and economic security for their populations. Ordinary people are having a hard time understanding why after almost 10 years of intervention, a 13000 soldiers strong UN mission, a 5000 strong Barkhane force, including French-led European Takuba Task Force, and G5Sahel, the security situation has deteriorated rather than it has improved. The G5Sahel is a 2017 French initiative to coordinate the fight against Jihadist among five Sahelian countries - Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. It has been a dismal failure. A UN [report](#) explains the joint operation's slow progress and the absence of tangible security gains as the result of a narrow military outlook, divergent priorities amongst concerned countries and a fraught relation with civilians.

If Afghanistan is anything to go by, military intervention campaigns are rarely transformative enterprises.

Interventions have become ritualized forms of action in which external actors use the cover of 'peace' 'security' and 'order' to justify intervention by itself. It produces discursive tropes that validate militarization as a new-age normative crusade of human rights, democratization and liberation of economic activity. Since the 1990s, states have been reduced to enforcers of Bretton Woods injunctions to liberalize if they are not busy enforcing 'partner countries' security policies.

People may not understand the intricacy of decision-making processes that have led to the present fiasco, but they perceive the relative inefficiency of the billions of dollars that have been spent on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the Barkhane Operation – which [cost](#) around 1 billion euros per year – and other international forces while Sahelian armies remain underfunded, underequipped, lacking the technological resources to collect reliable intelligence. One recalls that the March 2012 coup and that of August 2020 were both prompted by widespread public dissatisfaction with the blatant inefficacy of the Malian army fighting the Tuareg rebels and Jihadists. The Malian army was then ill-equipped -and they still are – to fight the jihadists. The public perceives that something is fundamentally wrong. What is peacekeeping in a country that is in active conflict? Failing to impose peace, what is MINUSMA exactly doing in Mali?

### **A historical shift?**

We may just be at the cusp of a revolution of a new kind, one that first and foremost opposes different generations whose experience of, and outlook over the postcolonial present barely overlap. The generational shift affects both the political and the military elites.

There is in fact more to the recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso than meet the eye. It would be absurd to pose the problem in terms of a choice to be made between military regimes vs. liberal democracy. The coups themselves are not the ultimate objective. The military is called upon to break a deadlock, to upend the status quo as neutral arbiters. Some of the protestors in Burkina Faso made that much [clear](#) in stating their determination to occupy the streets again should the military government fail to deliver on promises. However, coups potentially provide an opening for a necessary debate on a serious social project, something that has not been a preoccupation of previous governments since the time of the revolutionary Thomas Sankara.

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