

# Unconstitutional power shifts in contemporary Africa: Causes, consequences, and the path forward

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper critically examines the resurgence of unconstitutional changes in government (UCG) in contemporary Africa, focusing on the underlying causes, consequences, and the African Union's (AU) responses to these developments. The study highlights the ongoing challenges of democratisation on the continent. The ideal of good governance, characterised by political legitimacy, responsive leadership, and accountability, remains largely unfulfilled. The paradoxical governance architecture in Africa has led to the emergence of authoritarian regimes, creating an environment ripe for military coups. The paper highlights that despite the AU's efforts to address these unconstitutional power shifts through sanctions and other measures, its responses have often been inconsistent and insufficient. The recent wave of military interventions since the 2000s illustrates the shortcomings of the AU's approach. The paper argues that while poor governance and legitimacy crises are key drivers of these coups, the AU's ineffective and sporadic responses further undermine the continent's prospects for achieving stable democracy and good governance in the 21st century. Employing an exploratory method and qualitative analysis of existing literature on coups and AU responses, the paper reveals that the AU's actions have varied from firm stances to passive and often unperceptive responses. To address this critical issue, the paper recommends that the AU adopt a more proactive and unified approach. It emphasizes the necessity for AU member states to present a cohesive front, reinforce democratic institutions, and implement robust measures to prevent the contagion of military coups, thus safeguarding the continent's path toward enduring democratic stability and good governance.

**Keywords:** Africa, coups d'état, democratization, militarism, unconstitutional change.

## INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of military coups in Africa, after a period of relative democratic stability, has become a topic of significant concern. Military interventions, which were once frequent in the decades following independence, appear to be re-emerging as a critical issue in the region. The recent military takeover in Gabon is the latest in a series of such events, occurring just a month after a similar coup in Niger (BBC News, 2023). These developments are part of a broader trend, with Burkina Faso witnessing two coups in 2022, alongside failed attempts in Guinea Bissau, The Gambia, and São Tomé and Príncipe. In 2021, there were six recorded coup attempts in Africa, with four successful (Al Jazeera, 2023). This increase in unconstitutional changes of government has drawn the attention of

continental bodies such as the African Union. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, expressed concern about the "resurgence of unconstitutional changes of government," in his speech at the Second AU Reflection Forum on Unconstitutional Changes of Government in Accra highlighting the growing instability in the region (AU, 2024).

The concept of a coup d'état can be understood as an illegal and overt attempt, often by the military or other civilian actors, to overthrow a sitting government. According to a comprehensive study conducted by Powell and Thyne (2011), Africa has experienced over 200 such attempts since the 1950s. Remarkably, about half of these attempts have been successful; underscoring the persistent vulnerability

of political systems on the continent. In recent years, there has been a global recognition of the decline in coups, both in Africa and worldwide. The *New African* magazine questioned this downward trend due to the limited cases on the continent (Ntomba, 2015). By September 2017, Africa had not experienced an attempted coup in two years and had gone nearly three years without a successful one, a milestone noted by Schiel *et al.* (as referenced in Powell *et al.*, 2021). Kamissa Camara, Mali's former Foreign Minister, even declared the end of the coup era after a coup that occurred before her tenure. This marked the longest period without a coup d'état in Africa since the decolonization era. Several factors have been suggested for this shift, including clearer political frameworks and the influence of external actors like the African Union (AU) and regional bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Even after Robert Mugabe's removal in Zimbabwe in November 2017, the general consensus was that coups had become a limited occurrence.

However, since August 2020, Africa has witnessed significant political upheaval, including successful coups in Chad, Guinea, and Mali, as well as attempted coups in Niger and Sudan, each with varying degrees of success. This resurgence has reignited debates about its underlying causes, potential correlations, and possible solutions. Central to this discussion is the role of regional organizations like the African Union and other regional economic communities in effectively addressing this issue. Since 1950, African nations have faced over 200 coup attempts, with more than 100 of them being successful (Powell *et al.*, 2022). This study seeks to examine the recent increase in military coups in Africa and to evaluate the effectiveness of the African Union (AU) and other regional institutions in protecting and promoting democratic governance according to established frameworks and policies. Therefore, the specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Analyze the root causes of military coups in Africa.
2. Assess the role of external actors in influencing political stability and governance crises in African countries.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of existing democratic institutions in Africa.
4. Explore the socioeconomic conditions that contribute to the resurgence of military coups across the continent.
5. Examine the impact of regional organizations, such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, in responding to unconstitutional government changes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Coups d'état

Coups d'état are often described as the actions taken by a small group to seize control over the state's machinery,

targeting key centres of government authority, decision-making, and administration before extending their influence over the entire state apparatus (Sharp, 2005). Typically executed by powerful elites, particularly high-ranking military officials, coups are justified by the perpetrators as a means to rescue the government from a rogue leader. However, the irony lies in the fact that these new leaders frequently prove to be just as ineffective as their predecessors. Ultimately, coups often represent little more than a transfer of power from one dictatorial regime to another, with the primary distinction being that the new leadership may consist of a coalition of "partial dictators" who share authority rather than a single individual holding absolute power.

### Democracy

Democracy is a system of governance in which citizens collectively exercise control over political affairs, often referred to as "rule by the people." Abraham Lincoln famously described it as "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." However, this definition, while memorable, lacks depth in addressing democracy's full scope. More broadly, democracy is a constitutional framework where citizens' rights, duties, and responsibilities are inclusively balanced with state authority. It fosters an environment for open dialogue, association, and participation in governance, ensuring the will of the people is reflected in decision-making processes. Given these qualities, democracy is seen as the most inclusive form of government, with global institutions such as the European Union (EU) requiring it as a precondition for membership. However, recent military coups in Africa are eroding these democratic gains, creating what is often termed a democratic deficit, as societal inequalities and governance failures challenge the stability of democratic institutions.

According to Ake (2003), an appropriate democratic model for Africa should have these key characteristics:

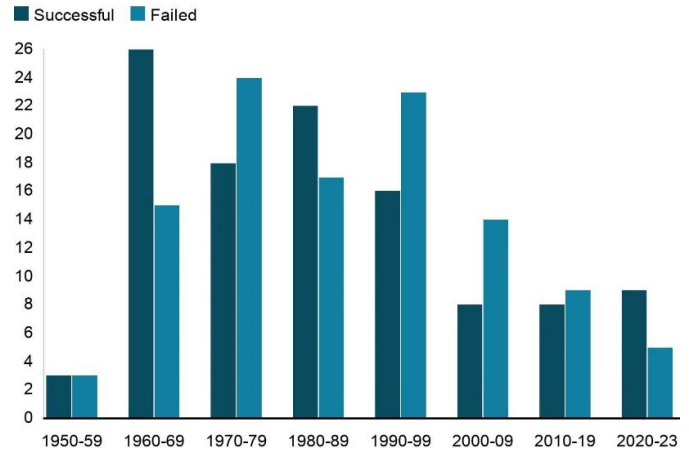
1. **Participatory Power:** A system where citizens have genuine decision-making authority that extends beyond just voting in elections. This means active involvement in governance processes.
2. **Substantive Social Democracy:** Rather than focusing solely on abstract political rights as in liberal democracy, this model emphasizes tangible political, social, and economic rights that impact people's daily lives.
3. **Balanced Rights Approach:** A democratic framework that gives equal importance to both collective (community) rights and individual rights, recognizing the significance of group identity in African contexts.
4. **Inclusive Governance:** A "democracy of incorporation" that ensures diverse groups are meaningfully integrated into the political process, promoting broad participation and representation.

## Military government

Military government refers to a political system in which the military exerts significant control over governance, often following a coup d'état or in situations of political instability. This form of governance typically arises when civilian authorities are deemed incapable of maintaining order or addressing pressing national issues, leading military leaders to assume power. According to scholars like Bratton and van de Walle (1997), military governments often justify their rule by claiming to restore stability and security in the face of perceived threats to national unity or public order. These regimes usually implement a range of measures aimed at consolidating power, including the suspension of constitutional rights, the imposition of martial law, and the suppression of political dissent. However, while military governments may initially bring a semblance of order, they often struggle to provide long-term solutions to the underlying political and social issues, leading to further instability and the potential for renewed civil conflict. Consequently, military rule is frequently characterized by a lack of democratic legitimacy and the erosion of civil liberties, as military leaders prioritize their authority over the principles of democratic governance.

## UNCONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT CHANGES IN AFRICA

The Africa Governance Report (2023) from the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) presents alarming statistics, revealing that between 2003 and 2022, the continent experienced 18 successful unconstitutional changes of government. This unsettling trend continued with the military coup in Niger in July 2023, marking the 19th such event, followed by Gabon's UCG in August 2023, which became the 20th. Gabon's coup was particularly significant, as it marked the 100th successful military coup in post-colonial Africa (1952-2023). These coups often set the stage for further instability, as seen in countries like Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Gabon, where one coup has often been followed by others. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report of July 14, 2023 titled "Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa," the recent surge in coups represents a staggering 229% increase compared to the previous two decades (UNDP, 2023). The report highlights that military coups not only destabilize constitutional rule but also entrench bad governance, erode human rights, and limit civic freedoms, ultimately creating an environment ripe for further coups. The AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, along with the AU Peace and Security Council, have expressed grave concern over this alarming resurgence of military coups. They recognize that these coups pose a significant threat to democracy, peace, security, and stability across the continent. After 2000, military interventions in Africa notably



**Figure 1.** Military coups in Africa over the decades (source: Research by Centre Florida and Kentucky Universities).

decreased, marking a period of relative political stability across the continent. However, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of coups. In 2020, only one coup occurred, in Mali. Yet, by 2021, the number of military interventions had significantly increased, with five countries—Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Niger experiencing coups. The trend continued into 2022, with five additional coup attempts, two of which successfully took place in Burkina Faso.

Sudan holds the record for the highest number of coups and attempted takeovers in Africa, with a total of 17, six of which were successful (Powell and Thyne, 2011). In 2019, long-time leader Omar al-Bashir was ousted after months of protests; ironically, Bashir had himself come to power through a military coup in 1989. Burkina Faso, located in West Africa, has experienced the most successful coups, with nine takeovers and one failed attempt. Nigeria, once notorious for military coups following its independence, experienced eight coups between January 1966 and the 1993 takeover by General Sani Abacha. However, since 1999, Nigeria's transfers of power have been conducted through democratic elections. Burundi's history is marked by 11 separate coups, largely driven by the tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi communities. Sierra Leone witnessed three coups between 1967 and 1968, another in 1971, and five more coup attempts between 1992 and 1997.

Ghana, too, has had its share of military coups, with eight occurring within two decades. The first coup took place in 1966, leading to the removal of Kwame Nkrumah, followed by an unsuccessful attempt by junior army officers the following year.

## Causes of resurgence of military coup in Africa

The resurgence of military coups in Africa can be traced to several interconnected factors, starting with democratic

backsliding across the continent. Like other parts of the world, Africa has witnessed a deterioration in democratic practices. The Ibrahim African Governance Index (2020) revealed that over the past decade, 41.9% of Africa's population has experienced declines in security and rule of law, participation, rights, and inclusion, despite progress in human development and economic opportunity. These democratic and governance declines are exacerbated by the strained relationship between governments and citizens, as seen in Guinea's 2021 coup, where public celebrations of the regime's downfall revealed the lack of legitimacy many African governments face. Contested elections also play a crucial role in the resurgence of coups. The weakened ability of elections to hold governments accountable, combined with the use of security forces to intimidate the opposition, has led to increasing rejections of electoral results, fostering an environment ripe for military intervention (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). This was evident in Guinea, where the public's reaction to the 2021 coup reflected dissatisfaction with the disputed 2020 election. Another factor is the concentration of power in the executive branch of government, which often undermines the checks and balances provided by other branches, leaving little room for opposition. When constitutional and political mechanisms like elections, impeachment, and recalls become ineffective or absent, coups become a more viable means for change, as the public and military perceive few alternatives for leadership transition.

Moreover, governance issues within the security sector contribute significantly to coup dynamics. Poor civil-military relations, a lack of professionalism within the military, and the politicization of the security sector create an environment where the military assumes the role of arbiter in politics, as seen in Sudan. In addition, repression of political freedoms and human rights violations further fuel public discontent and make it easier for the military, often collaborating with political elites, to exploit these grievances to justify a coup. Despite the growing public support for democracy and human rights, shrinking civic spaces and declining socio-economic conditions create a backdrop of frustration that can be easily manipulated by military forces seeking to seize power.

### **Resurgence of military coup in Africa**

The resurgence of military coups on the continents has created fresh debates about the ability of African states to sustain democracy. The resurgence of military coups in Africa can be attributed to a complex mix of governance crises that stem from the historical context of state formation and the dynamics of power relations between ruling elites and opposition forces (Falola, 2022). Furthermore, the role of external actors, such as Western powers or regional rivals, has also been significant in influencing the political stability of African countries. For

example, in Libya (2011), the intervention by NATO to topple Muammar Gaddafi contributed to the collapse of the state, leading to ongoing conflict and instability. Similarly, France's involvement in Mali (2013) through Operation Serval, while intended to counter Islamist insurgents, has been criticized for indirectly contributing to political instability and the subsequent coups in the country, including the one in 2020 (Al Jazeera, 2019). In Sudan (2019), external pressure from regional powers such as Egypt and the Gulf states also played a role in shaping the dynamics of the military takeover following the ousting of Omar al-Bashir. These instances highlight how external involvement can either support authoritarian regimes or aggravate opposition forces, further complicating internal political conflicts and making it harder for African nations to achieve long-term stability.

The recent surge in coups across Africa, a trend not seen in other regions, reflects a diminishing commitment from regional and international actors to uphold anti-coup norms. This decline is driven by several factors, including a regional democratic recession, a preference by regional bodies to negotiate compromises with coup leaders, reluctance to engage in military interventions, and the distraction of international actors due to internal crises and the pandemic, among other challenges. In many postcolonial African states, dictatorial tendencies have created an environment conducive to military intervention. This situation has been further exacerbated by the inability of leaders to address the socio-economic challenges facing their countries, leading to widespread discontent and instability.

Levan (2015) argues that the deep-seated political problems in Africa have contributed significantly to the continent's socio-economic difficulties. The AU Peace and Security Council (2022) further points to governance failures—such as corruption, greed, mismanagement of diversity and opportunities, marginalization, human rights violations, refusal to concede electoral defeat, and manipulation of constitutions—as key drivers of unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) in Africa. The Africa Governance Report (2023) similarly outlines various triggers, including the integrity of democratic elections, diversity management, constitutional violations, economic governance, and popular uprisings. The UNDP Report (2023) however breaks down the causes into structural, proximate, and trigger factors. Structural causes include political and military interference in governance, state fragility, and issues of legitimacy. Proximate causes focus on insecurity, poor government performance, democratic shortcomings, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and economic hardships.

In their quest for control, postcolonial African leaders often centralized power, leaving little room for inclusive governance, particularly in states with one-party systems. Even in countries that attempted multi-party systems, leaders frequently failed to respect opposition voices, leading to the emergence of authoritarian regimes charac-

terized by exclusionary politics and neo-patrimonial rule. Under these conditions, the military often positions itself as a 'game changer,' stepping in to overthrow governments, especially in countries where institutions are too weak to safeguard democracy. This has resulted in a cycle of coups that undermine democratic stability.

Decalo (1973) identifies several factors that trigger military takeovers, including the failure of elites to address economic challenges, high levels of corruption, governmental inefficiency, inter-elite rivalry, legitimacy crises, and threats to the military's interests. The coups in Mali, Guinea, and Sudan were shaped by distinct political, economic, and social factors, though they share common themes of governance failures, public dissatisfaction, and military involvement. In Mali, two coups occurred in 2020 and 2021, primarily driven by the government's inability to address the ongoing Islamist insurgency in the northern regions and widespread public protests against corruption and poor governance. The military, with a history of political intervention, took control, reflecting its significant role in the country's political instability. In Guinea, the 2021 coup was sparked by President Alpha Condé's attempt to extend his stay in power by changing the constitution to run for a third term. This move triggered widespread protests, as citizens were frustrated by economic inequality and the perceived abuse of power. The military, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, capitalized on the public's discontent and Condé's unpopularity, citing mismanagement and corruption as justifications for the takeover.

Sudan, with a history of military dominance, saw its 2021 coup as the military resisted fully handing over power to civilians after the 2019 ousting of Omar al-Bashir. The fragile power-sharing agreement between the military and civilians was marred by economic collapse, rising public frustration, and tensions within the transitional government. The military, fearing loss of control, staged the coup to reassert its dominance in the face of growing pressure for full civilian rule (Africa Governance Report 2023).

The recent wave of coups in Africa suggests a strong correlation between the institutionalization of democratic values and national stability. Countries plagued by illiberal regimes, where leaders manipulate constitutions to extend their rule, are particularly vulnerable to military coups. In contrast, nations that have successfully institutionalized democracy, such as Botswana and Cape Verde, have managed to avoid such disruptions. These countries demonstrate a commitment to regular, transparent elections and the peaceful transfer of power, setting them apart from those with a history of military interventions.

### **AU, RECs and ECOWAS**

The African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have played vital roles in promoting democracy and combating unconstitutional changes of government across Africa. The AU established a robust

framework against such changes, primarily through the Lomé Declaration (2000) and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007).

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG), was another significant step in the AU's efforts to build on the commitments made in its Constitutive Act. The Charter emphasizes the need for comprehensive and pragmatic support for political transitions, although it has been criticized for not fully addressing the phenomenon of mass uprisings. Article 23 of the ACDEG outlines specific instances of UCG, including:

1. Attempts to overthrow a democratically elected government through a coup d'état.
2. Intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government.
3. The overthrow of a government by armed dissidents or rebels.
4. The refusal of an incumbent government to cede power following a free and fair election.
5. Any alteration or modification of the constitution or legal instruments that undermines the democratic transfer of power (AU, 2007).

The AU has expressed concern over the manipulation of constitutional or legal frameworks in certain countries, such as Rwanda under Paul Kagame and Côte d'Ivoire under Alassane Ouattara, which are seen as violations of democratic principles. When coups or unconstitutional actions occur, the AU often responds by imposing sanctions and suspending the membership of the offending states, as seen in the cases of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. Additionally, the AU engages in mediation and peacekeeping efforts through its Peace and Security Council (PSC), deploying special envoys to resolve political crises and support transitions back to civilian rule.

RECs like the Southern African Development Community (SADC), East African Community (EAC), and Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) contribute to stabilizing democracy through regional integration, cooperation, and conflict resolution mechanisms. For instance, IGAD has played a key role in mediating conflicts in South Sudan and Somalia, promoting peace and stability in these regions. These organizations work to create environments that are conducive to democratic governance, which helps prevent the occurrence of unconstitutional changes in government.

ECOWAS, in particular, has been at the forefront of promoting democracy and addressing unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa. The ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001) mandates member states to adhere to democratic principles, respect the rule of law, and reject any unconstitutional government. ECOWAS has a history of using both military and diplomatic interventions to restore democracy, as demonstrated by the deployment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in conflicts in

Liberia, Sierra Leone, and The Gambia. In The Gambia, ECOWAS played a crucial role in ensuring a peaceful transfer of power after a disputed election in 2017. Additionally, ECOWAS, like the AU, imposes sanctions and suspends member states where unconstitutional changes occur, and engages in mediation efforts to facilitate peaceful transitions back to civilian rule, as seen in Mali and Guinea. Despite the adoption of several frameworks, the AU, along with international and regional organizations like the United Nations (UN) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has struggled to halt the recent wave of military coups in Africa. This situation raises critical questions: What factors are driving these coups, and how should the apparent public support for them be interpreted? Furthermore, why are UCGs seen as aberrations within African principles of democracy and governance?

One of the primary challenges lies in the inconsistent implementation of existing legal frameworks by the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and member states. While the current legal structure for addressing UCG is not without flaws, it is essential to recognize that no legal framework can be perfect. Rather than focusing on creating new legally binding instruments, attention should be directed towards enhancing the enforcement of the existing ones. In this context, two key measures are necessary.

The first measure is to develop a common understanding of UCG. The primary AU instruments addressing UCG include the Lomé Declaration of 2000, the Constitutive Act of the African Union, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, and the Malabo Protocol (Protocol on Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights). Over time, the definition of acts constituting UCG has expanded, with the most comprehensive definition found in Article 28(e) of the Malabo Protocol, which criminalizes UCG. However, there are two critical issues to consider. First, aside from the problem of mercenaries which is inadequately addressed by the outdated OAU Convention on the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa, the root causes of UCG are generally covered by existing treaties like the African Charter and the 1999 OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism. Second, despite its broad scope, the Malabo Protocol has not yet come into force because only 15 out of 55 AU member states have signed it, and even the African Charter has only been ratified by 36 of the 55 countries. This indicates an urgent need to reach a consensus on the nature and scope of UCG (OAU, 2000).

The second key issue is the need to develop a comprehensive strategy for enhancing the ratification and implementation of these instruments. The problem of UCG in Africa stems less from the absence of relevant legal instruments and more from their poor implementation. Additionally, UCG has become almost synonymous with coups d'état, despite the significant decline in the number

of coups over the past decade. Although the AU has made efforts to curb coups, it has not adequately addressed other root causes of UCG, such as the manipulation of constitutions to repeal presidential term limits, the rigging of electoral processes, and the refusal of incumbents to concede defeat. In many cases, the AU and RECs have either remained silent or colluded with incumbents by negotiating dubious power-sharing agreements that allow them to stay in power.

The Lomé Declaration established a clear prohibition against military coups, mandating sanctions against governments that seize power through such means. However, the recent surge in coups across Africa is alarming. A report by The Wall Street Journal highlights that the frequency of military coups has reached unprecedented levels since the end of the colonial era, particularly after the October 2021 coup in Sudan (Faucon *et al.*, 2021). While some analysts may downplay this trend, the year 2021 stands out as a stark departure from recent history, with The Economist (2021) noting that the number of coups that year exceeded the total from the previous five years combined.

The African Union's framework for UCG and its implementation faces significant challenges in light of this resurgence. Although the AU has been praised for its stance against military coups, it has also been criticized for its lack of engagement and slow response to unconstitutional power grabs. Historically, leaders often disregard the institutions that facilitated their rise to power, leading to a loss of public support and, ultimately, providing either a direct cause or superficial justification for their overthrow as they become more authoritarian. Another critical issue is the AU's tendency to mirror its predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), in its approach to coups and attempted coups. Consequently, governmental responses to coups often fail to address the root causes, potentially paving the way for future coup attempts (Krausa, 2020). Additionally, there is significant concern about the international community's lack of resolve in effectively addressing both the perpetrators of coups and the countries susceptible to such events, which could deter similar actions in the future. To address the resurgence of military coups in Africa in a sustainable manner, long-term solutions are essential, focusing on strengthening democratic institutions and promoting good governance. The erosion of democratic institutions, lack of transparency, and poor governance often provide fertile ground for military interventions. Therefore, building robust, independent democratic institutions is paramount. This involves ensuring that there are checks and balances between branches of government, strengthening the judiciary to be impartial and effective, and empowering electoral commissions to oversee free, fair, and transparent elections. When democratic institutions are strong and citizens trust these systems, the appeal of military takeovers diminishes significantly. Furthermore, promoting good governance practices through anti-

corruption measures, improved accountability, and equitable resource distribution is vital to reducing the socioeconomic frustrations that fuel coups. Finally, civic education initiatives and regional/international capacity-building efforts can strengthen democracy and prevent future instability across the continent.

### **Implications of the resurgence of the military coup in Africa**

The resurgence of military coups in Africa, especially in West Africa, presents a serious threat to peace, stability, and democratic governance across the continent. While coups have historically occurred in isolated instances, the recent wave in countries like Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), and Niger (2023) raises the concern that coups are becoming normalized as a means of resolving political grievances. This trend could have a "contagion effect," where the success of a coup in one region may inspire similar actions in neighbouring countries, further destabilizing the continent. According to Falola (2022), when a military coup takes place in one part of Africa, there is a likelihood that other countries facing similar governance challenges may follow suit. The risk of coups spreading is exacerbated when citizens in these regions openly support military interventions, as seen in Burkina Faso, Niger, and other West African countries.

The celebration of coups by the public in certain regions is particularly concerning, as it signals a deep disillusionment with democratic institutions that fail to deliver security, good governance, or economic development. This growing acceptance of military takeovers could encourage more militaries to seize power, believing that they will have the backing of the populace. Osariyekemwen and Osariyekemwen (2021) note the pattern of one coup inspiring another can be observed in cases like the Algerian and Sudanese coups of 2019 and the Malian coup of 2020, where juntas, emboldened by the success of coups in neighbouring nations, replicated similar actions in their own countries.

This cycle of coups not only undermines regional peace but also damages the prospects for long-term democratic consolidation in Africa. The formation of new alliances among juntas, as seen in the departure of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS in 2024, threatens to legitimize military takeovers and weaken the collective ability of regional organizations to respond effectively. Such moves could embolden military leaders elsewhere, creating a domino effect that destabilizes the broader African continent and sets back efforts toward democratic renewal.

### **Solutions to the resurgence of the military coup in Africa**

The resurgence of military coups in Africa reflects the urgent need to address deep-rooted governance and

socioeconomic challenges that have long destabilized the continent. Countries like Mali (2020), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022), and most recently Niger (2023) have experienced military takeovers, primarily driven by public disillusionment with weak governance, corruption, and growing insecurity. In many instances, citizens have supported coups, viewing them as alternatives to governments that fail to deliver on promises of economic development and security. However, despite initial popular support in some cases, there remains a clear preference for democratic governance, as demonstrated by a survey of 5000 citizens from countries that have recently experienced military coups by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The study was carried out to make sense of rising constitutional manipulation and the alarming uptick in military coups in Africa. The findings are captured in a flagship new report titled *Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa* highlighting the importance of addressing governance deficits and fulfilling the socioeconomic rights of citizens to prevent future coups. To counter the spread of unconstitutional changes of government, African regional organizations, particularly the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), must take stronger and more consistent action. Inconsistencies in responses, such as the lack of decisive action in Chad following the 2021 military takeover compared to the swift ECOWAS sanctions imposed on Mali, have undermined the credibility of these bodies. A more robust and unbiased approach is needed to deter potential coup leaders, including enhanced conflict prevention mechanisms, regional military cooperation, and the imposition of targeted sanctions. Furthermore, international actors, including the United Nations and the European Union, must coordinate with African regional organizations to support democratic transitions and apply diplomatic pressure where necessary.

Addressing the root causes of instability, such as corruption, poverty, and insecurity, is essential for long-term stability. In countries like Sudan, where political instability has been compounded by economic collapse and regional conflicts, the focus should be on strengthening democratic institutions, promoting inclusive governance, and professionalizing the military. International development partners, such as Belgium's recent Civic Space Initiative in the Sahel, emphasize the importance of supporting civil society and ensuring that aid is tailored to volatile political contexts. By addressing governance deficits, promoting socioeconomic development, and ensuring a strong regional and international response, African nations can mitigate the conditions that lead to military coups and foster long-term democratic stability.

### **CONCLUSION**

The resurgence of military coups in Africa, particularly in

the West African sub-region, highlights the deep-seated governance challenges that persist across the continent. The recent increase in unconstitutional changes of government (UCG) underscores the significant role that poor governance, escalating insecurity, socioeconomic frustration, and the failure to fulfil citizens' rights play in destabilizing nations and eroding democratic gains. The African Union (AU), despite its unique framework designed to address UCG, has struggled with inconsistent application and enforcement of its policies. The selective response to coups, as seen in Mauritania and Chad, weakens the AU's credibility and its ability to deter future power grabs. The failure to take decisive action against leaders, such as Mali's Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who sought to extend their rule through unconstitutional means, represents a missed opportunity to send a clear message against such actions. The recent wave of coups in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Guinea, and Gabon is a concerning step backwards for democratic governance on the continent. This trend highlights the urgent need for African nations, with support from global and regional partners, to address the root causes of instability by strengthening governance structures, enhancing security, and ensuring the protection of citizens' rights. Furthermore, strong regional and international cooperation is essential in tackling UCGs and reinforcing democratic principles. Through coordinated diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and technical support, both regional organizations like the AU and global powers can play a decisive role in promoting stability and democracy across the continent.

The current situation also presents an opportunity for the AU to re-evaluate its mechanisms for conflict prevention and to implement its UCG framework more consistently and effectively. For Africa to advance and solidify its position within the global community, the AU must adopt a more robust and proactive approach to safeguarding democracy, ensuring that governance is improved, and preventing further unconstitutional changes of government. Only through such measures, coupled with enhanced regional and international collaboration, can the continent achieve lasting stability and democratic consolidation.

### Recommendations

1. The international community, particularly major global powers and regional organizations like the African Union (AU), should recommit to a unified stance against coups. This can be achieved through coordinated diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions, and targeted interventions aimed at deterring potential coup leaders.
2. Regional bodies like the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should be empowered and resourced to act swiftly and decisively in response to coups. This could include establishing rapid response teams, enhancing conflict prevention mechanisms, and fostering closer military and security cooperation among member states to deter potential coup attempts.
3. The international community should prioritize supporting swift and sustainable transitions back to civilian rule when coups occur. This could involve providing technical assistance, monitoring, and financial support for democratic elections and holding coup leaders accountable for their actions.
4. African countries should ensure that economic reforms benefit the broader population, rather than a small elite, can mitigate the socioeconomic disparities that often lead to unrest and military takeovers.
5. Young people often drive political change. Investing in youth leadership programs and ensuring their inclusion in political processes can foster a new generation of democratic leaders less inclined to support military interventions in Africa.
6. Civil society organizations (CSOs) should be empowered to play an active role in holding governments accountable and advocating for democratic values. Encouraging civic participation can create pressure for reform and discourage authoritarian practices that lead to coups.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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