Democracy's Discontent and the Resurgence of Military Coups in Africa

Jude ODIGBO[1]
Kingsley Chukwudubem EZEKWELU[2]
Remi Chukwudi OKEKE[3]

Abstract

Post-colonial Africa is fraught with myriads of endogenous and exogenous challenges. This paper argues that decades of deplorable democratic experience in Africa have rather reincarnated some sorts of discontents and rebellious confrontation in some states in Africa. This is exemplified in the recent military coups in Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso and the failed coups in Guinea Bissau and Gambia. The study utilizes documentary methods of data collection and adopts frustration-aggression theory in explaining the contradictions that appeared to have stultified democracy in Africa which apparently have denied the people the corresponding gains embedded in democratic practice. It concludes that ending the resurgence of military coups in Africa demands urgent steps to enthrone good governance in Africa's democratic states. The paper recommends the institutionalization of governance in lieu of the prevailing personalization of state institutions in Africa.

Keywords: Democracy, Democracy's Discontent, Military, Coups in Africa

Introduction

Africa appears to have witnessed four remarkable political epochs. These are the traditional African Society, the era of colonial incursion, the period of decolonization and the contemporary African State system. These periods are remarkable and have distinctive

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[1] **Dr Odigbo** lectures in the Department of Political Science, Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus

[2] **Dr. Ezekwelu** lectures in the Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka-Nigeria

[3] **Dr. Okeke** lectures in the Department of Public Administration, Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus

characteristics especially in terms of pattern by which the society is governed. The traditional African society was organized based on family system, clans, emirates, kingships and kingdoms. The traditional system was predominantly ruled by kings and emperors, with many of these societies imbibed greater sense of communality. The colonial incursion in 18th century and subsequent effective occupation arising from the Berlin conference of 1885 virtually withered away the existing forms of governance in Africa. In fact, Ekeh (1975) argued that the establishment of colonial rule led to the emergence of two publics (moral and amoral publics) in Africa. Colonialism therefore eroded the existing traditionalism that was enshrined in pristine Africa's pattern of governance.

The devastating impacts of the World War II in Europe between 1939 and 1945 compelled the colonialists to subscribe to the idea of decolonization. In this regard, relinquishing the external territories enabled the Europeans to concentrate on rebuilding the European cities destroyed during the war. Decolonization marked the end of the third era leading to the emergence of the contemporary African State. As a result, between the 1950s and 1960s, many States in Africa gained independence. Indeed, independence enabled the new states to chart a new course for nation-building. In this regard, visionary leadership remained essential. This was critical towards the quest to change the narrative of colonial history and provide the needed leadership that would arouse and stimulate African nationalism.

Incidentally, the floundering conditions arising from poor governance, mismanagement, socio-economic and political instability and corruption that precipitated leadership deficit in many of the newly independent states in Africa paved the way for military incursions in many African states. In fact, many of the new states in Africa experienced military coups and counter coups within the first five years of their independence. By the 1980s, military despots had successfully established themselves as alternatives to the undesirable leadership deficit confronting the African region of the world. Siegle (2021) explained that between 1960 and 2000 Africa had experienced devastating eighty-two (82) military coups. For him, these coups contributed to the recurring instability, corruption, human rights abuses, impunity, and poverty that characterized many African countries during that era.

The third wave of democratization in the 1990s orchestrated the debacle of authoritarianism and the enthronement of democracy in many states in Africa. In spite of the growth and spread of democracy in Africa, especially in the last three decades, irregular military coups have continued to threaten the sustenance and consolidation of democracy in some African states. As can be seen, the spate of military coups in Africa threatens peace, stability and sustainable growth. Between 2000 and 2023, over eleven (11) military coups have occurred in Africa. In 2022 alone, there were four attempted and successful military coups in Mali, Burkina-Faso and Guinea-Bissau. The majority of the recent coups occurred in the West African sub-region. For instance, Mali alone has recorded three coups in just more than a decade. This means that nearly 20 percent of African countries have succumbed to coups since 2013 (Siegle, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the era of internationally anti-coup norm that criminalized military coup is still far from discouraging, dissuading and eliminating military juntas in Africa. The coups in Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso and the failed coups in Guinea Bissau and Gambia indicate that many African states are still in the threshold of relapsing into military autocracy if urgent steps are not taken to deepen democracy in the region. It is against this backdrop that this study examines democracy's discontents to determine the extent it has contributed to the resurgence of military coups in Africa.

Theoretical Context

The prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of the African continent appear grossly deplorable. As a result, mammoth theoretical positions explaining states' or continental inabilities can be appropriately used in dissecting the maladies of democracy in Africa. Among these theories is the elite theory. Essentially, elite theory as propounded by Vilfredo Pareto, Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Jose Ortega Gassat among others, is predicated on the conjecture that every society is composed of two classes of people (Varma, 1975). While the theorists were not oblivious of the complementary role of each of these classes, they focused more on the ruling elites because of the role they play in determining the fate of the rest in virtually every society. For instance, the master minders of military coups in Africa are not the proletariats. In Africa, virtually all military coups are plotted and executed by the military oligarchs or elites in the ranks and file of the military. Coups therefore promote and protect the narrow interest of the elites.

On the other hand, conspiracy theory illuminates the horrible degree of connivance between domestic elements and disgruntled foreign governments. Africa, in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed a huge number of coups with many of these coups alleged to have been instigated and executed by loyalists of foreign regimes. In this view, conspiracy theory therefore can be seen from the perspective of historical incidences secretly orchestrated or caused by a few numbers of people generally referred to as the conspirators (Keeley, 1999). Conspirators could be few persons, few groups or few nations secretly act for the interest of the members. Indeed, conspiracy theory strives in collusion, connivance and concealing of the activities of the group. These attributes are the hallmark of military coups in Africa especially in the immediate post-independence period. Generally, elite theory and conspiracy theory tend to unravel the few elements behind military coups in Africa but both have failed to explain how popular agitations and protests induced military coup.

However, this study adopts frustration aggression theory in explaining the underlining contradictions responsible for military coups in Africa and the recent coups in West Africa. The frustration aggression theory was propounded and popularized by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939); Berkowitz (1962); Berkowitz (1983) and the theory has over the years been applied in numerous fields of study (Breuer & Elson, 2017). Thus, the basic assumption of the theory is that there is always a link between frustration and aggression. For the theorists, it presupposes that aggression occurs as a result of frustration.

In fact, Zillmann& Cantor, (1976) explained the theory of frustration-aggression as a retaliatory act directed to the perceived source of frustration. Incidentally, the frustration-aggression thesis has been criticised severally on the basis that it has become obsolete and the fact that not all aggressions can be seen as direct consequences of frustration. Essentially, the relevance of the frustration-aggression theory lies in its capacity to disentangle the linkages and connections between frustration and aggression. In all, the fundamental assumption of the theory is that frustration can potentially trigger aggression.

Following from the above, military coups in Africa and more specifically West Africa could be lanced from the perspective of elitist power contestation, conspiracy of the ruling oligarch and bandwagon effect that characterized the post independent politics in Africa. However, it is the position of this paper that the most appropriate empirical understanding of the prevailing resurgence of military coups in West Africa would rest on the impact of the present frustrations steering on the faces of the populace in the region. These frustrations are made manifest in diverse forms. There are socio-economic, political, cultural and leadership frustrations that fraught almost every Africa's political space. Indeed, the rising number of people in abject poverty, increasing unemployment, corruption, human rights abuse, crass impunity, wars, rebellious activities have compounded the state of insecurity. Also, leadership deficit are all horrible incidences frustrating many Africans. Presently, West African nations have high and unacceptable inflationary rate. People die of preventable diseases in West Africa. There is also environmental degradation, injustice, lack of infrastructure, ethnic conflicts, militancy, terrorism and insecurity of different sorts, all of these breed hostility and intermittently produce aggression against democratic leaders who are rightly or inadvertently seen as being responsible for people's ordeal.

No doubts therefore, that people tend to be responding aggressively to the above frustrations. For instance, in Mali, Guinea, Burkina-Faso and some other African nations such as Chad and Sudan, sometimes citizens call for military intervention and some citizens overtly celebrate military incursions. More specifically, in January 2022, hundreds of people trooped out in Ouagadougou to celebrate military coup that dethroned the government of former President Roch Marc Christian Kabore. Also, in 2017, Zimbabweans took to the streets to celebrate the military coup that ousted former leader Robert Mugabe. While these celebrations may not mean an end to maladministration (for instance in Sudan people celebrated military coup and after some months confronted same military to go) it signifies a needed change that may have temporarily extinguished or eased frustration. In all, crop of leaders in Africa and West Africa in particular are either deliberately or unknowingly under-developing the already underdeveloped institutions, political systems and the people. This has led to an accumulated frustration which seems to have compelled some people to misconstrue democracy as being incapable of addressing the challenges confronting the West African region hence, the resolve to attack the system if not completely dismantle it in search of peace, stability, security and development. Frustration-aggression theory

therefore remains the basis for understanding the recurring military incursions in politics in West Africa. The utility of the theory lies in its capacity to demonstrate that some of the coups in West Africa occur as a result of people's restive tendencies towards democratic government. This restiveness sometimes serves as an invitation of military or even public invitation by the people.

Conceptualizing Democracy's Discontent and Resurgence of Military Coups

There is no doubt that the burgeoning tendencies of democracy, especially during the third wave of democracy in the 1990s and its widening acceptability in the aftermath of the third wave tend to have amplified its subscription. Virtually everywhere in the World, people have embraced democracy and it seems to have become a household concept in contemporary societies. Part of the reasons for this development is the people's growing awareness and desire to ensure accountability, equity and justice. These principles are well embedded in democratic principles as enunciated by Nnoli (2003); Appadorai (2004) etc.

Thus, Appadorai (2004) described democracy as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by them. He further explained that a state may, in political science, be termed a democracy if it provides institutions for the expression and, in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of social direction and policy (Nwanegbo & Odigbo 2012). Therefore, democracy embodies virtuous principles necessary for inclusive, progressive and stable society. In all, democracy has inbuilt principles and institutional mechanisms for development thereby establishing linkages between democratic practices and development in every society. With these innate or inherent abilities, it strives to provide greatest happiness to greater number of people in the society.

Following from the above, it can be stated that democracy's discontent can be seen as a state of dissatisfaction arising from poor governance and pitiable democratic performance. In Africa, lack or in some cases weak or personalized state institutions only reinforced failures. It can be noted that the stability and viability of a democracy determined the extent to which it addresses common societal problems. Therefore, democracy's discontent manifests as a result of poor governance, bad leadership, lack of development and the trajectory of impunity and social injustice. It implies that the outcome of democratic practice in a given society is antithetical to the common good and general assumptions or expectations of a democratic society.

The above could occur as a result of diverse reasons. The causes could manifest domestically or be externally instigated. For instance, in many African States, some Asian, some Latin-America and some Middle East nations, domestic terrain and the actions or inactions of political actors within these political spaces tend to be excessively inhibiting the practicability of democracy. In fact, among the developing and "never" to develop nations

of the world, democracy rests on dangerous structures, making it practically impossible to catalyze a desirable change and contentedness.

Also externally, global socio-economic and political realities favor mostly the developed societies thereby putting the developing states and the democratic governance in difficult surviving situation. In fact, the prevailing global economy is greatly suffocating developing nations who do not have financial power, strong institutions, conducive business environment and technology to compete. They tend to live at the mercy of the developed democracies that pay little or no attention to domestic permutations and expectations of people. Generally, democracy's discontent is seen from the perspective of people's anticipations and what democracy has practically provided in real terms.

Lastly, resurgence of military coup is an expression of the audacious re-emergence of military incursions and the preposterous dismantling of democratically elected civilian government. Globally, military regimes have been described as an aberration and a deviation from the norms. However, in Africa and many other developing or third world societies, some democratic leaders have performed awfully. In fact, some seemingly consolidated democracies in Africa are still either fragile or struggling to retain its identity as a nation. This predisposed such states to danger. Leadership deficits and poor governance increased the vulnerability of these states to military coups and popular protests against democratic governance. In Africa and West Africa specifically, it is pertinent to note that the recurring or the resurgence of military coups do not imply that democracy has failed, it simply means that democratically elected leaders have failed. Therefore, the coups (whether invited by the people or willful intervention by the military) are unfortunate but an expression of disappointment by some members of the political community.

Democracy, Disillusionments and Coups in Africa

No doubts, the inability of African leaders to surmount challenges facing the continent and reposition African states on the path of growth and development resulted to multiple military interregnums. Failure of leadership has remained the Africa's greatest undoing. By the 1980s, military despots had successfully established themselves as alternatives to the unenviable leadership deficit confronting the African region. Incidentally, Western capitalist democratization agenda that crept into Africa in the 1990s orchestrated the debacle of military dictatorships. Africans were in the 1990s awakened with high sense of optimism and hope following the acceptance and subsequent spread of democracy on the continent.

By the end of the 20th century, democracy has become widely accepted in Africa as a form of governance capable of addressing the numerous socio-economic and political obstacles bedeviling the continent. Hence, the drive by some military dictators to transform from military dictatorship to civilian leadership became a consequence of democratic acceptance. Undoubtedly, in the last three decades, democracy seems to have been entrenched in most

political systems in Africa. In spite of the enormous challenges facing democracy and democratic institutions in Africa, it is evident that democracy has no viable alternative in Africa. Its practice has promoted freedom, equity, fairness, transparency and accountability in governance in Africa.

However, the establishment of democratic governance in Africa tends to have failed to produce corresponding gains. This can be seen from the growing poverty, inadequate infrastructure, low life expectancy, insecurity, rebellious tendencies against the state, low per capita income, inadequacy of modern technology and injustice that cress-crossed every part of African territories. Indeed, Africa's development indicators show that nations with high prevalence of coups record higher poverty rate. In some of them, unemployment crisis and lack of transparency, accountability and corruption tend to induce military incursion or sometimes caused citizens to call or accept forceful removal of democratic government. Within this context, citizens sometimes are compelled to applaud unlawful removal of a constitutional government. For example, tables 1 and 2 below show some recent coups in Africa and development indicators and nations that have recorded recurring coups.

Table 1: Recent Coups in Africa

S/N	Nation	Date & Year	Successful or failed	Immediate Cause	Public Response
1	Sudan	25th October 2021	Successful	Inability of the putschist to form government	Jubilation
2	Ethiopia	23rd June 2019	Failed Coup	Not Clear	Not stated
3	Central African Republic	13th January 2021	Failed Coup	Not Clear	
4	Mali	24th May 2021	Successful	Inability to end insurgency and protest	Jubilation
5	Burkina-Faso	30th September 2022	Successful	Deteriorating security situation	Celebrated first military coup
6	Guinea-Bissau	1st February 2022	Failed coup	Not Clear	Not stated
7	Gambia	21st December 2022	Failed coup	Not Clear	Not Stated
8	Niger	30th March 2021	Failed coup	Not Clear	Not stated

Source: Compiled by the authors

Table 2: Some Development Indicators in African Nations Experiencing Coups

S/N	Nation	Total Population	Unemployment Rate	Poverty Rate
1	Sudan	45.66 million	19.81%	55.9%
2	Ethiopia	120.3 million	3.69%	35%
3	Central African Republic	5.457 million	6.58%	71% (estimated)

4	Mali	21.9 million	7.72%	44.4%
5	Burkina-Faso	21 million	7.1%	40%
6	Guinea-Bissau	2.11million	11.5%	65%
7	Gambia	2.64 million	11.21%	53%
8	Niger	26,427,610 million	0.75%	41.8%

Source: Compiled by the authors

Following from the above, it can be deduced that abysmal performance of constitutional government and leadership gaps in nations like Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso and many other nations triggered conditions that questioned the rationale for continuous subscription of democracy in these states. In the last two decades, the level of disillusionment has deepened. Essentially, disillusionment within this context emanates from abysmal performance of governments, injustice, lack of freedom, corruption, the disconnect between the rulers and the ruled and the failure of the state to judiciously perform her constitutional responsibilities. Indeed, unmet expectations coupled with unbearable insecurity are generating huge confrontations and disillusionment. For instance, table 2 shows that eight (8) nations witnessing recurring coups and attempted coups have very high rate of poverty incidences. Some of the nations also have unenviable records of horrible cases of insecurity and ethnic unrest which tend to have metamorphosed into the emergence of rebels and terrorist groups in nations like Mali and Burkina-Faso, Somalia, Nigeria and DR Congo etc. In fact, it has been argued that pervasive and persistently low levels of economic growth, associated with high levels of poverty, are symptomatic of the social grievances that may precipitate military coups in African countries (Barka & Ncube, 2012).

Thus, the post-independence African nations have witnessed over 200 failed and successful coups (Barka & Ncube, 2012). Majority of these coups occurred in the post independent era in Africa and especially when the military junta was in vogue. However, the trajectories of the recent coups demonstrated palpable change and clear deviation from the initial drivers of the coups. But more fundamentally is the fact that the spate of recent coups heightened the severity and enormity of the challenges facing Africa. These new drivers such as insecurity (terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, rebellion against the state etc), poverty, poor leadership, economic crisis emerged as a result of corruption, lack of transparency and lack of accountability in governance. The aforementioned factors have formed the basis of the prevailing growing disillusionment that orchestrated either the coups or resistance of military regimes in various Africa nations.

In all, the recent coups and counter coups can be described as the ultimate consequences of the failure of states in Africa to deliver the needed goods. Incidentally, military coup is an aberration, hence its inability to solve the problems facing these nations. The three nations with successful coups in the last two years in Africa (Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso) none has stabilized the polity nor solved the perceived problems that induced the coup. More specifically, coups in Mali and Burkina Faso were justified on ground of the inability

of the civilian government to deal with violent extremism such as the ISIS and al-Qaeda. Till date, military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso are yet to dismantle these security organizations. In fact, Siegle (2021) stated that between 2020 and 2021 attacks in the region by militant Islamist organizations increased 70 percent, from 1,180 to 2,005. In all, democratic failures in Africa precipitated disillusionment. Disillusionment provoked coups but because military regime lacks requisite knowledge to dealing with the existing challenges, it only intensifies the agony of the people.

Retooling Africa's Democracy for Development

One of the enormous challenges facing virtually every African nation is on how to apply or redefine democracy and make it more responsive and efficient. Over the years, there exists mammoth of scholarly commentaries on the dysfunctionality and the floundering trajectories of democratic practice in Africa (Awolowo, 1985; Ake, 2003; Houngnikpo, 2006; Collier, 2009; Omotola 2009; Nwanegbo & Odigbo, 2013; Nwanegbo & Odigbo 2014; Omotola, 2021). In fact, Ake (2003) specifically espoused the form of democracy suitable for Africa. This according to him would be a democracy characterized by the following features:

a. A democracy in which people have some real decision-making power over and above the formal consent of electoral choice.

b. A social democracy that places emphasis on concrete political, social and economic rights, as opposed to a liberal democracy that emphasizes abstract political right.

c. A democracy that puts as much emphasis on collective rights as it does on individual rights.

d. And lastly a democracy of incorporation (Ake, 2003, p.132).

Apart from these assumptions, it is important to posit that the basic challenges facing democracy in Africa stems from the fact that most African societies and their leaders lack basic democratic orientation and some never willingly embraced democracy. In some African countries, especially North Africa States like Libya, democracy was foisted on the state. Some other nations democratized to be qualified for foreign loans and other development assistance. This therefore shapes their democratic attitudes. Democratic attitudes are basic democratic dispositions of the people and the state. It does not only determine but also enhance the functionality of the democratic institutions. In fact, societal values that are in tandem with democratic values increase the potential for a viral democracy, energize democratic growth and survival. Domestic value systems when aligned with democratic values established conditions capable of retooling democratic processes to majorly developed within and offer the people greater opportunity to actualize their individual and collective dream of a better society. Nwanegbo & Odigbo (2012) posited that these values are in the people and nourish the practice. Without it, the institutions would

exist as different entities from the people and that is the prevalent circumstances in most African democracies today (cited in Nwanegbo & Odigbo 2012). Therefore, it predisposes democracy and the state to a perpetuate confrontation and in some cases these confrontations tend to lead to the collapse of democratically elected government.

Thus, retooling democracy in Africa entails people's total ownership of the means, processes and the institution itself. People will determine how and what would prevail in the polity. At this point, support and compliance to state policies and programmes would be driven by "we" feeling. Considering the fact that development is all encompassing and that man is the object and subject of development, the feeling of communality would drive collective goal of the people for a better society. This is greatly lacking in many African states and has contributed to a greater extent the prevailing disillusionment. It is important that African states realize this, re-calibrate and re-incorporate domestic democratic norms in contemporary governance structures for development.

Conclusion

This study has interrogated democracy in Africa with the aim to unraveling the underlining contradictions that prompted recent surge in military incursion in some democratic states in Africa. The paper concluded that disillusionment arising from insecurity, poor governance and misplaced priorities of government triggered the recent upsurge in military coups and violent crimes in Africa. The paper noted that the African populaces are deeply disconnected from state affairs and the leaders. This is counter-productive to democratic practice and indeed widened gap and amplify the question of trust that has been very elusive in Africa. It therefore concludes that ending the resurgence of military coups in Africa demands urgent steps to enthrone good governance in Africa's democratic states. The paper recommends the institutionalization of governance in lieu of the prevailing personalization of state institutions in Africa.

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