

# West Africa's 'Comeback Coups': Tying the Democracy Cause Up with the Military Cause

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## *West Africa's Comeback Coups*

Four successful and two failed coups have taken place in West Africa between August 2020 and February 2022, resulting in three out of the region's fifteen countries, being militarily governed.<sup>1</sup> Colonel Assimi Goita led elite military members to topple Mali's transitional government in May 2021. This was Goita's second coup, as the transitional government was installed following his first coup in August 2020. Mali's coup was then followed by one in Guinea in September 2021, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouy, and subsequently in Burkina Faso in January 2022 by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba. The two failed coups occurred in Niger in March 2021 and Guinea Bissau in February 2022. Guinea Bissau's failed coup was attributed to disgruntled drug lords<sup>16</sup> who sought to destabilize the country. Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso's bloodless coups, Guinea Bissau's coup resulted in reported deaths.<sup>2</sup> The rising spate of coups raises fears that the region is returning to its infamous tag of Africa's coup-belt and that the spectre of future military takeovers is likely to become regular, with Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, and Togo likely to be the next victims, while Ghana and Nigeria look increasingly vulnerable.<sup>3, 4, 17</sup> Other suggestions think it may be "too early to tell whether these military takeovers are encouraging jihadists and the spread of terrorism" but that they "probably will."<sup>5</sup>

The military takeovers have been attributed to a variety of causes, including poor delivery on poverty and corruption, but also social justice on the part of elected leaders while others, as illustrated below, believe there is a growing illiberal foreign influence on democracy in the region:<sup>6 18</sup>

The regional weakening of both the West and international organizations is providing opportunities for alliances with China, Turkey, the Gulf States, and especially Russia.<sup>5</sup>

The regional bloc, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), has also been criticized for reluctantly enforcing regional protocols on good governance and democracy. Analysts hold ECOWAS accountable for idly watching as supposedly democratically elected leaders pivot and leverage undemocratic strategies to prolong their stay in power against the wishes of their people.<sup>7</sup> The bloc is alleged to have been mute as Guinea ousted President Alpha Condeh and Ivorian incumbent President Alassane Ouattara violated presidential term limits in 2020 to prolong his stay in power.<sup>5</sup> These accusations have been buttressed by mass protests against ECOWAS sanctions on coup leaders and

wild celebrations of the downfall of elected leaders.<sup>7 19</sup> The critical point, argued below, is that:

In countries like Guinea and Mali, leaders did not lose popularity because they established genuine democracies that failed ... Instead, presidents atrophied support because they undermined their own democratic credentials in a context of rising instability and — in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali — jihadist insurgencies.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Mali and Burkina Faso have seen swaths of their territories taken by extremist groups. Militant attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso increased by 70 percent, from 1,180 to 2,005 between 2020 and 2021.<sup>6, 18</sup> This increase has caused disruptions to the relationship between state and society and detached citizens in terrorist-occupied territories from identifying effectively with central governments. These analyses suggest massive deficits in democratic governance and global terrorism have merged at a point significant enough to bring back militaries into national politics. Their point is that ongoing democracy and security crises have combined to push militaries into assuming the position of a "savior" and unconstitutionally grabbing power to exhibit their might. These emergent debates, however, fall short of looking at these coups in terms of the pushback stemming from problematic civilian initiatives in West African militaries.<sup>8 9</sup>

## *Tying Up Democracy and Military Causes*

West African militaries have historically used mutinies to push back unwanted civilian initiatives viewed as disruptive to military discipline.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup> Civilian disruptions, Dwyer argues, foster a sense of injustice that gives rise to material grievances within the armed forces. These grievances lead to military disobedience and can be followed by uprisings within the armed forces.<sup>10</sup> However, instead of viewing military mutinies in terms of tactical acts, seeking to open a dialogue with military leadership and provide platforms "for soldiers to vocalize their expectations in an environment devoid of the intentional stifling of 'the voices of the junior members'", West Africa's elected elites often counter military dissent by dispensing patronage rewards to top-level military officers.<sup>10 11</sup> These include prime appointments and retirement packages to buy top-level military loyalty and lower the probability of a coup against them. In the process, however, they undermine senior-ranked officers' control over military discipline.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, some coup leaders were rapidly promoted prior to their coups. Burkina

Faso's Damiba was promoted on December 23, 2021, which many analysts viewed as an attempt by President Kabore to shore up support within the army: but only a month later, he was overthrown by Damiba.<sup>4</sup> This case appears to suggest that not all military officers may be enticed with patronage rewards.

The decline of intra-state (i.e., civil) and interstate wars in the region also increases deployments of militaries in non-traditional missions. These deployments often include internal peacekeeping missions in political disputes, missions often reserved for police officers. In most cases, junior officers are those deployed to such politically polarizing missions. The militarization of civilian affairs leads to popular outcry, which draws negative media reportage to military officers. Indeed, militaries, in general, are inherently reluctant to fully embrace non-traditional missions due to their potency to intensify divisions and foment mutinies within armed forces.<sup>10</sup>

The maiden speeches and the socio-demographic features of coup leaders show that recent coups are also linked to military dissent caused by restlessness within the armed forces.<sup>4</sup> The maiden speeches of Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso's juntas revealed a common trend of military disapproval of certain political decisions. The coup in Burkina Faso followed the killing of 49 military officers by terrorists in November 2021 and a mutiny against weeklong starvation of officers involved in direct combat against terrorists.<sup>5</sup> The military blamed Kabore's government for starving them of much-needed logistics. Mali's ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta imposed austerity measures and yet purchased a \$40-million presidential jet. This sparked controversies, including with the International Monetary Fund, which demanded an explanation because it had granted the government a credit facility of \$23 million.<sup>11 20</sup> Militaries, in particular, appear to loath corrupt dissipation of public resources. A 2019 survey of 742 African security sector professionals from 37 countries found that 46% reported that corruption was the most significant security challenge, given that it deprives soldiers of resources needed to perform professionally.<sup>4 14</sup>

The recent coup leaders also seem to be mostly junior officers. They bear lower-ranking lieutenants and colonels, compared to higher-ranking insignias of generals and brigadiers. Mamady Dombouya of Guinea, Assimi Goita of Mali, and Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba of Burkina Faso are forty-one, thirty-nine, and forty-one respectively, which seems to reveal a trend of dissent among younger junior officers. That the spate of military takeovers has links to military dissent is further explained by how senior military officers have been speedily retired by coup leaders, as illustrated below:

Citing the failure of the ousted civilian governments in Mali and Burkina Faso to defeat Islamist insurgents, the new military rulers want to reorganize their countries' security systems, retiring many of the old cohorts of senior officers.<sup>4</sup>

Coup leaders thus seem to hold senior officers accountable for watching on while elected leaders dissipate meager

national resources for personal aggrandizement. Guinea's Mamady described the leadership of the ousted president, Alpha Condeh, as inhumane as the "rape" of the nation: "we don't need to rape Guinea anymore, we just need to make love to her."<sup>15</sup> Although coup instigators often ill-treat the liquidated regime, Mamady's crude description calls into question the extent to which he personally observed errors in judgments on the part of Condeh. Condeh's response to public dissent over his authoritarian tendencies in the weeks prior to the coup involved the use of security agencies to further terrorize and jail political opponents and anti-government activists.<sup>7</sup> Mamady was also a security guard for Condeh's office and could have loathed how Condeh perceived and deployed security offices to terrorize civilians for demanding the fair distribution of national resources. Burkina Faso's ousted President Kabore similarly used security officers to arrest and detain protestors who marched against his poor handling of the activities of terrorist groups.

### Way Forward

The spate of military takeovers in West Africa may be underpinned by poor democratic leadership, but it has also repositioned the armies as the regulators of last resort.<sup>5</sup> Thus, future studies should re-examine how elected leaders perceive and treat the democratic subordination of militaries to civilians. The maiden speeches and background characteristics of coup leaders point to an apparent rise of military dissent. This suggests elected leaders have misconstrued their civilian control over military policy to mean subservient of military officers to them, resulting in deployment of their armies in missions that tend to polarise national barracks. This polarization underlines much of the restlessness that has instigated the region's 'comeback coups'. It is thus recommended that efforts to counter armed forces' predispositions to push their way into politics should first address tendencies of civil leaders to polarise national barracks and undermine military discipline.

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### ENDNOTES

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