



The African Union

Topic A: The Resurgence of Coups d'Etat

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The Resurgence of Coups d'Etat

Introduction

It is no state secret that many fledgling governments in Africa underwent drastic changes after the demise of the colonial era. After the major European colonial powers ceased to exercise absolute control over the governance of their African colonies, independent governments formed. They did not form, however, without difficulty.

A coup d'état is defined¹ as a “sudden and decisive action in politics, especially one resulting in a change of government illegally or by force.” Although often coups d'état, coups for short, often involve the use of the national military apparatus by the usurper(s) in order to gain control of the government, this is not an essential feature of the coup. Rather, it is simply common for a would-be usurper to gain control of a small but powerful segment of the government and leverage that to gain control over the remaining segments, thus rendering the legitimate leader powerless.

In recent years, the cycle of violent political upheaval in Africa has begun anew. According to the Center for Systemic Peace, since 2000 there have been ten attempted and six successful coups d'état in Africa since 2000.²

In recent years, coups d'etat--both attempted and successful--have resulted in widespread violence and public distrust of governmental structures. An additional concern, which should worry all African states, is the effect of coups d'etat on neighboring states. Although political upheaval may

¹ Dictionary.com . “Coup d'etat”. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/coup+d'etat> (accessed November 28, 2009).

² Center for Systemic Peace. “Conflict Trends in Africa”. <http://www.systemicpeace.org/africa/ACPPAnnex2b.pdf> (accessed November 29, 2009).



occur in one state, political parties and movements are not always contained to national boundaries but can become international movements with the potential to destabilize entire regions.

With the rise of regional and supranational bodies within Africa in recent years, increased instability in any one region proves to be a social, economic, and social threat to the rest of Africa. In order to prevent additional political upheaval, the African Union must be willing to impose effective sanctions and/or find equitable solutions to strengthen central governments while providing additional support at the regional and continental level.

Background

Coups have been a defining feature of recent African history; from 1964 to 2004, there have been 80 successful and 181 unsuccessful coups in Africa, with Latin America being the only region on Earth to have experienced more coups in that time³. Despite their often devastating effects on the socioeconomics of a country, coups have been continue to be used as a means of instituting political change.

In 1963, Togo's president, Sylvanus Olympio, was assassinated in what is considered Africa's first coup. During his reign, Olympio, the first democratically elected president in Togo, had dissolved all opposition parties. Nicolas Grunitzy was installed as president and reinstated a multiparty system in the country. He served until 1967 when he was himself ousted in a bloodless military coup by Eyadema Gnassingbe, who served as Togo's president until 2005.

In 1965, Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria's first democratically elected president, was disposed of in a bloodless coup led by Colonel Houari Boumediène. Bella had failed to build up sufficient

³ Ngoma, Naison. "Coups and Coup Attempts in Africa, is there a missing link?" *African Security Review*, 2004.



political support to counteract the strong military⁴. Many speculators believed that the coup was backed by the Soviet Union, as it occurred just ten days before the Afro-Asian Conference in Algiers, to which the Soviets had not been invited.

Just one year later in 1966, General Joseph Ankrah disposed of Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah, a pivotal leader of the anticolonial movement in Africa. The coup was considered disheartening and a major setback for the country. Nkrumah favored socialism and had developed close ties with the Eastern Bloc and other Communist regimes; his eventual fall from power can be attributed to capitalist influences from the West and Nkrumah's own autocratic tendencies. In a span of thirteen years, three additional coups took place in Ghana; many scholars contribute the instability in Ghana and the later coups to the original 1966 coup⁵. That same year, a bloodless coup in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) installed General Mobutu Sese Seko to power. Mobutu's rule left a legacy of fiscal mismanagement, and his Afro-centric policies had an end result of driving foreign investors out of the country.

Nigeria has long been plagued by coups. Elections in 1964 and 1965 were rife with claims of corruption and boycotts. In January 1966, leftists under the command of Major Emmanuel Ifeajuna led a military coup that ended in the death of Prime Minister Abubakar Balewa. However, the coup was unable to set up a centralized government and was able to keep Major-General Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi in power for only a few months until his assassination in a counter-coup that brought Yakubu Gowon into power. The coup was particularly bloody and targeted Ironsi's ethnic group⁶. Nearly

⁴ British Broadcasting Corporation. *1965: Students Protest after Algiers Coup*. June 2005, 20. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/20/newsid_2943000/2943388.stm.

⁵ Gebe, Boni. "Ghana's Foreign Policy at Independence and." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2008: 160-186.

⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation. *Nigeria: A history of coups*. February 15, 1999. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/special_report/1998/06/98/after_abacha/83449.stm.



three years of civil war followed, and Gowon's delay of elections precipitated another coup in 1975 that installed Brigadier Murtala Ramat Muhammed in power; he was assassinated a year later. A civil government was established in 1979, only for a military coup to oust the government in 1983. This regime, led by Major-General Muhammadu Buhari was deposed by a military coup in 1985.

In Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi, an army captain, led a military coup against King Idris I in 1969; his rule ushered in Libya's transition to an Islamist state. Two years later, General Idi Amin seized power by means of military coup in Uganda. His regime, however, was not recognized by Tanzania, Zambia, Kenya, or the Organization of African Unity (OAU), a precursor to the African Union. Qaddafi was a supporter of Amin, often providing military and financial aid. Amin's regime was characterized by corruption, human rights violations, and fiscal mismanagement.

Continuing the trend of coups in Africa, in 1980, Joao Bernado Vieira led a coup against the first government since Guinea-Bissau's independence from Portugal. Vieira eventually banned all opposition parties and faced three alleged coup plots. That same year, Liberia's president and OAU chairman William R. Tolbert was killed in a military coup by Sam Doe, an obscure military leader. Tolbert incited controversy when the price of rice increased. Doe's junta suspended the constitution and was noted for favoring the Krahn ethnic group, stirring ethnic tensions between the Krahns and other ethnic groups in the country. Doe continued to rule until the 1989 civil war.

An attempted coup in Kenya in 1982 led to the death of 145 people, many of whom were students at the University of Nairobi, and the loss of \$111 million⁷. A group of Kenyan Air Force

⁷ New York Times. *AROUND THE WORLD; 145 Were Killed In Kenyan Uprising*. August 1982, 11. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/08/11/world/around-the-world-145-were-killed-in-kenyan-uprising.html?n=Top%2fNews%2fWorld%2fCountries%20and%20Territories%2fKenya>.



members announced over Nairobi radio that the government was overthrown; the Kenyan government responded by disbanding the air force and held snap elections in 1983.

In Sudan, General Omar al-Bashir led a coup against Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi in 1989. The coup installed an Islamic government in Sudan, which was tightened its grip on power ever since; Sudan has not had a democratically elected government in more than two decades.

All of these coups took place soon after the countries in which they were held were able to gain independence from their respective colonial powers. While the coups can be attributed to growing pains, they often replaced democratic or socialist governments with military rule. Many countries, such as Ghana, faced devastating economic effects, disturbing their economic growth.

Current Status

In the past few years, some member countries of the African Union have become increasingly unstable, but only a few have fallen into complete disarray. The countries we are most concerned with, in relation to the issue of African coups d'état, are Guinea, Madagascar, and Mauritania. Some experts argue about whether calling Madagascar's recent political upheaval a coup d'état is correct, but for our purposes, it shall be deemed so.

The political history of Madagascar does not make the current political situation surprising. It was granted independence from France in 1960, after which it was known as the Republic of Madagascar. The most recent events, those between 2006 and 2009, are what concern us presently. A coup was attempted by General Andrianafidisoa (called "Fidy" in colloquial discussion) during the time leading up to the 2006 presidential election.



Andrianafidisoa was not ultimately successful in the alleged coup, but he later claimed that no such attempt was made, and that his intention was to rather draw the incumbent president's attention to the state of the country's armed forces. He was ultimately sent to jail, but his sentence was a mere four years.

More recent events in Madagascar have been called a coup by some opposition leaders, but by others the political designation for the 2009 political crisis is less certain. The coup was carried out in March 2009, in which Antananarivo mayor Andry Rajoelina led a group of military personnel against the presidential palace. He immediately set himself up inside the palace and declared himself president. The African Union called the episode an attempted coup d'état, but Rajoelina insisted that this was not the case.

Although Rajoelina announced that there would be official elections after his seizure of power, no such elections have occurred. The highest court of Madagascar has since declared his seizure of power legal, making elections superfluous. Rajoelina himself has called his ascension to power a "direct expression of democracy," but many in the international community have imposed sanctions upon the country.

The African Union itself has suspended Madagascar in response to recent events, and can call for the complete expulsion of the country if political order is not maintained or a constitutional government is not adopted. In addition to actions taken by the African Union, the United States and the European Union have spoken out publicly against the undemocratic transition of power in the country. The US has suspended all non-humanitarian foreign aid indefinitely.

Another country currently suspended from the African Union for political upheaval is Mauritania. The coup was carried out in August 2008, in response to the president's termination of



some military officials. President Sidi Abdallahi was taken from power by members of his own armed guard, and power was given to a newly created governing council by General Mohammad Abdul Aziz.

While those perpetrating the coup have in fact called for elections, none have come to fruition. Numerous international organizations and individual states have called for the reinstatement of the democratically elected government, but so far to no avail.

In addition to the African Union, the Arab League, of which Mauritania is a member, expressed serious concern about the validity of a non-elected government and has suspended judgment until a time the organization deems appropriate to support or condemn the new regime. The leadership of the European Union has called attention to the problems that the political instability has caused, not only for the home country but also for the political stability in the rest of West Africa.

The Guinean coup, in contrast to the previous instances, was not a seizure of power from a living ruler or head of state. When Guinean President Lansana Conte passed away in December 2008, the National Council for Democracy and Development seized control, claiming they were doing it to ease the nation's grief. Nonetheless, the peaceful coup still violated the principles of African legality. The African Union gave the country six months to return to a constitutionally viable form of government, and when no action was taken, the country was suspended from the African Union.

There is still hope for a peaceful transition, however. Most major international organizations remain optimistic that a peaceful and constitutional transition of power in Guinea is possible, and



have reserved sanctions until a time that they see the government is acting in a manner incompatible with democracy.

These instances are just a small segment of the acts of political violence against the social order that have occurred in African countries in the last decade, and continue to this day. It is advisable for primary research to come from current events, as situations may have changed drastically from the writing of this paper to the opening of debate on the topic.

Question to Consider

1. What are the root causes of coups d'etat?
2. Have coups been successful in creating stable nations? If yes, why?
3. What has the international response to various coups been?
4. Does the maintenance of stable government face unique challenges in Africa?
5. How do ethnic minorities create political movements within a country?
6. What sort of political history does your country have, and how does this affect their policies toward states undergoing political unrest?
7. What manner of penalties has been enacted against unstable countries in the past, and how successful have they been?

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2. The New York Times <www.nytimes.com>



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