

# Not Yet Requiem For Coup De'tats: The West African Experience

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## ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the history during the latter years of colonialism and the euphemism of independence as it swept across West Africa. After independence, conflicts started between the nationalists turned politicians and/officials and soldiers who served the colonialist governments. The new found freedom unearthed the ethnic tension existing between the political and military leaders. Also, political independence did not translate to economic prosperity for the common Africans as was expected it would with the demise of colonialism. Rather the post-colonial leaders became corrupt. The military as the guardians of the commonwealth overthrew the civilian leaders but in most cases, they became worse than the civilian governments. Rather than solving the contemporary political and socio-economic problems, military coups d'état in West Africa have led to civilian sufferings and turmoil. This has been the case in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, Togo and Mali. The future trend is that coups will remain a common phenomenon as long as political and economic instability prevails.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism, Coup, Ethnicity, Military

## INTRODUCTION

As nation after nation attained self-governments and independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, euphoria and new hopes swept across West Africa. There were new dreams and expectations as the colonial masters were handing over the instruments of power to the indigenous peoples. This was the end of a long freedom struggle in which so many suffered in subjection and human exploitation.

The wind of change, as Mr. Harold McMillan, a British Prime Minister, later called it, started sweeping through the colonial Anglophone and Francophone West Africa in the early 1950's. Suddenly, there was the realization that the sub-continent had to be free from colonial domination and exploitation. Blowing through West Africa, as in the rest of Africa, was a new fervour for revolt and nationalism. The revolt which was mainly spiritual was meant to drive the colonial masters from the African soil; the nationalism to mobilize the masses to the forefront in a fight for self-determination, liberty and human dignity. The astonishing success of the anti-colonialist crusade in India, led by Mahatma Gandhi, was to become a great source of inspiration to African nationalists. India became independent in 1947.

## PRE-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

As the spirit of nationalism gained momentum throughout the continent the colonial rulers started accepting realities. Change was inevitable. Various national political parties and leaders started getting recognition from the colonial administration. Political activities, which previously meant jail, detention or banishment, were now being freely carried out. Nationalists and party leaders could organize and address political rallies so long as they were not subversive to the government. Nationalist politicians such as the fiery Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, nationalistic Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone, Azikiwe and Tafawa Balewa of Nigeria, later emerged as heads of their independent States.

In the Anglophone West African countries, the British started easing off control and slowly but gradually relinquishing power by the establishment of interim governments. National elections in which all the registered political parties participated were held. The interim governments were then formed, with ministers and chief ministers drawn. Each government was overseen by a British Governor, such being the British idea of 'self-government'. On attaining full independence a prime minister was then appointed, and the British officially handed over the instruments of government to their indigenous successors. This was the time that the colonial flag would go down for the last time and a new national flag hoisted for the first time. It was an occasion that was received with much excitement, pride and joy. The day of independence was a day celebrated with much pomp and pageantry and nationwide festivities. This excitement, however, did not last long, as many West African countries were to later find out.

The colonial military set up was a different issue. On a nationalistic level and from a patriotic standpoint the military was viewed by the indigenous peoples as a bird of a totally different feather. The colonial legacy left military organizations that were not fully accepted in the African society. During the sensitive days of struggle for freedom and independence the general populace and the local politicians had developed an almost allergic fear and mistrust for soldiers. As very well observed by W.F. Gutteridge:

Nationalist politicians saw them as agents of imperial rule suppressing political demonstrations and protecting European property. Though they had won glory by serving overseas in the two world wars, their imperial activities caused them to be regarded in some quarters as armies of occupation or at best as mercenaries in the service of a foreign power. This impression was assisted by a recruitment policy that preferred subjectively defined 'martial races' or those who were 'worthwhile soldiers'. The ensuing tribal imbalance necessarily made more difficult than it would otherwise have been the army's achievement of national status as an institution. (Gutteridge: 1975:6)

Also, Claude Welch opined that "the armed forces of contemporary Africa originated from the forces of European occupation and control". (Welch: 232)

The politicians, therefore, the military had no positive role in the process of the freedom struggle, and soldiers did not, therefore, need to be rewarded or accorded any special considerations. The Africanization process was given priority in the areas of civil administration. West Africans took over senior civil servant posts that were previously held by Europeans. This initial failure to Africanize the command hierarchy in the Armed Forces was later to become a major area for concern and a source of military grievances that were to turn catastrophic in most newly independent West African nations.

### **POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

At the time of independence in March 1957, Ghana had probably the highest standard of education in the entire black Africa. In spite of this impressive position, only a mere 10% of the commissioned officers were indigenous.

The post-independence era found many fledgling West African governments groping in the dark for stability and direction. Soon, many governments found out that the new state of nationhood meant much more than just the creation of a national flag, the composition of a national anthem and the election of a president. The military, which the nationalist politicians had grown to despise and mistrust during the pre-independence era, had to blend into this new national image. Politicians viewed the military as a tool to be utilized in subduing political opponents and in projecting personal power across the country. This tendency was viewed negatively in the professional military circles. It was seen as gross interference in military professionalism. Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana probably contributed to his own downfall by his undue meddling in the professional integrity of his army both at home and abroad. For example, President Nkrumah made the decision to send Ghanaians to the Congo in 1960 as part of the UN contingent. On several occasions Nkrumah instructed the Ghana contingent, and in the process contradicting what had already been issued by the United Nations Command. This practice frustrated the Ghanaian soldiers who saw it as an unnecessary intrusion into their professional responsibilities.

The newly independent West African nations took over what were essentially colonial armies. In the majority of the cases, the army was relatively small and ill-equipped. One major priority was to eliminate the colonial mentality that existed in the military by giving the armed forces a more national outlook. This obviously called for instituting clearly visible changes. The uniforms had to be redesigned to reflect a more national character.

The names of the regiments, the names of the barracks and even the tunes of martial music had all to be modified to identify with the new nation. As pointed out earlier, there existed a noticeable tribal imbalance in the national make-up of the military as a result of the colonialists' belief in 'martial tribes' or natural warriors.

Preference for a culture and the recruitment of speakers of a language that discouraged literacy in Western technology and education, produced the legacy of an educational and technological vacuum in the army, and helped to spawn serious political consequences in the polity after colonialism. Gutteridge (1970: 74)

Ejiogu, E.C. couldn't put it more succinctly,

The paradox is that, while the divisions that resulted from the fractured composition of the army continued to serve Britain's imperial cause well, even up until the last days of colonialism, it helped to open up Nigeria for political instability immediately after independence. (Ejiogu: 106)

In order to rectify this situation recruitment had to be conducted on a national scale with every tribe represented, on a pro rata basis, according to the known population figures at the time. Only in this way could tribal tension and rivalry be minimized. It was humanly impracticable, certainly, to totally eradicate tribalism due the ethnic customs and traditions so permanently intra-woven in African society. This inherent African character of tribalism that is so much imbedded in local culture is a potentially explosive social phenomenon that was later to cause civil war in Nigeria.

As the military was struggling to attain a national character in order to gain national acceptance, the politicians were becoming more self-seeking, power-hungry and ambitious. Some were out seeking instant wealth for themselves, their friends and relatives. Nepotism became rampant, commonplace and a norm. Others were out experimenting on new and foreign ideologies in the name of African socialism. These were ideologies that had no bearing or relevance to the improvement of the lives of the ordinary man. Some of these governments started openly courting the Eastern bloc for advice and guidance. It did not take the ordinary citizens long to realize that these so-called progressive governments were not delivering the goods fast enough. Corruption had become an accepted way of life. Mismanagement of the economy coupled with sheer incompetence had led to runaway inflation and unaffordable prices. Unemployment and crime rates were on the increase. Yet the greedy get-rich-quick politicians continued getting richer. These were the kind of situations to be found in Ghana, Nigeria, Guinea and other countries when their governments fell to the military.

In the majority of the coups that have occurred, the military has deemed it a national and patriotic obligation to rescue the country from total collapse and thereby restore lost national prestige. Although these coups d'état have been executed in the guise of national interest and patriotic duty, more often than not, military regimes have turned out to be more corrupt, oppressive and downright inefficient than the civilian governments they deposed.

### **HARVEST OF COUPS**

The period between 1960 and 1970 and slightly beyond has generally been called the 'decade of coups' in Africa. Once coups started in West Africa they became like a wild African bushfire. They swept through the entire sub-continent at an alarmingly high speed. The scoreboard read something like this:

Benin

- 1963–Oct 28th: Christophe Soglo overthrows Hubert Maga
- 1965–Nov 27th: Christophe Soglo overthrows Sourou-Migan Apithy
- 1967–Dec 16th: Maurice Kouandété overthrows Christophe Soglo
- 1972–Oct 26th: Mathieu Kérékou overthrows Justin Ahomadégbé-Tométin Burkina Faso
- 1966–Jan 3rd: Sangoulé Lamizana overthrows Maurice Yaméogo
- 1980–Nov 25th: Saye Zerbo overthrows Sangoulé Lamizana
- 1982–Nov 7th: Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo overthrows Saye Zerbo
- 1983–Aug 4th: Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré overthrow Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo
- 1987–Oct 15th: Blaise Compaoré overthrows Thomas Sankara Chad
- 1975–Apr 13th: Noël Milarew Odingar overthrows François Tombalbaye
- 1982–Jun 7th: Hissène Habré overthrows Goukouni Oueddei
- 1990–Dec 1st: Idriss Déby overthrows Hissène Habré Côte d'Ivoire
- 1999–Dec 24th: Robert Guéï overthrows Henri Konan Bédié
- 2011–Apr 11th: Alassane Ouattara overthrows Laurent Gbagbo Gambia
- 1994–Jul 22nd: Yahya Jammeh overthrows Dawda Jawara Ghana

- 1966–Feb 24th: Joseph Arthur Ankrah overthrows Kwame Nkrumah
- 1972–Jan 13th: Ignatius Kutu Acheampong overthrows Kofi Abrefa Busia
- 1978–Jul 5th: Fred Akuffo overthrows Ignatius Kutu Acheampong
- 1979–Jun 4th: Jerry John Rawlings overthrows Fred Akuffo
- 1981–Dec 31st: Jerry John Rawlings overthrows Hilla Limann Guinea
- 1984–Apr 3rd: Lansana Conté overthrows Louis Lansana Beavogui
- 2008–Dec 24th: Moussa Dadis Camara overthrows Aboubacar Sompore Guinea-Bissau
- 1980–Nov 14: João Bernardo Vieira overthrows Luís Cabral
- 1999–May 7: Ansumane Mané overthrows João Bernardo Vieira
- 2003–Sep 14: Veríssimo Correia Seabra overthrows Kumba Yala
- 2012–April 12: Army overthrows the government. Liberia
- 1980–Apr 12th: Staff Sergeant Samuel K. Doe overthrows President William R. Tolbert, Jr.
- 1990–Sep 9th: Prince Johnson overthrows President Samuel K. Doe Mali
- 1968–Nov 19th: Moussa Traoré overthrows Modibo Keita
- 1991–Mar 26th: Amadou Toumani Touré overthrows Moussa Traoré
- 2012–Mar 22nd: Military overthrows Amadou Toumani Touré Mauritania
- 1978–Jul 10th: Mustafa Ould Salek overthrows Moktar Ould Daddah
- 1979–Apr 6th: Ahmad Ould Bouceif and Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrow Mustafa Ould alek
- 1980–Jan 4th: Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah overthrows Mohamed Mahmoud Ould Louly
- 1984–Dec 12th: Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya overthrows Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah
- 2005–Aug 3rd: Ely Ould Mohamed Vall overthrows Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya
- 2008–Aug 6th: Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz overthrows Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi Niger
- 1974–Apr 15th: Seyni Kountché overthrows Hamani Diori
- 1996–Jan 27th: Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara overthrows Mahamane Ousmane
- 1999–Apr 9th: Daouda Malam Wanke overthrows Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara
- 2010–Feb 18th: Salou Djibo overthrows Mamadou Tandja Nigeria
- 1966–Jan 15th: Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu overthrows Abubakar Tafawa Balewa
- 1966–Jul 29th: Yakubu Gowon overthrows Johnson Aguiyi-Ironsi
- 1975–Jul 29th: Murtala Mohammed overthrows Yakubu Gowon
- 1983–Dec 31st: Muhammadu Buhari overthrows Shehu Shagari
- 1985–Aug 27th: Ibrahim Babangida overthrows Muhammadu Buhari
- 1993–Nov 17th: Sani Abacha overthrows Ernest Shonekan São Tomé and Príncipe
- 1995–Aug 15th: Manuel Quintas de Almeida overthrows Miguel Trovoada for 6 days
- 2003–Jul 16th: Fernando Pereira (major) overthrows Fradique de Menezes for 7 days Sierra Leone
- 1967–Mar 21st: David Lansana overthrows Siaka Stevens
- 1968–Apr 19th: John Amadu Bangura overthrows Andrew Juxon-Smith
- 1992–Apr 29th: Valentine Strasser overthrows Joseph Saidu Momoh
- 1996–Jan 16th: Julius Maada Bio overthrows Valentine Strasser
- 1997–May 25: Johnny Paul Koroma overthrows Ahmed Tejan Kabbah
- 1998–Feb 12th: ECOMOG overthrows Johnny Paul Koroma Togo
- 1963–Jan 13th: Étienne Eyadéma and Emmanuel Bodjolle overthrow Sylvanus Olympio
- 1967–Jan 13th: Étienne Eyadéma and Kléber Dadjo overthrow Nicolas Grunitzky

(List of successful coups: Wikipedia)

### TRENDS IN WEST AFRICA

By 1985, approximately half of the sub-continent's states were led by military or civil-military governments. Other states also had records of predatory attacks by their military forces. Decalo (1976a: 6) No doubt, the coup d'état and the military regime have become the most prevalent political phenomena in West Africa just like in the rest of the continent.

In an effort to justify the overthrow of the government one African officer is reputed to have claimed that a military take over and rule by officers never constitutes a revolution in tropical Africa but rather a limited modification of existing arrangements. This reasoning tends to border on naivety. What then has led to such an apparently endless spate of coups? Looking at the entire sub-continent, there appears to emerge some causes that share general commonality in the majority of the States. A protracted economic crisis has in most cases led to the failure of the political leadership. When faced with runaway inflation some of the more common

measures have been price control, strict currency control, increased taxes and devaluation. Unfortunately these have not always been popular measures and have instead tended to generate countrywide dissatisfaction and national outrage. Military intervention has often occurred in these circumstances.

Political squabbling, whereby the civilian leaders have been unable to resolve their differences in the interest of the nation, has led to military coups. Internal political problems within the ruling elite had the outward effect of leading the masses into disappointment, disillusion and loss of faith in the government. The democratic process has on occasions been maligned by the civilian leaders, a case is the abolition of presidential term limits in 2008 by President Paul Biya of Cameroun to win his sixth consecutive term in office, the subsequent flawed electoral processes as occasioned by connivance between the party in power and the electoral commission subvert the democratic process and normal leads to instability which rogue elements in the military are eager to cash in on.

The inefficiency of the civilian government, coupled with corruption and maladministration has been a common factor. After independence, the people expected their own government to be more familiar with their problems and be able to proffer solutions to them. This was not always so.

Military coups are but indicator of political instability or poor governmental performance in a country.  
(Ejiogu: 123)

A problem that is not likely to be resolved easily in West Africa is 'tribalism' or the ethnic factor. Ethnic groupings have created more national disunity than any other single factor. Governments have tended to be more tribal than national in structure, with inter-tribal oppression becoming common practice. This in effect has created more societal tension and turmoil.

Military intervention has not always been conducted to 'rescue' the nation from political ills. Coups have been linked directly or indirectly with personal ambitions and the craving for power by some specific key players. Decalo (1976b:231). This was in fact the case in Dahomey (now Republic of Benin) in 1965. In other instances, officers have led coups to regain lost prestige or to pre-empt an impending purge. Coupled with this, interpersonal clashes have occurred between the civilian and military elites and thereby provoking takeovers. Cases in point have been Togo in 1963 and several others.

## CONCLUSION

In retrospect, the results of military rule in West Africa have been very disappointing indeed. Besides being unable to solve the problems they set out to solve in the first place, military regimes in some cases have created situations that did not exist with civilian governments. Military rule has not necessarily been free of incompetence, corruption and maladministration that their civilian predecessors were alleged to have encouraged. Soldiers have been known to be more of wealth-seekers, property grabbers and bribe-takers. They have openly engaged themselves in self enrichment activities through the barrel of the gun and through intimidation. They have become better embezzlers than their forerunners.

Today, the coup d'état phenomenon still looms over West Africa. The coup has not improved the economic conditions and political stability. Rather it drives the sub-continent into further suffering, turmoil, insecurity and uncertainty.

Ostracizing military regimes did not automatically lead to improvement in governance. Outlawing military coups is one thing, and scrutinizing civilian governments and making them respect their own constitutions and democratic principles is another. Many civilian governments that rose to power through 'democratic' elections have acted in a weird way, changing constitutions and introducing new laws that make it a lot harder to effect peaceful transfer of political power. In many instances it led to political crisis and anarchy. Probably this explains why the 2010 coup in Niger and the recent development in Mali did not arise bitter resentments against the military junta. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) did not outrightly condemn the coup, instead asked that the coup leaders act "quickly to restore civilian rule".

The recent coups in Mali, Niger Republic and Guinea-Bissau should not be treated in isolation of the broader political developments in Africa. They are actually indicators of nebulous future in the realm of democratic development if serious and sincere efforts are not made towards strengthening State apparatus, mitigating corruption and corrupt practices to the barest minimum, curbing patronage politics and enhancing socio-

economic development, West Africa will be reverting to the not too glorious era of military coups of 1960's - 80's.

But one thing is certain. As long as there is economic and political instability military coups will occur; and as long as military regimes exist, counter-coups will continue to occur.

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