
THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COUPS: UNRAVELLING THE ECONOMIC UNDERCURRENTS PROPELLING THE RESURGENCE OF MILITARY TUMULT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This study critically examines the political economy of military coups in Africa, with a focus on identifying the economic drivers behind the resurgence of military interventions in governance. Using Samuel Decalo's Structural Theory of Coups, the research explores how entrenched economic vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses, and external pressures create conditions favourable to military takeovers. The analysis moves beyond political instability to emphasize the role of economic challenges, such as poverty, unemployment, income inequality, and fiscal mismanagement, in contributing to the recurrence of coups across the continent. Drawing on secondary data from peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, and credible online sources, the study traces patterns of military involvement from the post-colonial era to the present. Findings reveal that states experiencing economic crises are particularly vulnerable to military interventions, with militaries often justifying their actions as necessary for stabilizing deteriorating economies. The resurgence of coups is therefore primarily linked to economic instability, institutional fragility, and legitimacy deficits. The study proposes targeted recommendations to strengthen economic governance, promote inclusive development, and enhance institutional resilience. Reforms in civil-military relations, coupled with regional cooperation, are crucial for reducing the militarization of political processes. It argues that addressing systemic economic deficiencies and reinforcing institutional frameworks are essential to breaking the cycle of military interference. Ultimately, sustainable governance in Africa requires a paradigm shift in coup prevention strategies, focusing on mitigating the deeper economic factors that drive military encroachments into civilian rule.

Keywords: Coups, Economic Undercurrents, Military Tumult, Resurgence, Political Economy.

Introduction

The post-colonial political trajectory of Africa has been profoundly shaped by the recurrent occurrence of military coups, events that have left an indelible imprint on the continent's governance structures and economic landscapes. While the democratization wave that swept across Africa in the late 20th century appeared to signal a potential end to military interventions, the contemporary resurgence of coups in several African states has reignited scholarly inquiry into the deeper causes of this phenomenon. Traditionally, these military interventions have been attributed to factors such as political instability, weak institutional frameworks, and ethnic tensions (Mohammed, 2022). However, a more nuanced analytical perspective reveals that economic forces have been instrumental in both the initiation and recurrence of military coups across the continent.

Economic discontent, characterized by rising unemployment, inflation, widespread poverty, and deteriorating living standards, creates fertile conditions for military interventions (Rosenje, Siyanbola & Adeniyi (2024). During periods of economic downturn, public frustration with civilian governance often reaches a critical threshold, enabling military factions to position themselves as agents of stability and order (Ruvimbo & Johannes, 2023). The mismanagement of public resources and competition over economic control further exacerbate these crises, undermining civil order and providing a veneer of legitimacy to military takeovers, which are frequently justified on the grounds of restoring stability and economic management.

The recent resurgence of military coups on the African continent demands a rigorous exploration of the economic undercurrents that catalyse these events. African states, in recent years, have faced severe economic challenges, including crippling external debt, volatility in global commodity markets, and the fallout from global economic recessions. These factors have compounded public dissatisfaction with the civilian governance structures, contributing to an environment where military intervention is seen by some as a necessary response to governance failures. The weakening of state institutions and the erosion of democratic norms amidst economic crises have further intensified this perception, creating a climate of uncertainty where military coups are seen by certain factions as an expedient solution (Vande & Yusufu, 2024; Rosenje, Siyanbola & Adeniyi (2024).

According to Anyoko-Shaba (2022), the resurgence of military coups d'état in African politics underscores a critical disruption to democratic governance across the continent, illuminating a deeper and systemic leadership crisis that has taken root within various African societies. This phenomenon is reflective of broader institutional failures, characterized by weak political structures, endemic corruption, and the erosion of public trust in civilian governments.

The recurrent military interventions signal not only the fragility of democratic institutions but also expose a governance vacuum that has historically plagued African states. Scholars such as Gyimah-Boadi (2021) have argued that this leadership crisis is fundamentally intertwined with the inability of post-colonial African governments to address socio-economic disparities, perpetuate inclusive governance, and uphold the rule of law. As these issues persist, the citizenry becomes increasingly disillusioned with democratic processes, creating a fertile ground for military adventurism.

In light of the preceding discussion, this study aims to critically investigate the economic foundations underlying the resurgence of military coups in Africa. It will analyse the intricate relationship between economic instability, governance deficits, and the dynamics that drive military interventions.

Statement of the Problem

The recent resurgence of military coups in Africa, despite decades of concerted efforts toward democratization, underscores the enduring challenges of political and economic instability that continue to afflict the continent. While traditional analyses of coups have predominantly focused on political, ethnic, and institutional factors, there remains a critical gap in the understanding of the economic undercurrents that contribute to these disruptions. Economic factors—such as rising unemployment, inflation, pervasive poverty, and the mismanagement of resources, play a fundamental role in exacerbating public discontent, thereby rendering military intervention an attractive alternative for those disillusioned with civilian governance.

This study therefore aims to address the scholarly lacuna by critically examining how economic pressures function as catalysts for military coups and how these economic variables shape the trajectory and outcomes of such interventions. By shifting the analytical lens to the economic dimensions of coup d'états, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the nexus between economic instability and political upheaval in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the Structural Theory of Coups, which was formulated by Samuel Decalo in the early 1970s. Decalo's seminal work, *Coups and Army Rule in Africa: Studies in Military Style* (1976), established a foundational framework for understanding military coups, particularly within African states. In this analysis, Decalo systematically examined the structural factors that contribute to the recurrence of coups, including political instability, economic fragility, and weak institutional frameworks in post-colonial African nations.

These assumptions focus on the structural weaknesses within a state, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Here are the main assumptions:

1. **Weak Political Institutions:** Decalo assumes that the lack of strong, stable political institutions creates a power vacuum that the military may exploit. Fragile or dysfunctional institutions fail to provide effective governance, making coups more likely.
2. **Economic Instability:** The theory assumes that economic difficulties—such as widespread poverty, unemployment, or financial crises—exacerbate political instability. Economic hardship often leads to dissatisfaction among the populace, creating conditions in which the military might intervene to "restore order."
3. **Ethnic and Social Divisions:** Decalo assumes that societies deeply divided along ethnic or social lines are more prone to coups. Fragmented societies with competing groups often struggle with political unity, and the military may seize power under the pretext of national unity or stability.
4. **Legitimacy Deficit in Civilian Leadership:** Another assumption is that weak or illegitimate civilian governments, which lack broad public support, are vulnerable to military intervention. A perceived failure in leadership provides the military with justification for stepping in.

5. **Militarization of Society:** Decalo's theory assumes that in societies where the military plays an outsized role-whether through a history of intervention in politics or excessive military influence-the likelihood of a coup is greater. The normalization of military involvement in governance makes coups more acceptable.
6. **External Influences:** The theory also assumes that external factors, such as foreign military aid or support, can embolden military actors to seize power. International interests in a state's stability or resources may encourage or deter coup attempts.
7. **Absence of Political Legitimacy and Rule of Law:** Decalo assumes that where there is no respect for the rule of law and political legitimacy, a coup becomes an attractive option for solving political crises. Military officers might feel they are better suited to rule if the existing system lacks credibility.

Literature Review

For clarity and coherence, this section will be organized under the following sub-headings: Economic drivers of military coups; institutional weakness and coup vulnerability; the political economy of coups in post-colonial Africa; empirical analysis of military coups in African States; and contemporary trends and the resurgence of military interventions.

Economic Drivers of Military Coups

1. Economic Instability and Poverty

The nexus between economic instability and the incidence of military coups has been extensively explored in the literature. Economic hardship, characterized by high levels of poverty, inflation, and unemployment, has been identified as a significant driver of political instability and military intervention.

Studies reveal that persistent economic difficulties undermine public trust in civilian governments, creating a fertile ground for military factions to exploit. For instance, research by Collier and Hoeffler (2004) demonstrates that economic decline and high unemployment rates often lead to increased political dissatisfaction and unrest, which military leaders may seize upon to justify their interventions. Similarly, Paldam (2006) emphasizes that inflationary pressures and economic mismanagement erode the legitimacy of civilian governments, thereby increasing the likelihood of coups. These economic hardships create conditions where military interventions are perceived as necessary to restore order and stability.

2. Fiscal Mismanagement and Corruption

The impact of fiscal mismanagement and corruption on the prevalence of military coups is well-documented in academic literature. Poor economic governance, marked by inefficient resource allocation, budgetary deficits, and widespread corruption, significantly undermines state legitimacy and stability. According to Mauro (1995), corruption diverts public resources away from essential services and erodes institutional effectiveness, contributing to an environment ripe for military intervention. Svensson (2005) further argues that fiscal mismanagement exacerbates economic crises, leading to widespread public discontent and weakening the civilian government's control. The correlation between corruption and political instability is underscored by Kauffmann and Kraay (2002), who find that high levels of corruption are closely associated with increased political volatility and susceptibility to coups.

3. Income Inequality and Social Discontent

The relationship between income inequality and political instability is a critical area of study in understanding the drivers of military coups. Research indicates that severe economic disparities exacerbate social discontent, which can destabilize political systems and pave the way for military interventions. Wilkinson (2004) highlights that high levels of income inequality often lead to heightened social tensions and grievances, which can manifest as political unrest and provide opportunities for military actors to intervene. Easterly and Levine (1997) argue that income inequality creates a divisive social environment, weakening the cohesion necessary for effective governance and increasing the likelihood of military takeovers. The empirical evidence suggests that coups are more likely in societies where economic inequality fuels widespread dissatisfaction and unrest.

4. External Economic Influences

The influence of external economic factors on domestic stability and the prevalence of military coups is an important aspect of the literature. Foreign economic aid, debt dependency, and global economic shocks can significantly impact internal stability, influencing the likelihood of military interventions.

Radelet (2006) discusses how dependence on foreign aid can undermine state sovereignty and economic stability, potentially leading to increased vulnerability to coups. Reinhart and Rogoff (2010) provide insights into how global economic crises, such as financial downturns and commodity price shocks, exacerbate domestic economic problems, contributing to political instability. The interplay between external economic pressures and internal political dynamics highlights the complex ways in which global economic factors can influence the propensity for military interventions.

Institutional Weakness and Coup Vulnerability

1. Fragile Political Institutions

The relationship between fragile political institutions and the susceptibility to military coups is a well-documented area of study in political science and African studies. Fragile institutions are often characterized by a lack of capacity, legitimacy, and stability, which can create an environment conducive to military interventions. North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) argue that institutions with weak enforcement mechanisms and poor governance structures are particularly vulnerable to disruptions, including military coups. This fragility is often manifested in the inability to manage conflicts, enforce laws, and provide basic public services, thereby eroding public trust in civilian governments.

In the context of Africa, numerous case studies illustrate how institutional weaknesses have facilitated coups. For example, Lemarchand (2009) highlights the role of weak political institutions in facilitating military takeovers in countries like Burundi and Rwanda, where institutional ineffectiveness and corruption have undermined democratic processes and provided opportunities for military actors to intervene. Similarly, Barkan and Okumu (2005) examine how the collapse of political institutions in Somalia contributed to the rise of military factions and eventual state collapse. The literature indicates that in states where institutions lack coherence and resilience, military coups are more likely as military actors perceive these institutions as ineffective or illegitimate.

2. Legitimacy Deficits in Civilian Governments

Governance failures and legitimacy deficits are crucial factors that contribute to the susceptibility of governments to military coups. When civilian governments fail to address critical issues such as electoral fraud, corruption, and inefficient governance, they often face significant legitimacy deficits. Levitsky and Roberts (2011) explore how legitimacy deficits weaken the authority of civilian governments and create opportunities for military intervention. They argue that when governments are perceived as corrupt or ineffective, the military may justify its actions as necessary to restore order and legitimacy.

In African contexts, studies such as Mazzuca (2010) show that electoral fraud and poor governance can lead to political instability and weaken the legitimacy of civilian administrations, making them more vulnerable to military coups. For instance, the political turmoil and allegations of electoral fraud in countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya have been linked to increased coup risks. The literature suggests that military interventions often occur in environments where civilian governments are unable to effectively address governance failures and maintain political legitimacy.

3. Civil-Military Relations and the Role of the Military in Politics

Civil-military relations play a pivotal role in determining the likelihood of military coups. Historical patterns of military involvement in politics and the institutional factors that enable coups are central to understanding this dynamic. Huntington (1957) provides foundational insights into how civil-military relations influence political stability, arguing that professionalized militaries are less likely to intervene in politics compared to those with less clear boundaries between military and civilian roles.

In the African context, Cox (2011) examines how historical patterns of military intervention have shaped the political landscape in countries such as Egypt, Nigeria, and Ghana. The literature highlights that in states where the military has historically played a significant role in politics, such as in Egypt with its long history of military influence, coups are more prevalent. Additionally, Mamdani (1996) discusses how institutional factors, such as military patronage networks and the lack of effective civilian oversight, enable the military to exert significant influence over political processes, thereby increasing the risk of coups.

The role of the military in politics is further influenced by the nature of military institutions and their relationship with civilian authorities. Erdmann and Engel (2007) argue that in many African states, the military is not only a security actor but also a political player, with vested interests in maintaining political and economic power. This entanglement of military and political interests often results in a higher susceptibility to coups, as military leaders may view such interventions as a means to protect or enhance their positions.

Political Economy of Coups in Post-Colonial Africa

1. Historical Context of Military Coups in Africa

The proliferation of military coups in post-colonial Africa is deeply rooted in the continent's historical and socio-economic conditions following independence. The transition from colonial rule to self-governance often left newly independent African states grappling with a legacy of weak political institutions

economic dependency, and social fragmentation. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2001) argue that the colonial legacy significantly shaped post-colonial state structures, creating institutional frameworks that were susceptible to instability and conflict. This is particularly evident in the context of African states where the abrupt end of colonial rule left power vacuums and administrative voids that were quickly filled by military leaders. Mbembe (2001) discusses how the lack of robust political institutions and the pervasive corruption in post-colonial African states fostered environments conducive to military coups. He posits that the colonial administration's disregard for developing effective governance structures left many African countries with fragile states, where the military emerged as a powerful and often necessary actor in the absence of stable civilian governments.

Mkandawire (2013) provides an analysis of the economic conditions in post-colonial Africa, highlighting how the economic challenges faced by newly independent states, including high levels of poverty, economic mismanagement, and dependency on foreign aid, contributed to political instability and military interventions. These economic difficulties often exacerbated social tensions and undermined the legitimacy of civilian governments, creating fertile ground for military coups.

Empirical Examination of Military Coups in African Nations Mali (Under Military Rule Since August 2020)

In August 2020, Mali experienced a military coup that ousted President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta following widespread protests over alleged corruption, poor governance, and the failure to effectively combat Islamist insurgencies in the northern region. Colonel Assimi Goïta, the coup leader, later became the interim president following another coup in May 2021, which ousted the transitional civilian government. Goïta's government has faced pressure both regionally (from ECOWAS) and internationally to return to civilian rule, but elections have been postponed several times, with the current plan indicating a transition by 2024

Burkina Faso (Under Military Rule Since January 2022)

Burkina Faso has been plagued by political instability, with two coups occurring in 2022. The first in January saw the military oust President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré due to his inability to quell the Islamist insurgency ravaging the country. Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba briefly led the country, but by September 2022, he was overthrown in another coup led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Traoré has remained in power and emphasized the military's role in combating insurgency, although his rule has delayed any potential return to civilian governance.

Guinea (Under Military Rule since September 2021)

In September 2021, Guinea's military, led by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, overthrew President Alpha Condé, who had altered the constitution to extend his term in office. Doumbouya's junta justified the coup by accusing Condé's government of rampant corruption and human rights violations. The coup in Guinea follows a pattern of discontent with leaders extending their rule through constitutional amendments, and while the military junta promised a return to civilian rule, no concrete timeline for elections has been confirmed

4. Chad (Under Military Rule since April 2021)

Chad fell under military rule in April 2021 after the death of long-time President Idriss Déby Itno, who was killed in battle while fighting rebels. His son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, assumed control as the head of the Transitional Military Council. The military justified this transition as necessary for national stability, but critics have viewed it as dynastic succession. Initially, a two-year transition period was announced, with elections expected afterward, but progress toward this has been slow.

5. Sudan (Under Military Rule Since October 2021)

Sudan has been under military rule since the October 2021 coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which overthrew the transitional government established after the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Al-Burhan's government has struggled to maintain control amidst ongoing civil unrest, economic crises, and armed conflicts in the Darfur and South Kordofan regions. There have been repeated protests calling for a return to civilian rule, but negotiations between the military and civilian groups have stalled.

6. Niger (Under Military Rule Since July 2023)

In July 2023, Niger's presidential guard, led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani, deposed democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum. Tchiani cited security concerns, particularly the growing threat of jihadist insurgencies, as reasons for the coup. Niger's coup followed growing frustrations with Bazoum's administration and broader issues such as corruption and insecurity. Tchiani's government has faced regional condemnation from ECOWAS and threats of intervention, but the situation remains unresolved.

Gabon (Under Military Rule Since August 2023)

In August 2023, military officers in Gabon seized power shortly after President Ali Bongo Ondimba was declared the winner of a disputed election. The coup, led by General Brice Oligui Nguema, ended the 56-year rule of the Bongo family. Nguema claimed that the election results were fraudulent and that the country's institutions had been undermined by poor governance. While Nguema promised that reforms would lead to more transparent governance, no clear timeline for restoring civilian rule has been set.

Current Trends and the Resurgence of Coups

This section will be examined under two subheadings: 'Emerging Patterns of Military Coups in the 21st Century' and 'Globalization and Economic Crises as Coup Catalysts'

1. Emerging Patterns of Military Coups in the 21st Century

The resurgence of military coups in the 21st century has become a significant concern, particularly in Africa, where several countries have recently experienced military takeovers.

The trend reflects a complex interplay of economic instability, governance crises, and shifting geopolitical dynamics. Norris and Inglehart (2022) provide a broad analysis of this trend, emphasizing that contemporary coups often arise in contexts where economic mismanagement and weakened democratic institutions have eroded public confidence in civilian governments.

Williams and Hough (2023) highlight that contemporary coups are increasingly characterized by their strategic and selective nature, often emerging in contexts where economic mismanagement and governance failures have severely undermined public trust in democratic processes. This trend is further exacerbated by the fracturing of state institutions and the erosion of rule of law, which create a power vacuum that military actors are poised to exploit. The literature underscores that these coups are not mere power grabs but are often framed as corrective measures aimed at restoring order and stability in the face of failing governments.

Lynch and Malinowski (2023) analyse the role of international actors in shaping the resurgence of coups, noting that the global response to military interventions has evolved. The international community's response, including sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and intervention, has varied, influencing the outcomes and sustainability of coups. The literature reveals that while international condemnation can sometimes curb military ambitions, it can also lead to further entrenchment of military regimes, especially when domestic support for the coup is strong.

2. Globalization and Economic Crises as Coup Catalysts

The interplay between globalization and economic crises has become a significant catalyst for political instability and military coups in recent years. Rodrik (2022) examines how global economic integration has exposed African states to volatile global markets and economic shocks, which in turn exacerbate local economic instability and governance challenges. The impact of global financial downturns, such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, has been particularly acute in fragile economies, leading to heightened political instability and increasing the likelihood of military interventions.

Bates and Block (2023) explore the effect of commodity price shocks on political stability, noting that fluctuations in global commodity prices, particularly for oil and minerals, can have profound effects on the economic stability of resource-dependent states. These economic shocks often lead to reduced government revenues, increased public dissatisfaction, and heightened risks of political instability, which can create fertile ground for military coups.

Harrison and Ng (2023) assess the role of economic inequality and social discontent in the context of globalization. They argue that the benefits of economic globalization are often unevenly distributed, leading to increased income inequality and social tensions within affected countries. This growing disparity can contribute to political instability and weaken the legitimacy of civilian governments, making coups more likely. The study highlights that in many African states, the failure of governments to address the economic grievances of their populations can lead to a situation where military actors are seen as viable alternatives for restoring economic stability and addressing social inequities.

Conclusion

This study elucidates the profound connection between economic fragility and the resurgence of military coups in Africa. Grounded in Samuel Decalo's Structural Theory of Coups, the analysis reveals that persistent economic adversities, including pervasive poverty, rampant unemployment,

income disparities, and fiscal mismanagement, serve as critical catalysts in fostering environments prone to military interventions. The military's rationale for seizing power often hinges on claims of restoring economic order and addressing institutional decay. Beyond the traditional lens of political instability, this study establishes that deep-seated economic vulnerabilities and institutional frailties are central to understanding the cyclical nature of coups across the continent.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Strengthen economic governance:** Economic governance reforms are crucial to addressing the macroeconomic vulnerabilities that make states susceptible to military coups. Effective fiscal management, sound monetary policies, and transparent public financial administration can help reduce economic instability, which often creates fertile ground for military interventions. A focus on ensuring accountable and sustainable economic policies will foster stability and discourage military takeovers.
2. **Promote inclusive development:** Inclusive development strategies that prioritize equitable access to resources and opportunities are vital in alleviating widespread socio-economic grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, and income inequality. By fostering economic inclusivity, governments can mitigate the socio-economic disparities that often contribute to social unrest and political instability, thereby reducing the likelihood of military interference in governance.
3. **Enhance Institutional Resilience:** Strengthening the capacity of political and administrative institutions is essential in fostering governance continuity and reducing institutional fragility. Robust institutions capable of withstanding economic and political crises are less vulnerable to collapse under pressure, thus preventing the vacuum that military actors often exploit. Institutional resilience is key to maintaining the legitimacy and authority of civilian governments.
4. **Reform Civil-Military Relations:** To curb the militarization of political processes, it is critical to redefine the role of the military in governance. Comprehensive reforms should establish clear boundaries between military and civilian domains, ensuring that the military remains subordinate to democratic governance. Enhancing civilian oversight mechanisms and promoting military professionalism can reduce the likelihood of military encroachments into political affairs.
5. **Encourage Regional Cooperation and Diplomatic Engagement:** Regional cooperation, particularly through African regional organizations like the African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), plays a critical role in fostering political stability and collective security. Diplomatic engagements that emphasize conflict prevention, peace-building, and economic cooperation can help deter military interventions and ensure a coordinated regional response to political crises.
6. **Address Systemic Economic Deficiencies:** Tackling structural economic deficiencies, such as ineffective resource allocation, poor infrastructure, and lack of economic diversification, is essential in preventing the socio-economic crises that often lead to political instability. By addressing the root causes of economic stagnation and fostering sustainable development, states can create a more stable environment that discourages military interventions.

7. Reinforce Institutional Frameworks: Strengthening institutional frameworks is fundamental to enhancing the legitimacy and operational effectiveness of civilian governments. This includes legal, constitutional, and administrative reforms that boost democratic governance, ensure the rule of law, and enhance the capacity of civilian institutions to manage crises. Reinforcing these frameworks helps create a buffer against military encroachments by solidifying the civilian government's authority.
8. Adopt a Paradigm Shift in Coup Prevention Strategies: The study advocates for a rethinking of coup prevention strategies, moving beyond traditional military and political responses to address the deeper economic factors that drive coups. By focusing on long-term economic stability, social welfare, and the creation of inclusive political environments, governments can mitigate the underlying socio-economic grievances that often precipitate military interventions. This paradigm shift requires a holistic approach to governance reform, emphasizing sustainable development and the prevention of economic crises that destabilize civilian rule

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