The Resurgence of Coups D'état in the West African Region: Implications for Security in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The West African sub region historically has been plagued by coups, in the last decade however, the region which is richly blessed with natural resources such as; gold, uranium, copper, lithium, diamond and crude oil witnessed a reduction in coups. This led to the growth of democracy in some countries and the rise of autocracy in others. Recently however, there has been an unprecedented resurgence of coups in the region sweeping across, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Niger and Gabon. This has presented humanitarian, developmental, trading, and security implications for nations in the region. This paper therefore takes a close look at the resurgence of coups in the region and its implication for security in Nigeria. The study critically reviews the history of coups and outlines the causes of coups. It highlights the growing interference of foreign parties in the affairs of sovereign states in the region and the growing menace of insurgency in the region and the implications of the political instability caused by these coups on security in Nigeria in general. It brings to light the dangers of exposing the already stretched military to more inroads from insurgents from other West African regions as well as the impact of the coups on the proliferation of ammunition and migration into Nigeria. The paper therefore recommends that the Nigerian government should, employ diplomacy, increase regional corporation, adopt counter-terrorism measures, diversify the economy, logistical support for these countries as well as develop crisis response strategies to mention but a few.

Keywords: Coups, West Africa Sub Region, Security

INTRODUCTION

The African continent has over the years continued to draw global attention. This can be attributed to a number of factors that include its wealth of resources, large population, investment opportunities, slow development, migration issues and insecurity challenges.

The West African sub region is not left out on these factors as the region although richly blessed with numerous natural resources such as; gold, uranium, copper, diamond and crude oil is challenged by migration, exploding population, slow development and insecurity issues. For instance, Niger, rich endowed with large deposits of uranium has largely remained underdeveloped and plagued by insecurity and migration despite being one of the largest exporters of uranium globally (Musiabau, Shittu & Yanotti, 2022).

In recent times, however the West African sub region has seen a rise in military uprisings that has seen the forceful removal of presidents. The presidents of Mali (In May 2021), Guinea (September 2021), Burkina Faso (September, 2022) and Niger Republic (July, 2023) Gabon (August, 2023) have all been overthrown by the military within the past three years and this has ultimately created a constitutional crisis for the region and further challenged the growth of democracy in the region.

This overthrow of government by the military is otherwise regard as "coup d'état". Scholars hold that coups d'état involves the illegal overthrow of a sitting president or executive by the military, police or security

forces (Powell & Thyne, 2011, De Bruin, 2019). Another school of thought however argue that coup d'état can be carried out by any other group within the state apparatus (Simic, 2013; Sweet, 2007). According to Marshall it is the forceful capture of executive authority and office by dissidents within the country's ruling or political elites that leads to a substantial change in the executive leadership and policies of the prior regime.

History of Coups in the World between 1799-1966

Historically coups have happened across history and have been a recurring feature in political struggles and dynamics of various societies. For instance, in 1799, one of the most famous and earliest coups in history was when Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the French Directory and declared himself the ruler of France (Sultana, 2017). According to O'Rouke (2006), the coup denoted the conclusion of the French revolution and the spring of the Napoleonic era in the history of France. In 1952, General Fulgencio Batista overthrew the sitting government and installed himself as the ruler of Cuba. This incident was followed by several countries in Latin America such as Argentina, Brazil and Chile. In 1953, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegn was overthrown by CIA backed groups (Thompson, 2016).

In Africa, in 1966, a group of military officers overthrew President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, while in Mali in 1968, Lieutenant Moussa Traore staged a coup and overthrew President Modibo Keitao. Over the years, several leaders such as; General Ibrahim Babangida in Nigeria, Idi Amin in Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko in Democratic Republic of Congo to mention but a few have to come into power through coups. It was historically a practice through which many democracies were ended in many African countries. Nigeria one of the most populated countries on the continent has experienced its own fair share of periods of political instability since independence. According to Ousman (2013) challenges such as political corruption, ethnic and religious tensions and security issues have hampered the growth of the region.

Historically the country has equally experienced several bloody coups that include: the 1966 coup lead by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu that saw the assassination of several political leaders such as Ahmadu Bello and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the 1983 coup lead by Muhammadu Buhari to overthrow President Shagari regime largely regarded as corrupt (Adedire & Olarewaju, 2021).

REASONS BEHIND COUPS

Several scholars have continued to debate the reasons behind coups particularly because the cause of a coup in each country varies from the other (Hiroi & Omori, 2013; Yukawa et al., 2019). Nevertheless, some of the common reasons for coups include:

- **Crisis of Leadership**

In certain situations, countries are faced with leadership crises where the ruling presidents show incompetence, continue to extend their stay in power, internal power struggle or when the population loses faith in the ability of their leaders to govern and address their wellbeing and needs. According to Caselli (2006), coups happen when the leader governs in a way that curtails or suppresses the rights of its citizens or internal power struggles within the political parties that create a leadership vacuum. Buttressing this, Singh (2014) opines that leaders who come to power through debated means such as rigged elections or coups themselves are exposed to leadership crises as a result of legitimacy.

- **Foreign Pressure**

This reason involves coups occurring as a result of foreign influence in the process with a view to advancing their own interest. According to Savage & Caverley (2017), foreign governments or organizations may offer

finance, logistics or even military support to groups planning a coup. This foreign influence in coups can see foreign countries exerting pressure through sanctions and embargoes aimed at destabilizing the economy and creating an opportunity for a coup (Kiyani et al, 2023). Iroanya (2018) opines that foreign influence is most times motivated by factors such as; interest in natural resources, concerns about regional stability, proxy wars and religious factors.

- **Popular support**

Coups can occur when a particular group or individual attracts significant support from a large section of the population of the country. They carry out a coup arguing that they are acting in the best interest of the populace and in most cases cite corruption, economic mismanagement or human rights abuses by the government in power. It is critical to highlight that these coups are most times carried out in collaboration with a faction of the country's military and political establishment (Brooks, 2013)

- **Conflict in Constitution**

In situations where there is a conflict in the constitution, coups can occur. In the sense that disputes concerning the interpretation of the constitution or electoral processes can lead to coups. According to Arugay (2013) factions within the state may hold the position that the existing government is violating the constitution and initiate the process of rectifying the conflict in the constitution through a coup.

- **Economic factors**

Countries face economic challenges that could make the ruling power lose support from the populace in their ability to provide and manage the economic situation in the country. Factors such as widespread poverty, rising unemployment and inflation have instigated coups in countries as factions take the opportunity to seize power with the argument that they intend to correct the economic challenges facing the populace. According to a publication by Vanguard, failure of leadership in bringing about good governance and growing decay in institutions and corruption has increased the likelihood of coups (Vanguard, 2023).

- **Military Dissatisfaction**

The military is the backbone of the sovereignty of any country. Scholars opine that it protects the territorial integrity from external threats. They serve as deterrents to potential aggressors and potential unrest by maintaining law and order (Emina & Ikegbu, 2020). Growing dissatisfaction with regard to pay, government policies and rising corruption may influence the military to initiate actions that seek to correct these actions by seizing power.

- **Historical precedents**

Historically, some countries have experienced recurrent coups. This has become an approach political leaders employ to get or attempt to obtain power. According to Dalay (2016), this may be influenced as a result of the ruling class continuously refusing to cede power or marginalizing a section of the populace. As such, engaging in a coup in these countries has become a normal practice in these climes.

- **Ambition for Power**

Influenced by ambition to be in power, groups have initiated coups solely to snatch power from another group so as to be the ones enjoying the benefits of ruling a nation. According to Yukawa et al. (2019), political players initiate coups to gain political control over the state apparatus and grow their political dominance in the country and region at large.

- **Changing societal expectation**

Growing resentments towards the West have increased the coup occurrence. According to Rukooko & Silverman (2019) over the years, leaders have been backed by Western powers despite the records of human rights abuse, economic mismanagement and corruption because they protect their vested interest in the region. Changing societal expectations and awareness has increased resentment towards the West and has seen an increased occurrence of coups to replace these leaders who are loyal to the West.

MILITARY COUPS IN AFRICA

Literature highlights that since the independence of most African countries, there have been several forceful evictions of several sitting presidents (Collier & Hoeffler, 2005; McGowan, 2003). Over time, the idea of a coup was considered old-fashioned by many analysts due to the drop in coups in the continent. The recent rise in coups in Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Niger and recently in Gabon has further increased discussions about coups particularly in the West African sub region.

Analysts highlight that the West African sub region, is the western part of the African continent that covers over 6.14 million square meters of land mass. According to an estimate in 2021, the population of West Africa is pegged at 419 million and comprises countries that include: Senegal, Cote D'Ivoire, Benin, Niger, Togo, Mali, Liberia, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Chad and Cameroon (African Statistical Yearbook, 2001). It is largely populated by Tuareg, Berbers, Fulani, Akan, Hausa, Igbo, Kanuri, Mossi and Yoruba ethnic groups (Peoples of West Africa, 1997).

The region sits at an intersection of trade routes between Arab-dominated North Africa and the Southern part of the continent making it a key region for continental trading. Historically, the region played a key role in the early slave trade and colonial relationships of the African continent as a result of its accessibility through the Atlantic Ocean. According to Tracy (1990), as early as 1445, the region was in contract with Portuguese then subsequently the Dutch, French, Spanish, Danish and English traders engaged in trading activities with West African kingdoms. This was over time developed into full colonial control with Britain controlling Gambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria while France controlled Benin, Ivory Coast, Niger, Burkina Faso and Cameroun. Germany on the other hand, controlled Togo (Crowder, 2013). Despite the independence of these countries, they have maintained close relationships with their colonial masters partnering with them in several economic, political and security activities.

The rise in coups in the region therefore portends significant challenges to these partnerships. A school of thought, however, highlights that the rising coups in the region could be attributed to foreign involvement (Marc et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, in a bid to curtail the rise of coups in the region, ECOWAS the region's community for political, economic and security stability has sought to impose sanctions on coup organizers. For instance, the recent coup in Niger which was occasioned with jubilations within the country was strongly met with condemnation by the ECOWAS Chairman and subsequently sanctions placed on the country by ECOWAS and the European Union (ThisDay, 2023). Scholars hold that the consequences of the coups in the region have led to the freezing of assets, power cuts, bounder blockage and travel bans (Premium Times, 2023) which has significantly impacted the development of the region particularly because these events are occurring at a period when there is increasing conflicts in the region with over 2.5 million people already displaced as a result of conflict (Odalonu & Obani, 2018). According to Omenma et al (2023) increasing insurgency and ethnic-influenced conflicts in the region have plagued the region in the last century.

This is worsened by the largely porous borders that have characterized this region which has facilitated irregular migration and the flow of weapons across the region (Siberfein & Conteh, 2006). Today, the region is ill-equipped to handle the humanitarian crisis that will result from the impact of the sanctions of the coup by the ECOWAS and EU.

Geographically, Nigeria is closely tied with the countries experiencing coups in the region. The country is a multi-culturally diverse with a population of over 200 million (Vladimir, 2018). According to Udama (2013), the country has an estimated two hundred and fifty ethnic groups with over five hundred different languages spoken in the country. The nation is arguably the biggest economy in the region and plays a key role in the region significantly contributing to security and playing a big brother role to several countries in the region (Ojakorotu & Adeleke, 2018). A publication by Aljazeera (2023) highlights that Nigeria has provided the highest number of soldiers to a regional peacekeeping force that intervenes in civil wars in the region. According to Ewetan (2013), the country annually sets aside billions of Naira as security vote to provide military support and funding in tackling the growing trend of terrorism in the region.

As such, the recent coups experienced by its neighbours portend serious challenges for Nigeria. In the sense that, sanctions placed by ECOWAS and EU potentially can lead to increased border migration across the border, increase occurrence of ethnic clashes, food shortages, human rights violations and inflation to mention but a few. These issues may increase the level of insecurity in the Nigerian state and pose serious implications for security in the country.

CONCEPT OF INSECURITY

According to Obi (2015), insecurity is the threat to life, religious beliefs, properties, institutions and territories. It is a situation where the freedom of movement, lives and properties of people are not guaranteed (Udoh, 2015). According to Vornanen & Torronen (2009), security and insecurity are interlinked and insecurity is the failure of security which is the right to protection of rights and against potential dangers. As such understanding the implications of the rise in coups in the region on security in Nigeria is key to tackling the security challenges that could arise.

Implications for security in Nigeria

Nigeria is currently engaged in several military interventions in the northern and eastern parts of the country the occurrence of in Niger, Burkina Faso, Gabon and Mali has significant implications for Nigeria that will be centered on:

- **Regional security**

In the last decade, insurgent groups such as ISWAP, Boko Haram and Ansaru have continued to destabilize regional stability (Odobo, 2017). According to ECOWAS, in the first half of 2023 alone there have been an estimated 1,800 terrorist attacks in the region alone leading to 4,600 deaths and the displacement of about million people (Aljazeera, 2023). According to Garba (2020) Nigeria in collaboration with its neighbours has launched combined military interventions aimed at tackling the rising insurgency in the region. Nevertheless, analysts highlight that armed groups have made more in roads in Mali and Burkina Faso and a similar trajectory could be experienced in Niger (Aljazeera, 2023). As such, the political instability caused by the coups will offer and create an enabling environment for increased proliferation of weapons and migration of armed fighters into the Nigerian state. Nigeria already challenged by corruption, human rights violations, exponential poverty and poor welfare for soldiers continues to be ripe for exploitation by extremist groups to expand their activities and the uncertainty caused by these coups offers the opportunity for more chaos in the region.

- **Increased migration**

Scholars have established that coups often lead to exponential increases in migration (Sarac et al., 2023). As such, the coups currently being experienced in the West African region will not only stimulate increased migration in safer countries like Nigeria, it will also put pressure on the already challenged resources and infrastructures. According to Fayomi et al (2015), coups lead to social unrest and xenophobic actions in neighbouring countries as a result of increased migration of citizens of the affected country into neighbouring countries. In the sense that, increased migration of citizens into other countries as a result of a coup creates the avenue for agitation, distrust and built-in resentment by the local population towards citizens of nations affected by coups.

In addition, Nigeria is already by porous borders and as such, the consequence of these coups that will stimulate migration will see several criminals and jihadists cross the border into the country without proper identification and validation thereby, posing a significant threat to the stability of the country in question.

- **Transnational Crime**

As a result of coups in these countries, the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies will be limited as a result of the uncertainty created by coups. Scholars hold that coups facilitate transnational crime and in some cases are funded by criminals (Brown, 2013). In the West African region as a result of the resurgence of coups in the region, transnational criminal activities into Nigeria will be on the rise as the coups have created a lapse in the effectiveness of security arrangements within the affected countries as well as with other countries in the region. Nigeria shares a 1,609-kilometer border with Nigeria and its is the region that has seen more insurgent activities and political instability in Nigeria which is the only buffer between Nigeria and war-torn Libya will present significant security challenges for Nigeria and create room for jihadists and criminals to exploit this instability (Aljazeera, 2023). Furthermore, human and drug trafficking rings will be emboldened by the political instability in the region and increase their activities (Aning & Pokoo, 2014).

As such, it can be deduced that, this increase in transnational crime will stretch the already overburdened military in the country fighting on different fronts. According to Ojo et al (2020), increasing regional instability has seen Nigeria divert resources that could have been used to tackle internal security challenges to address regional instability in the West African region whilst being affected by military corruption

- **Economic instability**

The economic stability of Nigeria has remained key to the West African region. Nevertheless, the resurgence of coups in the region could disrupt trade and economic activities in the region. According to a publication by Reuters, the budget projections of Niger Republic is 3, 245 billion CFA francs for the fiscal year with 342.44 billion CFA francs expected to be obtained from loans (Reuters, 2023). The sanctions therefore, initiated by ECOWAS as well as the impact of the crisis on trade will impact transnational businesses thereby impacting the economic development of Nigeria and increasing opportunities for agitation within the country.

- **Intelligence sharing**

The rise of coups in the region has significantly impacted intelligence sharing amongst affected nations. In the sense that, while these countries seek to stabilize activities within the government in the aftermath of the coup. Sharing vital intelligence on the activities of criminals and terrorist groups with neighbouring countries is relegated which could potentially create security challenges for neighboring countries. As such,

the resurgence of coups in the West African region could potentially impact how effectively Niger, Gabon, Burkina Faso and Mali are sharing intelligence reports with the Nigerian security apparatus particularly as Nigeria is currently the head of ECOWAS and is responsible for initiating the sanctions upon the coup organizers.

- **Increased ethnic clashes**

Coups in the region will see an influx of other ethnic groups into the Nigerian territorial space. Previously allocated lands for farming will be encroached on by other ethnic groups from these troubled countries and this could lead to ethnic classes. Furthermore, ethnic groups that may presently be marginalized as a result of their population may find themselves more populated and become bolder in staking claim to the territory they reside.

BRIEF SUMMARY

The West African sub region which is considered as the bedrock of natural resources has over the years faced developmental challenges as a result of corruption, poor governance, infrastructural deficiency, rising unemployment and insecurity. Nigeria, one of the most populated countries in the region with enormous reserves of crude oil, gas and arable land has remained one of the biggest economies in the region. The country has however, just like other nations in the region continued to battle rising insecurity and sabotage within and outside the country.

In recent times however, a resurgence of coups in the region has seen several coups initiated in several countries such as Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and Gabon around Nigeria creating significant uncertainty in the region. Scholars hold that coups d'état involves the illegal overthrow of a sitting president or executive by the military, police or security forces and are caused by conflicts in the constitution, economic factors, military dissatisfaction, historical precedents, changing societal expectation and ambition for power to mention but a few.

Nigeria is at the centre of the rise of these coups and the potential impact of these political instabilities as well as the challenges that would be faced by these nations as a result of the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS of which Nigeria chairs could significantly see a rise in humanitarian challenges, proliferation of arms, increased ethnic clashes as well as a spike in insurgency activities and poor intelligence sharing with the affected countries. It is therefore important that more should be done to tackle the potential implications of the resurgence of coups in the region on the security situation in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Diplomatic Engagement**

The Nigerian government must reach out to coup-affected countries in the region and encourage a peaceful transition to democratic governance.

- **Increase regional corporation**

Nigeria, although the head of ECOWAS must work closely with other parties of ECOWAS and the African Union to promote stability, douse potential conflicts and advocate for democratic principles in the region.

- **Provide Logistic support**

The country regardless of their position on the coups, should provide a certain level of technical and logistical support to these affected countries in order to improve their capacity to address border security.

- **Counter-terrorism Measures**

Domestic counter-terrorism strategies must be initiated to prevent the infiltration of extremists from neighbouring countries into the country.

- **Develop a crisis response plan**

The government must develop strategies in collaboration with non-governmental agencies aimed at managing potential humanitarian and security crises that result from coups in neighbouring nations.

- **Diversify Economy**

The government must look into diversifying the economy and reduce its economic reliance on the region. The Nigerian government must therefore look elsewhere for trade partners.

- **Motivate security agencies**

Security forces in the country must be adequately trained, equipped with modern military machinery and motivated through adequate welfare and remuneration in order to be able to not only tackle present security challenges but also tackle the negative aftermaths of these coups on Nigeria's territorial integrity and safety.

- **Prioritize people-friendly policies**

Policies that favour the populace should be prioritized. The ruling class must therefore realize the potential impact of the resurgence of coups in the region and the threat it may pose on their legitimacy and rule and hence ensure that, government expenditure is targeted towards alleviating the conditions of masses in the country.

- **Tackle societal problems**

The government should tackle fundamental societal problems such as unemployment, growing youth restiveness and perceived marginalization in the country.

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