

Resurgence of Military Coups in West Africa: Engaging the Interplay of External Interests, National Maladministration and Developmental Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the correlation between the resurgence of coup d'états that have rapidly swept through parts of West Africa, giving bent to external power plays, and the interplay of maladministration and development challenges that have ravaged the sub-region. Previously in the sub-region, coups were staged to protect, propagate, and strengthen Western interests; and Western-friendly regimes have flourished despite apparent internal discontents. However, recent coups had marked a difference: it attempted to stifle the strangulating hold of the West, providing a pathway for the Russians to establish real presence in a manner that alarms and threatens Western interests. This development creates severe implications for a sub-region that is utterly unprepared to fashion out a balancing act. The study uses the content analysis method since all the sources used – especially secondary sources – are in the public domain. The study finds that there is a connection between maladministration and recent coups, supported largely by the re-entrance of Russia as a power that confronts Western hegemonic dominance of the globe and has emboldened disenchanted politicians and military officers to attempt the dislodgement of elected governments deemed puppets of the West. More so, real and significant steps to build and develop their economies are currently being entertained by the military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, where the imperialistic hands of the French government have been removed in the economy and security landscapes. However, the study concludes by sounding a note of warning that if these coup leaders refuse to tackle structures that perpetuate maladministration and underdevelopment, they are likely to be booted out by another set of military officers, thereby creating endless platforms for external power plays.

Key Words: Maladministration, Coup d'état, African Leaders, Western Hegemony, Russia

INTRODUCTION

West Africa's search for stability and economic development has continued to totter decades after gaining independence. Due to the tenuousness of this independence, it is characterised by various degrees of political instability that either grow up leaders who have no business been in the circle of leadership, or a change of government that is secured through "the barrel of the gun."^{xlvii} This sad reality has created a process whereby maladministration and economic mismanagement are intertwined with overarching external players whose designs for the sub-region and its people have aided to entrench socio-economic and political instability.

Military coups have recently become somewhat endemic in West Africa in a manner reminiscent of the 1960s and 70s when Western powers used coups as instruments to remove intractable leaders who refused to do their biddings. What is ironic about these coups is that almost all of them have no endorsement from the West, mirroring a significant and qualitative departure from the practice of the old order. In fact, these coups kicked out Western-backed leaders from power, and the postures of the leaders of the coup apparently revealed where their support and inspiration emanated. So, instead of being pro-West, these coups are virulently anti-West, making Western leaders tout empty and sanctimonious sermons of maintaining the ideals of a democratic system in a sub-region they use and see only as their unfettered Natural Resources Camp.

Western leaders were shocked to see their interests severely injured, and could not make sense with the trend of events that threaten to end their decades-long strangulation of the sub-region. Military coups used to be the plaything of the West, where leaders who truly seek to develop their states were violently removed from power by renegades trained and sponsored by the West. The sub-region's foremost supranational institution Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), caged by the exploitative antics of the West and by internal contradictions is more confused about how to tackle what has becomes a pandemic of coups ravaging the sub-region, and its resort to Western powers, affirms the connection between military coups and maladministration in the sub-region.

The spread of coups has once again raised the issues of external intrusion, misgovernance, and maladministration that separate leaders from the people they claim to lead. It has equally returned the sub-region to the heyday of the Cold War, when the powers of the East and West competed for influence and control in almost all parts of the world – including West Africa. It also creates in the sub-region a scenario whereby military regimes are forced to meander through a maze of external power play and are

expected to change the socio-economic status quo of their states in order to maintain their hold on power.

Therefore, this study draws a link between the resurgence of coups and the sub-region's well-noted struggles with maladministration and economic underdevelopment. It however, wonders if these coups and the juntas that have emerged will not be reduced to a flash in a pan, reminiscing the sub-region's experience where coups produced little change and become a "change that changes nothing".

Military Coups and Governance in West Africa

Africa is a hotbed for the forceful dislodgement of democratically elected governments referred to in literatures as coup d'états. The history of coups in the sub-region could be attributed to the history of democracy and self-rule, whereby the gale of coups spread from one part of the sub-region to the other, having obvious trail of Western endorsement and support. The secret agencies of the western governments had busy days in the 1960s and 1970s plotting which government to overthrow in Africa and which government to spare, all in the service of their national interests.

The overthrow of President Patrice Lumumba of Congo opened the gale of coups that swept across the continent like a hurricane, reaching every part, and tumbling every government interested in providing good governance to its people. The depths of political instability that followed political independence and its concomitant effects have led to the jettisoning of post-colonial theory as an irrelevant standpoint that failed to capture the true picture of occurrence after the demise of colonial rule – in what has been classified into three waves.^{xlvi}

The western African sub-region had its share of the political upheavals that convulsed states and rendered the delivery of good governance difficult through the machinations of the west and dutifully executed by hirelings desirous to replace leaders that were depicted as albatross to western design to perpetuate the sub-region as a huge Natural Resources Camp. Togo was hit in 1963, Nigeria in 1960, Ghana in 1967, Sierra Leone in 1967, Mauritania in 1978, Niger in 1974, Burkina Faso in 1980, Guinea Bissau in 1980, Liberia in 1985,^{xlvi} and other violent disruptions of democratically elected governments that became a sort of tradition were copied by other states that were not initially infested.

What is apparent is that military coups must not be discussed in disconnection with the system of government prevalent in the sub-region, even while acknowledging the leprous hands of the West that constantly seek unfettered access to cheap natural resources. West African leaders became amenable to the machination of the West and were ready to execute it despite internal oppositions. The endemic nature of coup d'état was seen in its reoccurrence, with one military group aspiring to remove the ruling junta, citing similar grievances that the junta had used to remove elected leaders. In other words, it is a case of endless relay of maladministration and tiresome buck-passing.

Western scholars like Ruth First have written extensively on the causes of coups in West Africa, and why it is likely reoccurring and happening in states that have not experienced it.^{xlvi} However, their writings tend to concentrate on factors such as socioeconomic nature of Africa and the appalling role of the political leadership but had little contribution on the role of Western powers that, on many occasions lure, support, and sponsor disgruntle politicians and military officers to instigate coups that remove popular and unpopular leaders from power. The Westerners, while scheming how to control the resources in West Africa, had no business preaching democratic values that crucial in voting out leaders who failed to fulfill their electoral promises as it is done in the West.

Preaching democracy to disenchanted Africans desirous of change would be counterproductive to Europeans whose presence on the continent is tailored towards having unqualified access to the abundance of natural resources in Africa. Yet, western scholars ignore the complicities of their governments and unjustly blame Africans for something that they were merely co-opted into, and but which remains highly detrimental to their interests.

By and large, the burden and consequence of military coups lie on the leaders and peoples of the sub-region. It has to be seen if the current waves of coup d'état in the sub-region would instigate real and sincere attempts to usher in socio-economic development in a way never seen before, and which must cast the sub-region as a serious contributor to world development.

Maladministration as a Consequence of Coup d'état

The inability to properly manage the economy, improve the people's welfare, put to an end corrupt practices, eschew ethnicity, and remove the intruding influence of the West, contributed significantly to create an atmosphere where some sections of the military became convinced that only coercive means would salvage the drowning ship of the nation.

As a result of ineffective leadership, the sub-region has one of the worst human development indexes (HDI) despite the presence of different natural resources. The 1997 poverty figure for West Africa is 42% varying from 71.3% in Mali to 17.7% in Cote d'Ivoire. Using HDI therefore, the standard of living of ECOWAS citizens intended to be raised by the regional body has not been raised.^{xlvi} The trend of poverty and want has not changed nor improved, since government policies continue to falter, plunging people into deep states of depression and economic hardships even when the region is blessed with numerous mineral resources that are in great need in developed world.

The abundance and exploitation of natural minerals has not improved the welfare of the people who for decades have been wallowing in abject poverty and disillusion on account of the sheer mismanagement of these resources by their leaders, who rely on the support gotten from abroad. The exploitation of these minerals by western firms and their

governments has stoked fundamental tensions and bred profound socioeconomic dislocations that alienate the society from the crop of people leading it.^{xlvi}

Insecurity has become almost a pandemic in the sub-region, and especially in the Sahel, where terrorists groups surprisingly operate side-by-side with multimillion dollar western military bases established to purportedly fight terrorism.^{xlvi} It is however jarring how terrorists could function very close to these bases and yet nothing is done to eliminate them. This disjunction chimes with the positions of the Niger military in the wake of the coup, that on discovery terrorist operation, messages must be relayed to the French government whose holds the decision on whether to strike or not. This means that the Nigerien military is impotent to fight terrorism as a sovereign state on its own soil, unless it secures the express approval of France, the imperial hegemon that controls substantial parts of the Sahel.

Western influence has traditionally provided cover and support for leaders to freely govern their states without recourse to the feelings of their people. All what the leaders think and work for is how they are viewed in western capitals, and not about the ratings of their people who elected them into offices. This disposition has produced tyrannical, despotic, and incompetent leaders whose only credential of being in power is their sustenance from their western backers that are ready to crush genuine oppositions that are aimed at seeking new alternative, or removing them from power.^{xlvi}

More so, the influences of international organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in the economic affairs of the sub-region have aided the increase of the misery and plight of the people.^{xlvi} These institutions were created to manage the affairs of Europe after the Second World War, and have not really deem it appropriate to include other people's of the world, especially West Africa, in its various intervention packages it claims are in the interests of the people and their governments. Therefore, these institutions are viewed with great disdain and contempt by the people of West Africa for giving out loans with stringent conditions that have adverse effects on the economy of the people, and because attempt by the Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF and World Bank) to impose Washington Consensus on divergent and unrelated economies have unleashed severe strains and disconnected on the people.^{xlvi}

The challenge to the United States' hegemonic control of the world is predicated on Russia's willingness through the formation BRICS – Brazil, Russia, Iran, China, and South Africa – to curtail all known sources of power and influence used by the western world to dominate and control the world, including the American dollar, ownership of strategic natural minerals in the developing states, and the control of states who sheepishly conform to the dictates of the West, even when it is counterproductive to their states – and it has had great impacts on states in the sub-region.^{xlvi} It appears as if a veil has been forcefully removed and people began to ask questions that are not inconceivable in the previous decades when the influence of Russia was not yet extended to Africa, and the

West enjoyed *carte blanche* to operate freely and independently, putting and removing leaders at will without any form of credible challenge or opposition. The game seems to have changed, and a new sheriff, Russia, has intruded onto the scene of West African politics and a lot of unprecedented incidences are beginning to occur.

The role of Russia as a resurgent actor in global politics has helped spread the outbreak of coups in the continent. Russia has successfully casts itself as a suitable alternative to the traditional partners of states in the sub-region, and many militaries are eager to throw off the wobbling elected governments and establish relations in a manner that reveals Russia's guidance and direction. States that successfully overthrew western-backed elected governments readily sort the protection of Russia as a bulwark against the well-coordinated and well-oiled diplomatic and clandestine influence of the West.^{xlvii} Russia's appearance and ties tends to sound a note of warning to Western powers that this piece of territory has been "effectively retaken" in a process that is truly reminiscence of the Berlin Conference.

Russia's openly expressed desire to challenge the West and destroy their power bases all over the world, coupled with inherent misrule in the West African sub-region, offers great attractions to military higher-ups who feel their government isn't doing enough to develop the society, or that the influence and control of the West is inimical to socioeconomic and political developments of their states. The recently increased waves of cooperation between the military leaders of Chad, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso with Russia, and the kicking out of western military bases and the ending of military cooperation agreements signed decades ago, show the impact of Russia on coup d'états in West Africa, and the weakening influence of the West as the traditional partner of the sub-region.

Will the Recent Coup Put an End to Maladministration in the Sub-region?

One of the fault lines of Western powers in Africa is the tendency to overlook and pretend to support democratic tenets in states where their puppets serve and protect their interests, and have the protection to commit unspeakable atrocities in the name of governance. It is for this that maladministration has assumed a deathly proportion which threatens to convulse the states and its people, while the leaders are routinely serenaded in Western media as bastion of democracy.

The recently successful coups in the sub-region will certainly test the ability of the paradigm shift to see if it is going to be business as usual after few years of tough-talking display. The practice of Russia not to intervene in the political process of a partner state might erode whatever progress that has been achieved and create a western-like hegemony that only seeks it benefits against the interests of the state and its people. However, the ideological postures of these juntas, their desire to develop their states by removing Western unfair and unjust system of trade that hinders real economic

development is a soothing pointer that, after all, it is possible to start afresh after many decades of groping in the dark.

If the tempo witnessed in states such as Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso is institutionalised, it may well stimulate a practice whereby African states would begin to truly own and manage their natural resources, which in turn would engender development through limiting the influence of the West to interfere and distort processes of development that don't serve their interests.

It is possible for these coups to address the age-long challenges of maladministration in the sub-region. However, it has to go beyond what Russia has to offer, because Russia, just like the pretentious West, is not a good example of democratic state. However, it portrays great limitations for one to argue that development can only thrive under the banner of democracy. For instance, Apartheid South Africa made great progress when majority of black South Africans were brutally suppressed and crushed. Nevertheless, Africans need to leverage on Russia's newfound mission and use it to develop their society.

It is necessary to state that the elongation of military rule in Burkina Faso for five years must be viewed only in its pragmatic value, just like Lee Kuan Yew's thirty-eight years reign is only remembered for the giant strides Yew initiated that made Singapore become one of the most prosperous states in Southeast Asia. Socioeconomic development must not always follow a well-known pattern and the notion that only democracy can usher in development is an illusion created by the West. What is required is that, Africans must stand up and take charge of their states and devise a future where they will be at the driving seat.

Conclusion

The outbreaks of coups have once again put West Africa on the spotlight and have jolted people and friends of the sub-region. It aptly reminisces the period after gaining independence when socio-economic challenges were not truly the motivating factors that undergirded the repeated removal of democratically elected leaders from power. However, as recent coups in West Africa were staged, the traditional leeches of the sub-region also displayed consternation through options examined in the wake of the coups, which included threatening to invade militarily to restore their darling puppets in power, all in the name of protecting democracy. For instance, the last-minute scamper by the United States to save its military bases from being dislodged in Niger Republic removed all pretences about the United States' well-publicised support for democracy or the fight against terrorists in the sub-region.

Western media, in their usual narrow-minded reporting of events in Africa, focused on external factors instead of examining socioeconomic and political dynamics of each state. No mention was made of the perennial maladministration of the sub-region by elected

leaders who are disconnected completely from their society, and only worry about their image in Western capitals. The correlations between the coups of yesteryears and maladministration were reinforced only to the point economic underdevelopment and irresponsible leadership received Western endorsement and support.

The reemergence of Russia as a substitute of West gave impetus to disillusion figures in West Africa who successfully removed constituted authorities through violent means, and subsequently instituted Russia-friendly policies. However, the elephant remains in the room, and Russia's support alone would be inadequate of ending maladministration and economic underdevelopment if these leaders refuse to honestly and patriotically develop their states and make them truly independent – thereby significantly benefitting from global power plays.