


P O L I C Y B R I E F

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The quest for democracy in Africa through the analysis of frequent military coups in West Africa: A case of Guinea-Bissau

Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights the causes of rising military coups in West Africa within the concept of democracy and governance protocols prescribed by the African Union (AU). The policy brief pays specific attention to the 2023 events in Guinea-Bissau, expected regional trends, and the likely impact on the citizen-centric consideration for governance. The pathways to policy responses from state actors, and makes recommendations for actions that can contribute to the regional policy environment.

Introduction

Since 2020, West Africa has seen a rise in military coups, prompting the focus on the causes of unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs), thus advancing the need to examine the frequent occurrences (see Figure 1), particularly the ground triggers, and the need to contextualise policy measures embedded in the concept of democracy. This is with the understating that as a principle, democracy is intended to give citizens the power to elect through a process that they deem appropriate for the political governance and management of national affairs.

These events as witnessed in Mali in 2020, and Chad, Niger, Sudan, and Burkina Faso in 2021, have not only led to the practice being termed an “African epidemic”; but also raised the question of whether democracy is failing in Africa on

the premise that there is growing support for governance interventions through UCGs or military takeovers in Africa. The quagmire is multi-fold: public support by citizens in public display of approval or excitement when coups occur, and society’s support for military control as a form of authority that resonates with the desired changes.¹ Secondly, weak democratic processes, failure to adhere to transition agreements, such as in the case of Mali. Thirdly, the ideals that failed nations in Francophone West Africa, for example deepening inequality, corrupt administrations, fragile ethnic and cultural accord, and social arrests and insecurity as a result of violent extremists making the region vulnerable to coups, as in the case of Mali, Chad, and Niger.² Lastly, the rise in military coups and government instability poses a threat to the harmonious socio-economic development (volatile inflation) of West African countries, Central Africa and subsequent instabilities in Africa as a whole.

As Mkandawire (2010) puts it, the expression of democracy is found in the electoral processes,³ thus the idea of democracy requires a system that is responsive to the desires of the citizens through mechanisms that will enable accountability.⁴ Coups d’état are in nature the antithesis of a democratic transition. Although these occurrences are greeted with a certain amount of popular celebration and acceptance, military governments are irreconcilable to de-

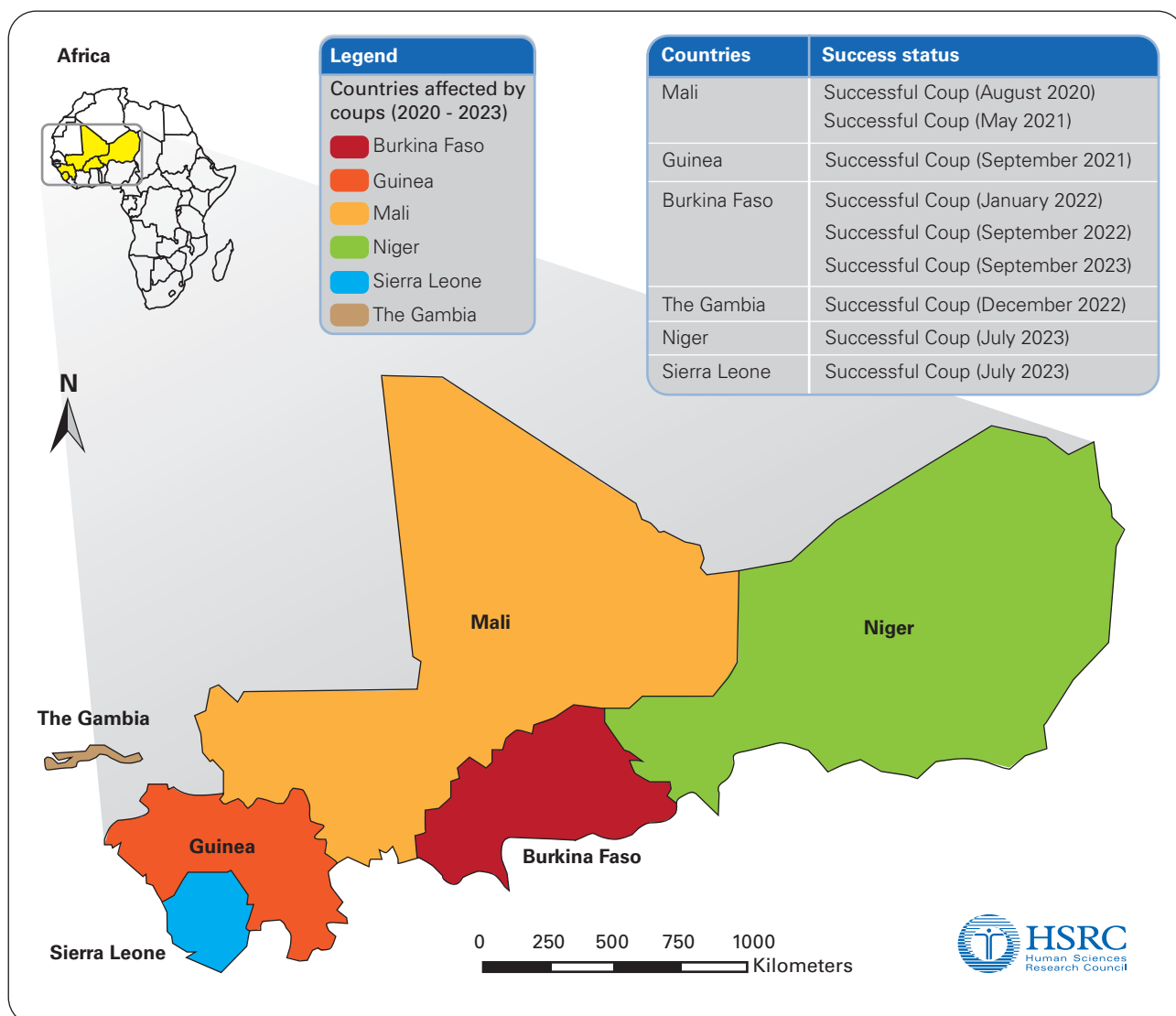
mocracy as a principle. Historically, coups were common in Africa during the Cold War. However, in recent years, coups seem to be returning, most notably in West Africa.

Coups are the irregular capture of the state's central executive by the regular armed forces or by the internal security forces through force.⁵ The act is usually carried out by a small group of existing state military, with the intent of replacing the deposed government with another body, either civil or military.⁶ The success of a coup d'état depends on their ability to establish dominance when the incumbent fails to prevent or resist their consideration of power. These takeovers are bloody by design and coercive – this is on the understanding that an entire nation is forced to surrender its choice and tenets of governance to a parochial and generally unqualified group of men who may have the objective of attaining power for self-aggrandisement, or because of shortcomings of the country's civilian regimes.⁷ As such, coups impede a country's attempts to achieve socioeconomic independence because most Western countries, and even

regional organisations, tend to withhold necessary financial assistance.

The post-independence political arena witnessed the first coup wave between the 1960s and 1970s, with the overthrow of post-independence liberation leaders whose political pose and ideological orientations opposed the interests of major colonial masters⁸. The coups were also manifestations of the leaders' failure to respond to citizens' economic and development expectations. As in their character, the coups accounted for the death of 12 African leaders, extra-judicial killings, and human rights violations. The second wave of coups erupted between 1990–2001, fostered largely by mid-level military officials in attribution to economic mismanagement, further underscoring theoretical perspectives leading to coups. As argued in the Peace and Security Council Report by the Institute of Security Studies 2023, the wave accounted for only 14% of leader deaths, further distinguished by a large decrease in the level of human rights violations as a result of coups.⁹

Figure 1. West African countries that have experienced coups d'état since 2020



Source: Human Sciences Research Council (reproduced through geospatial mapping)

In their manifestations, past coups have been theoretically interpreted from the following perspectives:

- Socio-economic development theory asserts that the occurrence of coups in politics declines with increased socioeconomic development levels.¹⁰ The theory further alludes to poverty and inadequate socio-economic development catalysing the occurrence of coups¹¹, with less developed countries witnessing military coups as opposed to those deemed developed.
- Political development theory, used synonymously with strong civilian rule, strong democratic values, and political intuitions, cites the presence of these indicators, which yield a high degree of fundamental freedom, rule of law, equity, and justice, thus limiting the prevalence of military coups.¹²
- Centrality of military theory, which alludes to weak civilian institutions, the centrality of the military to the state's claim on legitimate brutality, enabling it to use its dominance politically. The theory further asserts the double effect of creating a powerful military,¹³ as it can also be used by the elite to overthrow civilian governments.

As a result of democratic relapses linked to the exploitation of national constitutions for term extensions, rigged

electoral pronouncements, and an increase in anti-colonial views, these coups are percolating the frustration of citizens similar to the Arab Spring drivers. In Niger, motivations are centred on "the continuous deterioration of the security situation and deteriorating socio-economic policies,¹⁴ with those in Guinea slamming Alpha Conde for mismanagement, unscrupulousness, and governance deficiency.¹⁵ The wave has further underscored the role of multilateral bodies in responding to coups and the overall adherence of states to declarations and charters, such as the 2000 Lomé Declaration and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance.¹⁶

For instance, following a March 2020 Constitutional referendum saw Alpha Conde run for a third term, and the presidential elections in October 2020 characterised by violence, ultimately resulting in a coup.¹⁷ Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Authority and the African Union (AU) decided to suspend Guinea from all its operations and decision-making structures, further imposing sanctions, such as travel bans and asset freezes on coup leaders and their families.¹⁸ Additionally, with Mali experiencing a coup within a coup in May 2021, ECOWAS responded with economic and financial sanctions on the country with the closure of land and air borders.¹⁹



A case of Guinea-Bissau

The political context is a semi-presidential representative democratic republic, accompanied by a multi-party system. The president is the head of state, with the prime minister serving as the head of administration. As a result, executive power is employed by the administration. Concomitantly, Guinea-Bissau's party system has been dominated by the socialist African Independent Party of Guinea and Cape Verde and the Party for Social Renewal since 1994.²⁰ Despite the presence of a democratic constitutional framework, the military had a substantial exercise of power and repeated interference in civilian leadership subsequent to multi-party elections as launched in 1974.

Guinea-Bissau has witnessed substantial political and military disruptions, since attaining independence in 1974, with a military coup that established General João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira as president in 1980, suppressing political criticism and purging political rivals. Several coup attempts followed between 1980 and 1990, which failed to unseat him. Additionally, in 1999, a military mutiny and civil war resulted in Vieira's ouster. As such in February 2000, a provisional government turned over power to the leader of the opposition Kumba Yalá.²¹ However, the government was not exempted from a military coup, as in September 2003 a bloodless coup took place that led to Henrique Rosa being sworn in as president. This was followed by the re-election of former President Vieira in 2005, who promised to foster economic development and national reconciliation. However, this was short-lived as he was assassinated in March 2009. Furthermore, from the year of President Vieira's presidency, the country witnessed a military arrest in 2010²², a coup attempt in 2011,²³ a successful coup in 2012,²⁴ and the 2019 election disruption. The coups were with the same characteristics as those of other African countries between the second wave from 1990 to 2001.

Equally important, with elections held on 24 November 2019, Umaro Sissoco Embaló was declared winner of the elections. The declaration was followed by a dispute lodged by opponent Domingos Simões Pereira.²⁵ With no approval from the supreme court of Guinea-Bissau and the parliament for the official swearing-in ceremony, the president alternatively organised a swearing-in ceremony in a hotel in Bissau and declared himself a legally appointed president of Guinea-Bissau.²⁶ However, before taking office, Umaro Sissoco Embaló encountered in the eleventh hour a staff-off with parliament, making him the first president-elect without the support of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC).²⁷ The breakdown in his relations with the party can be traced back to when he was appointed prime minister in 2016 by President José Mário Vaz, taking the post while under a boycott from PAIGC, which cited him as a "principal factor in the country's political crisis".²⁸

Guinea-Bissau has been confronted with political predicaments since 2015, with election delays undermining democratic legitimacy. As asserted by the Freedom House Country Report, the first constitutional predicament surfaced President Embaló who organised his inauguration unconstitutionally.²⁹ Secondly, the pervasiveness of corruption in the country, including senior government officials, both military and civilian officials, accused of involvement in the illegal trade, continues to pose democratic challenges for the country. The lack of effective legal prescriptions that foster public access to government information, and government officials neglecting to publicly make known their financial information as required by law. Furthermore, the Freedom House adds the lack of transparency as a contributor to chronic budget shortfalls, frequent delays in public sector wages, and lack of trust in the management of foreign assistance, as some of the challenges facing the country. Journalists regularly face harassment and intimidation with pressure on the coverage of political figures and government officials, despite the country's efforts in making provision for freedom of the press and diversity in the media. For instance, the order by the government in 2022 for the closure of 79 radio stations as a result of non-payment of broadcast licensing fees, was further denounced as an attack on press freedom by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ).³⁰ Moreover, the existing description of the country as a "narco-state" by the United Nations,³¹ as attributed to the corruption of government officials, who in their dealings are bribed to disregard the illegal drug trade activities.³² An ongoing challenge that took the front burner in President Embaló's commitments, and saw what is known as the "Cocaine coup" of 2012 with army officers seizing the rule of the then government and the drug trade³³. These challenges, therefore, leave the country prone to the occurrence of coups, to be discussed below.

Guinea-Bissau experienced eight attempted coups before 2022, with one noticeable coup on 1 February 2022, which witnessed an attempted coup after a declaration by President Umaro Sissoco Embaló that the coup was over.³⁴ In a news interview, the president indicated that members of the security forces had been killed in a failed coup attempt, referring to it as a "failed attack against democracy".³⁵ This followed after a group of armed men surrounded the government palace, after beliefs that President Umaro Sissoco Embaló and Prime Minister Nuno Gomes Nabiam would be attending a cabinet meeting. The attack was unsuccessful as the presidential guards were able to escort the president to his official residency,³⁶ with the government announcing that the president would address the nations on what had transpired. It was, therefore, at this address that the president was able to assure citizens that the attacks had been repelled after attempts to enter the government palace. The president further suggested that the army was not in-



involved in the coup attempt. “I can assure you that no camp joined this attempted coup. It was isolated. It is linked to people we have fought against”, he said, without giving a detailed account of the statement. Yielding reactions from ECOWAS condemned the event and held the military responsible for failing to ensure the physical integrity of the president and the members of his government,³⁷ and the AU urged the military to return swiftly to its barracks to protect President Umaro Sissoco Embaló and members of his government.³⁸

Additionally, the country witnessed yet another coup on 14 September 2023, which came to be known as a bloodless military coup led by General Veríssimo Correia Seabra against the interim government of President Kumba Yalá. The coup was a response to the incapacity of the government to guarantee service delivery, coupled with a stagnant economy, political instability, and military dissatisfaction over unpaid salaries.³⁹ Following President Yalá’s public resignation as announced on 17 September 2023, an agreement was signed that prevented him from participating in politics for five years. This resulted in a civilian-led transitional government, led by businessman Henrique Rosa and PRS Secretary-General Artur Sanhá, being set up at the end of September.⁴⁰

Similarly, from 30 November to 01 December 2023 in Bissau, confrontations broke between government forces and the national guard units after the release of two ministers accused of unscrupulousness from detention, leading to the arrest of National Guard commander, Colonel Victor Tchongo.⁴¹ Described as an attempted coup, President Embaló ordered the dissolution of the country’s legislature calling on soldiers to be deployed at the headquarters of a state media outlet. Correspondingly, the order further instituted the replacement of the National Broadcasting of Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Bissau Television, who were believed to be disloyal to the assembly.⁴²

Domestically, the government stated through its spokesman, Francisco Muniro Conte, a “president who is elected must complete his term of office”. Internally, ECOWA issued a statement “strongly” condemning the violence and all attempts to discredit constitutional order and the rule of law in the country. The AU through its statement

condemned the violence, expressing concern over President Embaló’s decision to dissolve the National Assembly. Moreover, Stephane Dujarric, spokesperson for the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, called for calm and requested security forces “to continue refraining from interference in national politics”.

Recommendations

1. The government of Guinea-Bissau should through AU structures, such as African Governance Architecture (AGA), make use of all constitutional prescriptions to fight corruption and foster adherence to all legal provisions when the election of government officials is concerned. Citizens should be engaged through meaningful dialogue with practical steps committed to efforts that will yield or enable respect for the constitutional and human rights laws.
2. In the strengthening of its security forces, the government of Guinea-Bissau, should work on dismantling the presence of drug networks in the country, further vetting of the government officials, as a practical response to allegations of government officials being involved in the drug trade.
3. In the interest of civil liberties, as provided for in the constitution of the country, the country should create an enabling environment for journalists and the media in their report mandate, and relinquish all efforts that restrict media and reporting freedom in the country, to foster democratic values of freedom of speech and access to information.
4. Freedom of assembly should be encouraged at all times, within the country’s laws with no interference by authorities especially in peaceful demonstrations, with no repeat of what the country witnessed in 2021 with restrictions being prolonged for most of 2021, thus intercepting protesters from gathering during the time of high political tension.
5. The separation of the judiciary should be maintained to foster the rule of law, free from political pressure, and resources should be made available to improve the capacity and effectiveness of the court system.

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