



Democratic Deficits and Military Coups in West Africa: Implications for Democratic Consolidation

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Abstract

The West African sub-region is the most burdened by Military coups in Africa. This is a negation, especially within the context of the Lome convention of 2000 prohibiting military government in the sub-region. However, the resurgence of Coups shows that democracy which swept Africa during the third wave of the democratization process has fail to bring with it the much needed socio-economic development, peace and stability with serious implications on democracy and democratic consolidations. This paper therefore examines democratic deficits and resurgence of military coups in West Africa, implications for democratic consolidation. In building the body of the work, the paper employed descriptive method collating information from relevant secondary materials. The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is the State fragility theory. Findings reveal that several factors are responsible for military coups in West Africa some of which are the fragility of the state, weak state institutions, legitimacy issues, poverty and hardships. Other findings are that democracy can only be consolidated through strong state institutions, robust policies that will promote development. Also, democracy was not able to fulfil citizens expectations of development, what ensued rather was heightened insecurity, Banditry, jihadism, youth unemployment which became a recipe for military coups in West Africa. Part of the recommendations is that there is the need to mitigate state fragility through Mitigate the resurgence of coups by tackling poverty and economic hardship: Long-term stability requires addressing the socio-economic conditions that can fuel political instability and create opportunities for military intervention.

KEYWORDS: Coup, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, Military, Resurgence. West Africa



INTRODUCTION

The re-emergence of military coups in West Africa has reignited scholarly discussion on the fragility of democratic governance and the persistence of democratic deficits in West Africa. Huntington, 1991 cited in Bom (2016), averred that since the beginning of the wave of democratic governance in the 1990s, when quite a good number of countries transitioned from authoritarian regimes to multi-party democracies, expectations were high that democracy would be consolidated. Adebayo, (2021), averred that decade later, democratic governance became characterized by weak institutions, perverse and malignant corruption, contested elections, human rights abuses and fragrant neglect of constitutionalism. To Gyimah-Boadi and Logan, (2022), democratic deficits have eroded public trust in elected officials, creating opportunities for military interventions with the claims of being a corrective measure against anarchy as a result of governance failure.

The implications of the emergence of military coups in West Africa are very profound. Military coups disrupts constitutional order and also reverse fragile democratic gains while equally undermining regional stability, weaken the prospects for the institutionalization of democratic norms and values. According to Onapajo and Babalola (2024), while the economic community of West African states have attempted deterring unconstitutional change of government through the Lome convention in 2000, the reemergence of coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2020 and 2023 underscores the dynamics of governance challenges facing the West African sub-region (Nugent, 2021). Understanding the connection between democratic deficits and military coups in the West African sub-region becomes paramount in appraising the prospects for democratic consolidation as it highlights the need for robust reforms that can strengthen institutions, promote transparency and accountability while also enhancing citizens' participation in governance.

Statement of the problem

The three decades of democratization and democratic governance came to naught in West Africa with the reemergence of military coups. The West African region continues to grapple with political instability, insecurity, jihadism and insurgency, and



political instability which gave the military a veritable tool for incursion into governance. The successive coups in Mali, (2020; 2021) Guinea, (2021), Burkina Faso, (2022) and Niger, (2023) possess a fundamental question about the consolidation of democratic governance in West Africa. Although democratic governance was supposed to deliver good governance, effective leadership, transparency and accountability, constitutionalism and inclusive development, the persistence of corruption, electoral inefficiencies, elite rivalry and state capture coupled with weak institutional framework have led to distrust and confidence in democracy. This democratic deficit delegitimizes elected officials while bolstering and providing the military the leeway for presenting itself as a viable alternative. The re-emergence of coups reflects a vicious cycle in which democratic deficits invite military takeover of governance which inadvertently weakens democratic institutions. This vicious cycle definitely negatively affects democratic consolidation, as each unconstitutional disruption of democratic governance resets the fragile progress made over time towards the institutionalization of democracy and consolidation.

Objectives of the Study

- 1.To assess the impact of resurgence of Military Coups on democracy and democratic consolidation in West African sub-region.
- 2.To establish ways of mitigating resurgence of coups in the West African sub-region.
- 3.To examine State fragility as precursor to democratic deficit and coups in West Africa

Research questions

- 1.What is the impact of Coups on democratic consolidation in the West African sub-region?
- 2.What are the ways of Mitigating coups in the West African sub-region?
- 3.Is state fragility a precursor to democratic deficit and coups in West Africa?

Conceptual framework

Democracy

A discuss on democracy will not be complete without a reference to Ancient Greece



where it is said it all began. According to Nwogu, (2015), the term originates from the Greek word '*demokratia*' "rule of the people" which was coined from *demos* "people" and *kratos* "power" or "rule" in the 5th century B.C (Nwogu, 2015). Erunke, 2012 cited in Joseph and Segun (2020), see's democracy as fluid concept and so has been defined differently by scholars. Jev and Dzodo (2014) opined that since ancient Greece, the concept of democracy has remained elusive. They concurred with the view above that it is a paradoxical that despite centuries of democratic governance in most part of the world, there is still no universally accepted definition of democracy. It is however important that definitions common to the concept is presented. Darl in his treaties on democracy cited in Jev and Dzodo (2014) avers that:

Democracy is a system of government with elected representatives operating under the rule of law, with the greater number of the citizenry having the opportunity to participate in the governmental process as well as have access to equal share of the resources through participation in the decision making process that has to do with the allocation of scarce resources (Asongo & Dzodo 2014).

To Okpaga (1999:4) cited in Asongo and Dzodo (2014), conceives democracy to mean:

"Any system of government that is rooted in the notion that ultimate authority in the governance of the people rightly belongs to the people, that everyone is entitle to an equitable participation and share in the equal rights and equitable social and economic justice as the birth right of everyone in the society....(p251).

To Aristotle, democracy is associated with equality in which 'the poor shall not be in any greater subjection than the rich; nor that the supreme power shall be lodged in either of these, but that both shall share it' (cited in Plato Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2022). To Almond, Powell and Storm (2004) cited in Sunday and Abdulwahab (2020) democracy is a political system in which citizens enjoy wide range of civil and political rights in which political leaders are elected in free and fair elections and are accountable under the rule of law. To Nzongola-Ntalaja, cited in Sunday and Abdulwahab, (2020) democracy is a continuous process of promoting equal access to fundamental rights; a political system that operates on the basis of popularly elected representatives to run the affairs of the State. Democracy is about the



people, who are at the centre of all process involved in a democratic system.

In his famous Gettysbough Address in (1863), Abraham Lincoln cited by Ibrahim, Onochie and Bibi, (2021), and Anyoko-Shaba, (2022) defines democracy as “government of the people by the people and for the people. Huntington, (1970) cited in Audu, Gana, and Adamu, (2022) avers that democracy exist where the principal leaders of a political system are selected through a competitive election in which the bulk of the population has the opportunity to participate. With the above attributes, democracy is regarded as the best form of government because by its nature, it is supposedly an all-inclusive form of government (Anyoko-Shaba, 2022). A cursory look at all the definitions cited above, reveals that democracy as a system provide for all citizens equal opportunity to exercise their franchise equally by those qualify to exercise it. Democracy involves election within the contest of law where people are elected freely in an election to form government in a political system for the good of all.

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation means the establishment and enthronement of a stable, institutional and enduring democratic process. Furthermore, democratic consolidation is the process by which a new democracy matures, such that it is unlikely to revert to authoritarianism, that is, the return to military government through coup. According to Ademola (2011) cited in Musa, Ibietan, and Diende-Adedeji, (2020) for democracy to consolidate, it involves a process of alteration from totalitarian systems to a democratic system, which is vital for a lasting democracy and stable institutions to be established. Linz and Stephan (1996) cited in Maerz, (2024), averred that to consolidate on democracy is to accept democratic values where citizens, elites and institutions broadly accept democracy as the legitimate form of government and political actors’ resolves conflict through democratic procedures rather than violence or unconstitutional means. There is the existence of rule of law and independent judiciary with strong legal frameworks that ensure equality before the law, protect people’s rights, and hold leaders accountable and the existence of an independent judiciary that can check the excesses of the executive.

Added to this, is a strong and stable institutions that will promotes effective legislature,



an accountable executive, and a credible election management institution. It requires institutions that can operate beyond personalities and can withstand leadership changes and pressures exerted on it (Linz & Stephan, cited in Maerz, 2024). It also follows that for democracy to be consolidated, there must be free, fair and periodic elections that is competitive, transparent, inclusive, and trusted by the electorates. In a consolidated democracy, civilian control of the military is sustained and remains subordinate to elected civilian authority. Security forces are professionalized and remain non-partisan. There is the existence of a vibrant civil society organization, free media, and citizen's engagement in public affairs. In a consolidated democracy, there are safeguards for human rights, freedom of speech, press, association and assembly becomes paramount while also ensuring minority right to avoid "tyranny of the majority". There is the pursuit of economic stability and social inclusion, reduction of poverty and inequality that could destabilize democracy, instead, promote policies that enhances social justice, welfare and inclusive development (Linz & Stephan, 1996; Gorokhovskala, 2017).

Military Coup

According to Military coups and Military Disengagement a military coup is the 'removal or the attempted removal of a state's chief executive by the regular armed forces through the use of threat of force' (Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, 2023).

West African Sub-region

The West African sub-region, as defined by Britannica (2025), comprises 16 countries. These countries are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

Literature review

Resurgence of coups in West Africa

A coup d'état, is literally a sudden, illegal, and usually violent seizure of power from a government or ruling authority (Luttwak, 2016). The primary objective of a coup is to overthrow the existing government and replace it with a new regime. According to Singh (2022), between February 2021 to February 2022, there were five successful



overthrows of democratically elected governments in Chad, Mali, Guinea, Sudan, and Burkina Faso and four unsuccessful Coups can be initiated by a range of actors, including military officials, political leaders, or factions within the ruling elite. They can be motivated by various factors, such as political, economic, or social grievances, personal ambitions, or external pressures (Bratton et al, 1997). Coups can have significant consequences for the affected country and its citizens. They can lead to political instability, violence, and human rights abuses Appiah-Mensah, 2020 cited by Yusuf, (2023). Coups can also have implications for regional and global security, as they can disrupt international relations and create new power dynamics.

According to Suleiman and Onapajo, (2022), the resurgence of course in West Africa in this present time is alarming and Falola (2022; Anyoko-Shaba, 2022), attributed the re-emergence of coups in the region to the failure of the intensification and deepening of democracy in the West African sub-region. These coups are however indicative of the fragile and regressive state of democracy in West Africa. As Akubueze, (2024) noted, fears of systematic democratic decline are regrettably well-founded due to the global decline in the efficacy of established political parties along with soaring partisan divisions in many long-standing democracies. “The resurgence of military coups on the continents has created fresh debates about the ability of African states to sustain democracy” (Akubueze, 2024). Other reasons for the resurgence of coups in Africa are complex and multifaceted. Some of the factors that have contributed to the recent coups include weak democratic institutions, corruption, poverty, and insecurity. In some cases, leaders have attempted to extend their tenure in office, leading to tensions and unrest that can lead to coups. The proliferation of armed groups and insurgencies in some African countries has also created a security vacuum that can be exploited by military leaders to seize power. The reasons for re-emergence of military coups in west African sub-region are not limited to the under listed.

a. Weak democratic institutions: Weak democratic institutions in some African countries can make it easier for military leaders to seize power (Azubuike, Matthew and Vincent, 2024). In Mali, for example, weak democratic institutions allowed the military to overthrow President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020. The coup was carried out amid widespread protests over corruption, insecurity, and economic hardship, and the military was able to take advantage of the political instability to seize



power.

b. Economic Hardship and Corruption: Corruption is another factor that can contribute to the re-emergence of coups in Africa. In Guinea, for example, the military overthrew President Alpha Condé in September 2021, citing corruption and the government's failure to address the country's economic and social problems. Fragile states therefore fail to deliver economic stability, widespread poverty, and elite corruption feed public resentment for, making citizens tolerant to coups (Ayola, Ojo and Kugbayi 2024).

c. Collapse of constitutionalism: In Guinea (2021) and Mali, (2020 and 2021) collapse constitutionalism could not resist elongation of tenure limit. In some cases, leaders who attempt to extend their tenure in office can create tensions and unrest that can lead to coups. In Chad, for example, President Idriss Deby had been in power for 30 years and was seeking a sixth term in office when he was killed in a battle with rebels in April 2021. The military council that took over after his death promised to hold elections in 18 months, but the situation in Chad remains unstable (Yusuf, 2022).

d. Insecurity: Insecurity and the proliferation of armed groups in some African countries can create a security vacuum that can be exploited by military leaders to seize power. In Sudan, for example, a group of military officers staged a coup in October 2021 and overthrew the transitional government that had been in power since the ouster of former President Omar al-Bashir in 2019. The military cited insecurity and the need to restore order as reasons for the coup (Yusuf, 2022).

State fragility and Democratic Deficit in West Africa

Democratic deficits in West Africa are generally attributed to the following;

1. Weak Institutions: many West African countries have weak institutions in all ramifications. These institutions fail in their constitutional roles and functions. In many instances, executives exegeses are not checked leading to electoral fraud, tenure elongation attempt and general disregard for constitutional order (Akubueze, 2024).
2. Erosion of Regime legitimacy: Many government loose legitimacy due to flawed elections, corruption, and poor service delivery or lack of it altogether. There is also the case of widening gap between the state and citizens
3. Security Challenges: Perennial and persistent insecurity from terrorism, porous borders, Jihadism especially in Burkina Faso, Banditry especially in Mali, Burkina



Faso and Niger reflects the states' inability to protect citizens and safeguard lives and properties thereby undermining confidence in democracy (Oladoyin, Osimen, Pokubo, Obozekhai & Oladipo 2024).

4. Dependence on Personalities: Democratic systems in the West African sub-region are personality driven rather than institution driven, weakening resilience against authoritarian tendencies (Ayola, Ojo & Kugbayi 2024).

Implications of Coups to Democratic Consolidations in West Africa

According to International Monetary Fund, (2024; Georgetown journal of international Affairs, 2024), the reemergence of coups military coups across West Africa and the Sahel since 2020, represents a significant reversal of democratic trends in the West African region with attendant consequences on political, security, economic, Humanitarian and regional governance. Politically, military seizures of power routinely suspend the constitution, dissolve the legislature and the judiciary and restrict or suspend altogether political activity (Haruna, 2024). These actions, has implications on democratic consolidation as it leads to democratic breakdown while also risking long term institutional erosion of norms of civilian oversight and constitutionalism (Freedom House, 2023; Human Right watch, 2023).

Security is one major area the coup plotters always mention as some of the reason for the coup or military takeover. The coup therefore becomes necessary in order to address the deteriorating security challenges associated with insurgency, Jihadist activities. (International Crisis group, 2023). However, the international Monetary Fund (2024) in its report indicated that military take over exacerbate insecurity by disrupting command structures, complicates international security cooperation, and creating openings which insurgents, and jihadist exploit especially in the Sahel region. At the economic level, military take over creates economic shocks which exacerbates misery (Haruna, 2024), capital flight, and suspension of the country from economic block (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), trade disruptions and boarder closures among others. According to IMF, (2024), the combine effects of all these is lower growth projections, tightened fiscal space and increased poverty risk.



Mitigating Coups in West Africa

To mitigate coups in West Africa, regional bodies and governments should focus on improving governance and democratic processes, strengthening early warning systems to identify coup indicators like political instability and economic hardship, proactively engaging with member states to address the root causes of instability such as poverty and military discontent, and consistently enforcing sanctions against coup perpetrators. Additionally, a focus on improving the effectiveness and coordination of regional diplomatic and military responses, alongside a commitment to addressing the underlying socio-economic factors that fuel instability, is crucial for long-term regional stability (Haruna, 2024). To mitigate military takeover in West Africa will require strengthening governance and democracy. Governments in West Africa should implement policies that promote transparency, accountability, and the rule of law to prevent grievances that can lead to coups. Improve electoral processes: Ensuring fair and free elections can prevent voter dissatisfaction, a significant factor contributing to instability and potential military interventions (Olubuyo & Ayodele, 2024).

There is the to improving early warning systems and response which entails developing a comprehensive early warning systems to identify warning signs, including rising political tensions, economic hardship, and growing discontent within the military. There should be proactive intervention once signs are detected, early intervention through diplomacy and mediation can help address underlying issues before they escalate into a coup. Added to this is need to be consistent on the application of sanctions. Regional bodies like ECOWAS must ensure uniform and robust enforcement of sanctions and other measures against all coup perpetrators to maintain authority and discourage future attempts (Omilusi, 2024; Onapajo & Babalola, 2024).

To Abdulrahman, Taiwo & Nazifi, (2025), addressing Root Causes in terms of Tackling poverty and economic hardship, Long-term stability requires addressing the socio-economic conditions that can fuel political instability and create opportunities for military intervention. The military must be Professionalize. Military reform is paramount to ensure forces are professional and aligned with democratic governance, rather than acting as independent political actors. Regional cooperation should be enhanced through coordinated action. The Economic Community of West African



States (ECOWAS) and other regional bodies must work in concert to address coups, using a combination of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and potentially military intervention as a last resort. There should be community engagement with member nations to proactively tackle the root causes of coups is crucial for building a network that promotes long-term regional stability (Siddigi, et. al, cited in Haruna, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

State fragility theory is adopted to support arguments presented in this paper. The theory is appropriate in explaining democratic deficits and coups in West Africa. One of the chief proponents of the state fragility theory is Robert Rotberg (2003) who in his “fragile states, Collapsed states, Weak States: Causes and Indicators” argued that fragile states are those unable to provide political goods such as security, justice and welfare to their citizens. He emphasized that fragility is a continuum, with collapse being the extreme. The Fund for peace (2005) uses indicators such as state legitimacy, public services, security demographic pressures, refugees and human rights to measure fragility. All these combine, results in re-emergence of coups in West Africa. Their work popularized the empirical application of fragility theory in policy and comparative politics. Robert Jackson (1990) indicated how many post-colonial African states survived and enjoyed external recognition but remain fragile internally. Call, (2008) offer a nuanced version of fragility and weakness. In his “the fallacy of the failed state” he expanded on the variables or indicators of a fragile state to include security, legitimacy and capacity. Patrick, (2011) was of the opinion that fragile states are not only a threat to themselves but also a threat to global security. Patrick, (2011) also highlighted on terrorism, transnational crime as outcome of state fragility. The World development Report, (2011) linked state fragility to cycles of violence, corruption both benign and malignant, and weak state institutions as being responsible for state fragility. State fragility theories generally posit that when legitimacy, security and capacity becomes eroded, non-democratic alternatives especially military coups or takeover becomes a new normal. Democratic deficit is therefore attributed to the failure of leadership, structural and institutional weakness of these fragile States.



Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design relying on secondary data to analyze the topic under study. Data were sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, policy documents, and credible online data base. Relevant materials were identified through systematic searches in reputable sources like Google, Research gate and official organizational websites. The study focuses on publications published between 2003-2025, which address issues of resurgence of coups, governance, weak institutions and democratic consolidation in West Africa and Africa as a whole. Validation of data was done through cross-referencing across multiple sources to ensure accuracy and consistency. The study covered just Five year period (2020-2025) which was the time coups began in West Africa after the return to democratic governance. Reliability was maintained through the use of peer reviewed materials and journal papers. Triangulation of materials was maintained through the inclusion of well research reports known for rigorous review processes.

Analysis

From the literatures reviewed, it is certain that democratic prescriptions for Africa could not cure nor treat the disease of poverty, unemployment, ethnicity and ethno-religious crisis, underdevelopment and dependence. Robert Rotberg (2003) who in his “fragile states, Collapsed states, Weak States: Causes and Indicators” argued that fragile states are those unable to provide political goods such as security, justice and welfare to their citizens. He emphasized that fragility is a continuum, with collapse being the extreme. What democratic prescription succeeded in doing was to heightened ethno-religious conflicts, poverty, underdevelopment in the midst of plenty and frustrations among the people who jubilated during the democratization process but also jubilated again when democracy was truncated. Perhaps the people have realized that democracy is just a euphemism for dependence, backwardness and instability. Authoritarian regimes that were rejected some few decades ago are now being welcome with jubilations. Olubuyo and Ayodele (2024), posit that to mitigate military takeover in West Africa will require strengthening governance and democracy. Governments in West Africa should implement policies that promote transparency, accountability, and the rule of law to prevent grievances that can lead to coups. Improve electoral



processes: Ensuring fair and free elections can prevent voter dissatisfaction, a significant factor contributing to instability and potential military interventions.

Findings

The reemergence of coups military coups across West Africa and the Sahel since 2020, represents a significant reversal of democratic trends in the West African region with attendant consequences on political, security, economic, Humanitarian and regional governance. Haruna, (2024), when he stated that politically, military seizures of power routinely suspend the constitution, dissolve the legislature and the judiciary and restrict or suspend altogether political activity which has adverse implications on democracy and democratic consolidation in West Africa. Olubuyo and Ayodele, (2024), suggested that to mitigate military takeover in West Africa will require strengthening governance and democracy. Governments in West Africa should implement policies that promote transparency, accountability, and the rule of law to prevent grievances that can lead to coups. Improve electoral processes: Ensuring fair and free elections can prevent voter dissatisfaction, a significant factor contributing to instability and potential military interventions. There is the need to ensure indicators that lead to state fragility are eliminated through concerted policy implementation geared towards more regional integration through collaborations and engagement in trade which will improve welfare for the people, ensure accountability and transparency to build public trust in government.

Conclusion

To consolidate democracy in West Africa will require countries in the sub-region to cooperate and implement policies that will promote effective service delivery, promote social welfare and economic growth. To achieve this will require West African countries to address root causes of poverty and hardships, develop comprehensive early warning systems to identify warning signs, including rising political tensions, economic hardship, and growing discontent within the military. Proactive intervention: Once signs are detected, early intervention through diplomacy and mediation can help address underlying issues before they escalate into a coup. The economic community of West African states and other regional bodies must work in concert to address coups,



using a combination of diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and potentially military intervention as a last resort.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Threats to democracy and democratic consolidation must be reduced drastically through the implementations of robust policies and regional cooperation that will promote trade, improve social welfare of the people. African countries must make effective use of the instrument of the (ACFTA) African continental free trade agreements, so that trade among African countries can promote economy of scale, create jobs, reduce unemployment, reduce insecurity and other criminal acts fending off reasons for coups.
2. Mitigate the resurgence of coups by tackling poverty and economic hardship: Long-term stability requires addressing the socio-economic conditions that can fuel political instability and create opportunities for military intervention.
3. Reduce state fragility by strengthening institutions, ensuring regime legitimacy through good governance and inclusion, constitutionalism and rule of law.

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