Fragile Democracies and the Resurgence of Military Regime in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Post-colonial Africa is burdened with numerous innermost and outermost challenges. This paper argues that decades of dreadful democratic experience in Africa have rather reincarnated some sorts of discontent and rebellious confrontations in some states in Africa. This is exemplified in the recent military coups in Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, Gabon and the failed coups in Guinea Bissau and Gambia. The study obtains its data from secondary source materials employs the historical method of data analysis descriptive statistics and adopts frustration-aggression theory in explaining the contradictions that appeared to have stultified democracy in Africa which have denied the people the corresponding gains surrounding democratic practice. It concludes that ending the resurgence of military coups in Africa demands urgent steps to enthrone good governance in Africa's democratic states. The paper recommends the institutionalization of governance instead of the prevailing personalization of state institutions in Africa.

Keywords: fragile, democracies, resurgence, military regime, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Africa appears to have witnessed four notable political epochs. These are the traditional African Society, the era of colonial incursion, the period of decolonization and the fashionable African State system. These periods are distinctiveness, especially in terms of the pattern by which the society is governed. The traditional African society was organized based on family system, clans, emirates, kingships and kingdoms. The traditional system was primarily ruled by kings and emperors, with many of these societies imbibing a greater sense of commonality. The colonial

incursion in the 18th century and subsequent effective occupation arising from the Berlin conference of 1885 virtually wasted away the existing forms of governance in Africa. Ekeh (1975) argued that the establishment of colonial rule led to the emergence of two publics (moral and amoral publics) in Africa. Colonialism therefore eroded the existing traditionalism that was enshrined in faultless Africa's pattern of governance.

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

By the way, the floundering conditions arising from poor governance, mismanagement, socio-economic and political instability and corruption that precipitated leadership deficit in many of the newly independent states in Africa paved the way for military incursions in many African states. Many of the new states in Africa experienced military coups and counter-coups within the first five years of their independence, an example of such is the first military coup in Africa that took place in Egypt in 1952 when Col.Gamel Abdel Nasser unseated King Farouk. In West Africa the first military coup took place in Togo on January 13, 1963, in which President Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated, followed by Benin Republic in November 1965, then the sequence coup d'état of 1966 Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Nigeria. By the 1980s, military despots had lucratively established themselves as alternatives to the undesirable leadership shortfall confronting the African region of the world. Siegle (2021) explained that between 1960 and 2000 Africa had experienced devastating eighty-two (82) military coups. For him, these coups contributed to the recurring instability, corruption, human rights abuses, impunity, and poverty that characterized many African countries during that era.

The third wave of democratization in the 1990s orchestrated the debacle of authoritarianism and the enthronement of democracy in many states in Africa. Despite the growth and spread of democracy in Africa, especially in the last three decades, irregular military coups have continued

to threaten the sustenance and consolidation of democracy in some African states. As can be seen, the spate of military coups in Africa threatens peace, stability and sustainable growth. Between 2000 and 2023, over eleven (11) military coups have occurred in Africa. In 2022 alone, there were four attempted and successful military coups in Mali, Burkina-Faso and Guinea-Bissau. And the two newest military coups d'état in the Niger Republic on 26,july 2023 and the Gabonese Republic on 30th August 2023. The majority of the recent coups occurred in the West African sub-region. For instance, Mali alone has recorded three coups in just more than a decade. This means that nearly 20 per cent of African countries have succumbed to coups since 2013 (single, 2021) Certainly, the era of worldwide anti-coup norms that criminalized military coups is still far from discouraging, dissuading and eliminating military juntas in Africa. The coups in Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, and Gabon and the failed coups in Guinea Bissau and Gambia indicate that many African states are still on the threshold of relapsing into military autocracy if urgent steps are not taken to deepen democracy in the region. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines democracies fragile to determine the extent it has contributed to the resurgence of the military regime in Africa.

Theoretical Context

The prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of the African continent appear grossly deplorable. As a result, gargantuan theoretical positions explaining states' or continental inabilities can be appropriately used in dissecting the maladies of democracies in Africa. Among these theories is the elite theory. Essentially, elite theory as propounded by Vilfredo Pareto, Roberto Michels, Gaetano Mosca and Jose Ortega Gassat among others, is predicated on the conjecture that every society is composed of two classes of people (Varma, 1975). The theorists is a theory of state that seeks to describe and explain power relationships in contemporary society. The theory posits that a small minority, consisting of members of the economic elite and policy-planning networks, holds the most power and that this power is independent of democratic elections. The basic characteristics of this theory are that power is concentrated, the elites are unified, the non-elites are diverse and powerless, the elite's interests are unified due to common backgrounds and positions and the defining characteristic of power is institutional position. For instance, the master minders of military coups in Africa are not the proletariats. In Africa, virtually all military coups

are plotted and executed by the military oligarchs or elites in the ranks and files of the military. Coups therefore promote and protect the narrow interests of the elites.

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

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

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

Following from the above, military coups in Africa and more specifically West Africa could be lanced from the perspective of elitist power contestation, conspiracy of the ruling oligarch and bandwagon effect that characterized the post-independent politics in Africa. However, it is the

position of this paper that the most appropriate empirical understanding of the prevailing resurgence of military coups in West Africa would rest on the impact of the present frustrations steering on the faces of the populace in the region. These frustrations are made manifest in diverse forms. There are socio-economic, political, cultural and leadership frustrations that fraught almost every Africa's political space. Indeed, the rising number of people in horrible poverty, increasing unemployment, corruption, human rights abuse, crass impunity, wars, and rebellious activities have compounded the state of insecurity. Also, leadership deficits are all horrible incidences frustrating many Africans. Presently, West African nations have high and unacceptable inflationary rates. People die of preventable diseases in West Africa. There is also environmental degradation, injustice, lack of infrastructure, ethnic conflicts, militancy, terrorism and insecurity of different sorts, all of these breed hostility and intermittently produce aggression against democratic leaders who are rightly or inadvertently seen as being responsible for people's ordeal. No doubt, therefore, that people tend to respond aggressively to the above frustrations. For instance, in Mali, Guinea, Burkina-Faso and some other African nations such as Chad and Sudan, sometimes citizens call for military intervention and some citizens overtly celebrate military incursions. More specifically, in January 2022, hundreds of people trooped out to Ouagadougou (the capital city of Burkina-Faso) to celebrate the military coup that dethroned the government of former President Roch Marc Christian Kabore. Also, in 2017, Zimbabweans took to the streets to celebrate the military coup that ousted former leader Robert Mugabe. While these celebrations may not mean an end to maladministration (for instance in Sudan people celebrated a military coup and after some months confronted the same military to go) they signify a needed change that may have temporarily extinguished or eased frustration. In all, a crop of leaders in Africa and West Africa in particular are either deliberately or unknowingly under-developing the already underdeveloped institutions, political systems and people. This has led to an accumulated frustration which seems to have compelled some people to misconstrue democracy as being incapable of addressing the challenges confronting the West African region hence, the resolve to attack the system if not completely dismantle it in search of peace, stability, security and development. Frustration-aggression theory therefore remains the basis for understanding the recurring military incursions in the politics of Africa. The utility of the theory lies in its capacity to demonstrate that some of the coups in West Africa occurred as a result of people's restive

tendencies towards democratic government. This restiveness sometimes serves as an invitation of military or even public invitation by the people.

Conceptualizing Fragile Democracies and the Resurgence of Military Regime in Africa.

Without a doubt, the escalating tendencies of democracy, particularly during the third wave of democracy in the 1990s and its widening acceptability in the aftermath of the third wave tend to have amplified its subscription. Virtually everywhere in the World, people have embraced democracy and it seems to have become a household concept in contemporary societies. Part of the reason for this development is the people's growing awareness and desire to ensure accountability, equity and justice. These principles are well implanted in democratic principles as enunciated by Nnoli (2003); and Appadorai (2004).

Thus, Appadorai (2004) described democracy as a system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representatives periodically elected by them. He further explained that a state may, in political science, be termed a democracy if it provides institutions for the expression and, in the last analysis, the supremacy of the popular will on basic questions of social direction and policy (Placeholder1)(Nwanegbo & Odigbo 2012). Therefore, democracy embodies righteous principles necessary for an inclusive, progressive and stable society. In all, democracy has inbuilt principles and institutional mechanisms for development thereby establishing linkages between democratic practices and development in every society. With these natural or inborn abilities, it strives to provide the greatest happiness to a greater number of people in society.

Subsequently, it can be stated that fragile democracies and the resurgence of military regimes in Africa can be seen as a lack of strong institutions, and struggles to maintain the rule of law and protect democratic principles. This fragility can stem from weak governance structures, political polarization, limited citizen participation, and susceptibility to external pressures. Democratic backsliding gradually erodes and transitions towards authoritarian rule. It might involve the erosion of civil liberties, stifling of political opposition, restrictions on media freedom, and manipulations and open doors for the resurgence of military regimes. Weak institutions corruption, socioeconomic challenges, ethnic and regional divisions, and external interference. These factors

intertwine and create conditions that undermine democratic governance, making it receptive to military interventions.

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

Democracies, Disillusionments and Resurgence of Military Regime in Africa

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

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

it is obvious that democracy has no viable alternative in Africa. Its practice has promoted freedom, equity, fairness, transparency and accountability in governance in Africa.

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

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

In all, the recent coups and counter coups can be described as the ultimate consequences of the failure of states in Africa to deliver the needed goods. Incidentally, military resurgence is an aberration, hence its inability to solve the problems facing these nations. Of the three nations with successful coups in the last two years in Africa (Sudan, Mali and Burkina Faso) none has stabilized the polity nor solved the perceived problems that induced the coup. More specifically, coups in Mali and Burkina Faso were justified on the grounds of the inability of the civilian government to deal with violent extremism such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. To date, military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso have yet to dismantle these security organizations. Siegle (2021) stated that between 2020 and 2021 attacks in the region by militant Islamist organizations increased 70 percent, from 1,180 to 2,005. In all, democratic failures in Africa precipitated disillusionment. Disillusionment

provoked coups but because the military regime lacked requisite knowledge to deal with the existing challenges, it only intensified the agony of the people.

Retooling Africa's Democracies for Development

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recommendations

Given the findings in this paper, the following recommendations are made:

i.   To effectively address the challenges of fragile democracies and the resurgence of military regimes in Africa, a comprehensive approach is necessary. This approach should encompass strengthening institutions, addressing socioeconomic disparities, promoting regional cooperation, and engaging in diplomatic efforts to preserve democratic gains and prevent authoritarian setbacks.

ii.   Pathways to resilience: Efforts should focus on enhancing the rule of law, building and empowering independent institutions, promoting political participation, and advocating for transparency and accountability.

iii. Coup-proofing strategies: These may include the strategic placing of family, ethnic, and religious groups in the military; and fragmenting of military and security agencies. However, coup-proofing reduces military effectiveness as loyalty is prioritized over experience when filling key positions within the military.

iv.   Democratization in Africa also requires a re-orientation to suit local circumstances.

v.   Supporting the development of constitutions and legislation: Democratic constitutions and legislation build the foundation for flourishing democracy. Without these cornerstones, democratic processes can unravel.

vi. Regional and international responses: Regional organizations like the African Union and sub-regional bodies have a role to play in responding to threats to democracy in Africa. They can monitor electoral processes, mediate conflicts, and initiate diplomatic efforts to preserve or restore democratic governance. International actors, including donor countries, should these efforts while promoting human rights, democracy, and good governance in their partnerships with African states.

Conclusion

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

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