

Are Coups Causes or Precursors of Civil Strife?: Assessing the Relationship between Coups Phenomenon and Civil Conflicts in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, praetorian coups in the West African region have continued to pose a persistent threat to political stability, undermining democratization endeavours and igniting insurgencies. As the new political reality of renewed trend of coups confounds political scholars, there is a need to examine how and why military interventions continue to bedevil the West African region. Using the rational choice theory, this paper assesses the correlation between the coup phenomenon and civil strife in the West African region. The paper argues that coups act both as precursors and outcomes of civil war depending on the contextual environment around them. Conflicts can act as instigators of coups when they act as peace inducing agents, when the government's victory is in doubt, and as the military anticipates threats to its interests. Conversely, coups have also preceded civil wars as the coup phenomenon and its authoritarian tenets see ethnic wars and fears of ethnic dominance. Additionally, coups carry the risk of the instrumentalization of identity against other identities.

INTRODUCTION

The political development of the sub-Saharan African region has been hampered by the prevalence of instances of political instability in the region characterized by the recurrence of violence as an organizing theme in the socio-political and economic organization as well as frequent shifts from one regime type to another.^[1] The African continent is notorious for stuttering politically due to the malaise of coups d'état, civil unrests, identity politics, corruption, ethnic violence, institutional ineptitude and outright political failure, widespread bureaucratic corruption, and administrative inefficiency^[2]. Nowhere is the threat of political underdevelopment as pronounced as in the case of the West African region. The region is the cradle of praetorian coups and governmental instability^[3]. While political instability and military coups have been a salient feature in post-colonial societies in sub-Saharan Africa, the threat of coups has been especially pronounced in the West African region leading the region to earn the unenviable title, "the cradle of military coups and governmental instability"^[4]. According to McGowan, the sixteen West African states experienced numerous forms of political conflict between 1960 and 2004, including seven instances of civil strife and eighty-two coup plots, forty-four of which were successful and forty-three of which were bloody failures.^[5]

Characterized by a shift in political power with neither recourse to the agreed rules of the game nor to democratic mechanisms of political succession, coups entail the overthrow of an existing government often in violent ways. While the end of colonial rule in 1960, the *annus mirabilis* of African independence, brought with it optimism in the future and belief in the ability of independence political fighters to chart a better way forward to the region's political and economic development, the West African region has been bedeviled with ceaseless coups d'état. With this phenomenon pervading the architecture of the 16-country region, this has lent credence to the conclusion that a coup d'état is an institutionalized mechanism for political succession in the region.^[6]

In the 21st century, praetorian coups in the West African region have continued to pose a persistent threat to political stability, undermining democratization endeavours and igniting insurgencies as seen in Niger, the Central African Republic, Mali (2012 and 2020), and Nigeria (1967), and leading to years of devastating praetorian governance.^[7] Moreover, the 21st century has seen resurgence in unconstitutional changes in government and “constitutional crises” have progressively crept across the continent’s political realm most notably in Mauritania in 2005 and in 2008, Guinea in 2008, in Niger in 2010, Mali in 2012 and in 2020, the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2013, and Guinea-Bissau in 2003 and in 2012.^[8] This has posed a tenacious risk to political stability thus deflating democratization efforts and enkindling insurrections in their wake.^[9] As the new political reality of renewed trend of coups confounds political scholars, there is a need to examine how and why military interventions continue to bedevil the West African region particularly in Francophone West Africa most notably Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea Bissau and Mauritania.

In examining the environment underpinning the coup phenomenon, the correlation between civil war and coups has been examined by a number of scholars. According to Bell and Sudduth, one in every four coup attempts occurs during a civil war. The two academics assert that war raises the chance of a coup attempt in their examination of the connection between current civil war and coup activity. Stronger rebel organizations always offer bigger challenges to the political survival of the regime and its elites, therefore this risk rises when states are forced to deal with them. The praetorian elites’ propensity for coup plots results from the detrimental impact of ongoing war on the welfare of the praetorian elites and soldiers. As the war worsens their welfare and heralds uncertainty about the state’s future, potential plotters become more open to accepting riskier overtures at military regime changes than they might plot during peacetime ^[10].

Using the rational choice theory, this paper assesses the correlation between the coup phenomenon and civil strife in the West African region. The rational choice approach is a potent paradigm in not only explaining the rational choices that the praetorian guards make when they are involved in politics but also in the measures that can be adopted including the use of alliances, bargain negotiations as well as rational deterrence measures in order to limit the chances of the coup failing or succeeding. The main assumptions of this theory are that; first, that all individuals are rational actors; secondly, that these individuals interact strategically with each other to achieve their own goals; thirdly, that whereas the choices an individual may make are constrained by various mechanisms which stems from institutions and the scarcity of resources; and fourthly, that actors must make decisions while facing uncertainty an uncertainty that is accounted for by making decisions that are consistent relative to the actor’s preferences.^[11] The rational choice approach is rooted in the assumption that certain political behaviours attract costs on the parties involved when compared to other non-violent options on the table including diplomacy and constitution change-over of governments.^[12]

DISCUSSION

Conflicts as Precursors of Coups

One of the biggest barriers to peace and stability on the planet is civil war. Scholars’ attention has switched to the roughly a dozen civil wars that are still raging today as interstate battles become less common. In the short and long term, civil conflicts have a huge negative impact on the economy, society, and politics. Given that civil wars typically last six years, their length is one characteristic that contributes to these expenses.^[13]

Conflicts have been seen as instigators of coups. The influence of conflict in the coup phenomenon particularly in the Sahara-Sahel region. The role of coups as peace inducing agents. According to Thyne, coups can shock an otherwise impenetrable negotiating environment during a civil war, cutting the length of

the conflict. This surprise affects concerns about information and credibility. Coups reduce government preferences to a single, unified perspective, enabling governments to more effectively translate preferences into action. Also, by combining the military and the government, the military is effectively eliminated as a spoiler, which helps to resolve the commitment issue. Thyne investigates the effects of successful coups on the length of civil wars between 1950 and 2009 and discovers that coups do, in fact, function as shocks that induce peace, principally through the credibility mechanism.[\[14\]](#)

In intrastate wars, where it is more involved in domestic politics and the economy, the military develops a professionalism that is internally centered. Due to the military's size, influence, and propensity to participate in domestic politics and governance, the end of intrastate combat poses a particularly serious threat to civil-military relations. During civil conflict, states are more susceptible to coups, especially if the outcome is uncertain for the ruling party. Moreover, coups that take place in the midst of a civil war may act as a "peace-inducing shock," facilitating negotiations between the rebel and government sides.[\[15\]](#)

In the 1990s, this was seen in the case of Sierra Leone, a former British colony. The coup in Sierra Leone in 1992 was as a result of the destructive civil war from 1991. This coup easily escalated leading to the proliferation of small arms and light weapons occasioned by cross-border kinship groups and linkages. The scholar argues that small arms and light weapons were a critical factor to enabling rebel groups such as the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to prosecute the destructive war. The failure to stem the proliferation of small arms and light weapons early enough by peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone led to the protracted murderous campaign run by the rebels.[\[16\]](#)

These sentiments are echoed by Bell and Sudduth, who argue that one in every four coup attempts occurs during a civil war. The two scholars contend that, while coup attempts during war are significantly less likely to succeed, war raises the likelihood of a coup attempt. So, when states deal with larger and more potent rebel organizations that pose greater challenges to the political survival of the incumbent government, the likelihood of a coup during a war greatly increases. These findings are attributed to the detrimental effects of the ongoing war on the wellbeing of military elites and soldiers who are most capable of staging a coup. Potential coup plotters are more likely to embrace riskier coup attempts than they would in times of peace since war lowers their well-being and increases uncertainty about the state's future. coup plotters try more and riskier coups when rebels are reasonably strong since incumbents are more likely to lose their fights at these times.[\[17\]](#)

This phenomenon of conflicts as instigators of coups is prevalent in coups in the 21st century. The coups in Mali for instance can be traced to the political, economic and social destabilization brought about by the conflict in Mali in the 2010s. For instance, In March 2012, dissatisfied praetorian guards mutinied and seized power following a wave of fury over the perception that Malian soldiers had been unsupported by the government in their fight against touareg jihadists and left alone to suffer, and die in the Sahara Desert, while the defense hierarchy sat safe in Kati and Bamako. Despite the putsch being addressed through negotiations, this led to a fragile civilian interim administration that lay the ground for future putsches.

How militaries react to peace after civil war is a different aspect. While the military anticipates risks to its interests, according to White, civil war peace deals raise the likelihood of a coup. Provisions for military integration present a particularly difficult problem. These clauses might call for the military to be disbanded and then reassembled, and the military would then have to consent to cooperate with former adversaries. In response, the military might try to stage a coup. White asserts that the administration faces a commitment issue as a result of the end of the civil war. Armed conflict enables the government to make its promises to the military of resources, advantages, and autonomy credible since both the government and the military comprehend that a strong military will be necessary to manage the continuous struggle. Nonetheless, the administration finds it difficult to guarantee the military that it would keep its privileges and resources when peace seems to be approaching. The government faces a particularly difficult challenge when it comes to

peace accords because the government has vowed to put a stop to armed conflict, signaling to the military that much of their current status is no longer logical. [\[18\]](#)

However, peace treaties frequently contain clauses that pose a direct threat to the status of the military. Particularly risky are those that necessitate military integration—a formal procedure for integrating former militants into the armed services. The ability to keep at least some of the rebels’ forces armed lessens the insurgents’ postwar vulnerability, therefore this approach can offer a crucial vehicle for the government to make genuine assurances to the rebels. Military integration provisions make it challenging for the government to allay military concerns about its position in peacetime because many of the solutions the government would use to address the commitment problem, such as increased military size, budget, or promotions, now must be distributed to the newly integrated rebels as well. Furthermore, depending on the depth and breadth of military integration, this may put the military in danger of extinction or result in a significant change in its institutional identity. So, military integration clauses should intensify the crisis in civil-military relations that peace transitions inevitably bring about and provide a particularly high risk of military retaliation. [\[19\]](#)

The government’s willingness to reform the military for the benefit of the rebels creates clear incentives for the military to interfere while it is still strong and unintegrated, which presents a commitment challenge for maintaining the status quo of the war. Peace agreements following civil wars should, therefore, make coups more likely, especially if they contain clauses requiring the integration of rebels into the military forces. [\[20\]](#)

This situation is particularly prevalent in the aftermath of the unrest of the post-independence era, when one of the difficulties faced by the newly independent West African republics was the fact that they inherited territories with militaries that could best be described as colonial armies. Most of the time, the army was undersized and poorly armed. One top aim was to give the military a more national perspective in order to get rid of the colonial mindset that prevailed there. This obviously required implementing noticeable adjustments. [\[21\]](#)

According to Adebajo, Rashid, and Thompson, military coups or military interventions in West African politics can be classified into two broad waves. These two waves of military interventions can be distinguished by differences in social class, reasons for military interventions, grievance targets, and coup outcomes. In the case of the first wave, military coups were mostly carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, during the first two decades of independence, when senior officers were mostly in charge of military coups. The first wave of these interventions, known as Veto or Guardian coups d’état, were largely prompted by social changes that directly threatened the interests of the military and its allies as a means of rescuing the country (in the case of guardian coups d’état). [\[22\]](#)

The second wave of military coups d’état, also known as breakthrough coups d’état or coups from below, occurred in the West African region between the 1980s and 1990s, the third and fourth decades of post-independence republics. These military coups d’état, in contrast to those in the first wave, were primarily organized and directed by junior officers or non-commissioned officers. The military’s goal in the second wave of coups d’état in the West African region was to overthrow an authoritarian or traditional—that is, outmoded—regime and attempt to completely transform society, effectively breaking with the past. It was largely started in Francophone nations as a result of class conflict in the military and wider society, which led to strikes, mainly in the military because of low pay. In Anglophone countries, it was largely due to ethno-class polarization within the broader society. [\[23\]](#) According to Ejiogu, the rationale behind the ethnic mix in the coups in Anglophone countries was occasioned by the paradox emanating from the divisions that emanated from the fractured ethnic composition of the army. In Nigeria for instance, it helped to open up Nigeria for political instability straightaway after independence. [\[24\]](#)

Many West African countries introduced democracy and pluralism after the Cold War ended. Furthermore,

in 1990, then-French President François Mitterrand delivered his famous “La Baule speech,” in which he linked ODA to democratic governance. As a result, in former French colonies, multi-party systems and competitive elections became the norm.^[25] However, while the wave of democracy swept out coups in the West African region in the 1990s and 2000s in Anglophone countries such as the Gambia, Nigeria, and Ghana, as well as several other Francophone countries, giving the impression that West African militaries had surrendered their hold on political affairs to civilians and subjected themselves to civilian control, events in Guinea, Niger, Mali, and Guinea-Bissau proved the exact opposite.^[26]

Furthermore, there was a challenge in weaker civil-military relations. This is largely based on the Huntingtonian thesis of the soldier’s place in the state. In his book “The Soldier and the State,” Samuel Huntington argues that the military must be brought fully under civilian control in order to perform its primary function of providing national security without undermining the democratic system of government in place. According to Samuel Huntington, the military must also recognize its role in the maintenance of democracy and be a willing partner in its consolidation. To that end, the importance of civilian control of the military as a cardinal principle of civil-military relations must be recognized. Furthermore, civilian control of the military is an essential feature of democratic governance and an important factor in preventing internal armed conflict.^[27] Unlike the Huntingtonian thesis, the West African states were characterized by poor oversight of the military leading to uncontrolled use of force which occasionally spiralled into other security challenges as well as the abuse of human rights as seen in Nigeria.^[28]

Coups as Precursors of Civil War

Coups have also preceded civil wars. In Nigeria for instance, the Biafran war was preceded by a coup and a counter coup. A coup overthrew Nigeria’s government in January 1966. The coup leaders not only took power, but also executed a number of military and governmental leaders. In July 1966, troops in Northern Nigeria mutinied, two months after a series of riots in the country’s northern provinces. In his comparative study of the contextual socioeconomic and political environment in Nigeria and Uganda, Barongo concluded that the coup phenomenon and its authoritarian tenets saw Ibo-Hausa ethnic wars in the middle of the 1960s due to a fear of ethnic dominance. With the Aguiyi Ironsi administration’s implementation of the unitary system of governance and elimination of regional structures, the Hausas feared dominance and turned to violence and ethnic conflict against the Ibos. This was followed by a new military coup, which resulted in the assassination of several leaders of the January government and the establishment of the Gowon regime, named after the group’s leader. Throughout the Biafran secessionist era, this government remained in power ^[29].

In Côte d’Ivoire, the source of the 1999 coup can be traced to the destabilization in the wake of the post-Cold War political economic problems. In the period after independence when the then Ivorian President, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, instituted an open policy that encouraged free trade and free movement of people within West Africa. This attracted a large migrant workforce to Ivory Coast from the immediate neighbouring countries as well as other West African states^[30]. The immigration into Côte d’Ivoire would go on for the three decades that Houphouët-Boigny reigned in the then West African regional economic powerhouse largely fueled by enormous economic growth and economic modernization due to her enviable position of being one of the largest global exporters of coffee and cocoa beans in the second half of the 19th century^[31]. With Côte d’Ivoire being one of the top dozen migrant destination countries globally, the net effect was a demographic shift with the percentage of foreigners living in Côte d’Ivoire increasing from 5% in 1950 to 26% in 1998^[32].

However, the inability of Côte d’Ivoire to fully modernize the economy and move away from the dependence on few export crops led to a downturn for the country’s fortunes in the 1980s as a result of declining terms of trade for its exports, global recessions as well as structural adjustment programmes. This led to an upsurge in identity tensions based on shifting concepts of citizenship and identity as well as the

control of resources as migrant populations came to be viewed as foreigners who should not have property rights. The instrumentalization of the notion of “Ivoryité” identity against a migrant (foreigner) identity was mainstreamed in Ivorian politics and was a predominant rallying call in national grievances^[33]. With the ascent of Henri Konan Bédié following Houphouët-Boigny’s death in 1993, the situation worsened with allegations of corruption, political repression, and of stripping immigrants of their political rights leading to the 1999 coup when soldiers led by Tuo Fozie rebelled on 23rd December 1999^[34].

The civil instability and conflicts resulting from the hasty independence have also been fingered as the source of the conflict. Many newly formed West African countries were fumbling in the dark for stability and direction after gaining independence in the 1960s. It was necessary to make the military, which the nationalist leaders of the newly independent countries had come to hate and distrust throughout the time leading up to independence, fit into this new national image. National leaders in West African nations consequently viewed the military as a weapon for taming political foes and projecting personal power throughout the nation. According to Chidume, professional praetorian circles had a bad opinion of this tendency. It was viewed as a flagrant violation of praetorian professionalism.^[35]

CONCLUSION

During civil wars, coups can happen suddenly and violently. A civil war may begin as a result of a coup. Wars can start coups when they work as peace-inducing agents by shocking an otherwise impenetrable negotiating position and cutting the length of the war. They combine the military and the government as well, which effectively eliminates the military as a spoiler and helps to resolve the commitment issue. Thirdly, states are more susceptible to coups during civil conflict, particularly if the outcome is uncertain for the government. So, while coup attempts during a conflict are substantially less likely to succeed, a coup attempt is more likely.

Also, as the military expects challenges to its interests, peace deals following civil wars raise the likelihood of a coup. This is due to the fact that peace accords frequently contain clauses that pose a direct threat to the military’s position. Particularly risky are those that necessitate military integration—a formal procedure for integrating former militants into the armed services. The government’s willingness to reform the military for the benefit of the rebels creates clear incentives for the military to interfere while it is still strong and unintegrated, which presents a commitment challenge for maintaining the status quo of the war. Conversely, coups have also preceded civil wars as the coup phenomenon and its authoritarian tenets see ethnic wars and fears of ethnic dominance. Additionally, coups carry the risk of the instrumentalization of identity against other identities.

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FOOTNOTES

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