



## From Military Putsch to Civilian Government – Appropriate Responses by International Actors

### Summary

The trend for military putsches continued in 2015, with no end yet in sight. After the unsuccessful attempt in Burundi, the military in Burkina Faso once more seized power, albeit for a short duration. Putsches remain a widespread means of precipitating a change in government. Although the absolute global figure has decreased, Coups d'Etat remain particularly common in West Africa. Of 69 changes in government in the region between 1990 and 2014, 33 were elicited via elections and 18 via military putsches.

International actors usually react to military putsches with two standard responses. Firstly, they demand that the putschists cede power to a civilian government. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are just two organisations which have formally declared, in legally binding documents, that a junta regime may not remain in power and that the next government must be appointed via elections. Secondly, several states and organisations including the USA and the AU have decided to impose sanctions automatically.

This double response, consisting in the goal formulation of the swiftest possible transition to a civilian government and sanctions, creates a good basis for international actors to promote sustainable democratic structures. If democracy promotion is to be effective, however, three questions must be answered prior to any attempts in this area:

- What is the military's attitude towards democratic order? In the event that the putsch is an attempt to

destabilise democratic order (as was recently the case in Burkina Faso), a hard-line policy against the putschists is appropriate. However, if the military is overthrowing an autocratic leadership, it may well prove a useful partner.

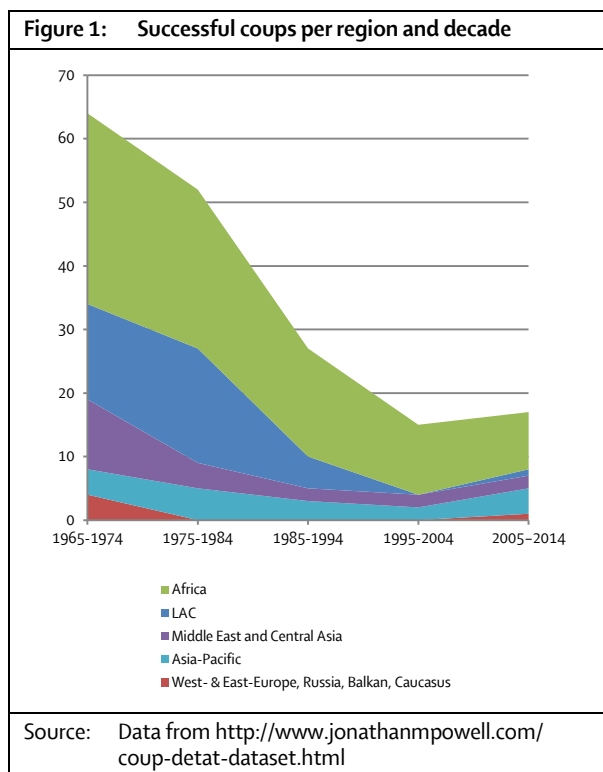
- What are the most pressing problems within the country's political system? International actors may be well advised to focus on military withdrawal in the event that a civilian government constitutes a *sine qua non* for democracy. However, this alone is not sufficient. Coups d'Etat are frequently an expression of deep-set structural problems. As a result, international actors should broaden their focus and address the root causes of the putsch. It may be expedient to combine steps towards reconciliation between political parties and security sector or judicial reforms with the demand for a civilian government.
- Which actions are appropriate in order to achieve these more broadly defined objectives? The suspension of cooperation may be a suitable means to penalise junta regimes. However, these measures should be complemented by other strategies. Restricting action to sanctions constricts scope for action unnecessarily. Military force, positive and negative, material and immaterial incentives as well as long-term persuasion efforts can, under specific conditions, complement traditional sanctions. The ultimate degree of success enjoyed by such measures depends heavily on the level of consensus reached by international actors and their legitimacy in the eyes of the addressees.

## 1. Coups d'Etat – a widespread phenomenon in a state of flux

Between 1960 and 1980, up to ten successful military putsches were staged globally each year. Since 1980, the number of triumphant Coups d'Etat, defined as unconstitutional accessions to power by the military, has been in decline and is currently stagnating at under five per year.

However, regional differences persist. While Coups d'Etat have become the absolute exception to the rule in Latin America, the number in West Africa – the region experiencing the most putsches – has remained relentlessly high since the end of the Cold War. 26 % of all changes in government in West Africa are precipitated by Coups d'Etat. Of 69 changes in government in the region between 1990 and 2014, 33 were elicited via elections and 18 via military putsches. The most recent putsches in Burkina Faso (2014 and 2015) are another striking confirmation of this.

While Coups d'Etat thus remain a widespread means of seizing power, the resulting governments are, in many cases, no longer able to retain power for several years. Since 2008, many military juntas have ceded power to civilians within two years, sometimes even after considerably shorter periods, as was the case recently in Burkina Faso.



## 2. International reactions to Coups d'Etat

Since the end of the Cold War, various international actors have developed policies designed to prevent seizures of

power by military regimes and to provoke the swift withdrawal of the military in the event that Coups d'Etat actually take place. The response by international actors to a putsch usually consists of two elements.

Firstly, the military junta is formally requested to cede power to a civilian government. Both nation states and international organisations have committed themselves to this objective. The foreign policy of former colonial powers such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Portugal, but also of the USA, adheres to the more or less clear objective of promoting democratic governance. In addition, the West African states have abandoned their indifferent attitude towards their neighbours' political constitutionality.

These democratic values have been introduced at international level by the governments and laid down in writing in the mandates of international organisations. Particularly worthy of emphasis here are the African Union (AU) and regional organisations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which position themselves clearly. ECOWAS, for example, states the following unequivocally: *Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means* (Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, 2001, Article 1c).

Secondly, international actors have more or less rigorously defined how the objective of the re-establishment of a democratically legitimate government (and thus military withdrawal) should be achieved. In the case of the USA, the AU and the EU, a practice which can be paraphrased as "automatic sanctions" has been developed in recent years. All three actors, as well as a host of other international organisations and bilateral actors, initially condemn the Coup d'Etat. This condemnation is linked with a demand that the military cedes power to a civilian government.

In order to ensure that their activities are not limited to purely rhetorical exercises, the USA and the AU have also pledged themselves to the imposition of automatic sanctions. Since the 1990s, the US Congress has enshrined each year in its budgetary law that any cooperation with governments which have attained power via a Coup d'Etat must be ceased immediately. The AU advocates a similar practice. In the wake of a Coup d'Etat, the membership of the country in question is suspended automatically and a six-month conflict resolution period is put in place. The EU, on the other hand, frequently suspends cooperation and seeks negotiations within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement.

Both the objective of establishing a civilian government and the intention to achieve this with verbal condemnations and sanctions constitute major advances in international policy. They enshrine the meaning of democratic governance in legally binding documents and even link these with concrete guidelines. The objective is to ensure that no other security-policy or economically-

motivated interests prevail. It thus follows that, exceptions apart, steps towards value-based foreign policy exist which do not give automatic precedence to geostrategic stability interests.

The "automatic response" approach has proved effective in recent years. The average period of time spent by junta regimes in power has decreased considerably. However, the approach remains erratic, as it only advances democratic development in a superficial manner, with the result that the long-term objectives of a value-based foreign policy are not fulfilled in their entirety.

In consequence, the following three steps should be taken in the wake of a Coup d'Etat in order to promote sustainable democratic stability. Firstly, it is important to ascertain whether the putsch in question constitutes a Coup d'Etat for or against autocratic rule. This appraisal should determine the fundamental stance towards the military and, by extension, the strategies to be adopted by international actors. Secondly, the objective of precipitating military withdrawal must be complemented by substantial reforms of the political system. As the case of Burkina Faso shows, a military pullback to the barracks is frequently just not sufficient. Thirdly, measures should be implemented which promise long-term success in the prevailing conditions. Limiting scope of action to sanctions may lead to other, more effective measures being overlooked.

### 3. Viewing the military as a partner

Do situations exist in which a Coup d'Etat by the military can be justified or is even desirable? Politics and academe maintain two standpoints on this issue. For the former, such situations are unimaginable. According to established definitions of democracy, a Coup d'Etat violates the constitutive core of democratic systems: the free, equal and fair choice of government. A Coup d'Etat is, by definition, a forcible seizure of power by the military. As a result, each Coup d'Etat violates the principle of free elections for the determination of governments. Accordingly, Coups d'Etat cannot satisfy democratic legitimisation criteria.

The second perspective is a broader one. Here, the circumstances surrounding the Coup d'Etat are taken into account. If, for example, a government lacked democratic legitimacy, undermined democratic order or violated civil rights on a severe scale, it may be legitimate to remove it by force. Putting an end to acute suffering or autocratic structures and the initiation of a political process which could result in democratic structures are consequently rated more highly than the infringement of procedural electoral franchise.

A glance at the recent history of West Africa demonstrates how difficult these deliberative processes can prove in individual cases. For instance, the Nigerien president,

Mamadou Tandja, tried to secure a third term of office via a constitutional amendment prior to the end of his second term in December 2009. In the ensuing debate, both the parliament and the constitutional court opposed Tandja's scheme. The latter dissolved both institutions and conducted an unconstitutional referendum on the constitutional amendment. International actors – predominantly ECOWAS and the AU, but also the USA and the EU – intervened and attempted to dissuade Tandja from carrying out his plans with arguments and, ultimately, incentives, including round tables and sanctions. However, Tandja stood firm and remained in office after his original term had expired. The sanctions were subsequently intensified, yet this failed to elicit an immediate effect, whereupon the military staged a coup and removed Tandja from the government.

The example of Niger demonstrates that the military does not always do democracy a disservice, while, in Burkina Faso, it is currently becoming clear that only certain parts of the military may be acting undemocratically. While these elements should be penalised, the parts of the military which promote democratic transition should be provided with support.

### 4. Democracy – more than a civilian government

International attention frequently wanes as soon as the objective of a civilian government has been achieved. All too often, the formal withdrawal of the military and tolerably free and fair elections satisfy international actors. This proves problematic, as a military putsch is invariably an expression of a failure of the political system as a whole. The re-establishment of a form of civil order is not sufficient to consolidate long-term democratic structures.

The developments in Niger also constitute a good example of this. Although the civilian government of 2011 resulted from free, fair elections, structural reforms of the political system in Niamey have failed to materialise. The same actors who have been contaminating the political climate since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1991 (which has already resulted in two Coups d'Etat) remain in power in various guises and are fighting one another with all available means.

An improvement in relations between the civil actors is not pursued with the same enthusiasm by international actors as the restoration of power to a civilian government. However, a systematic expansion of the policy of democracy promotion is required in order to contribute to the sustainable consolidation of democratic governance.

### 5. Context-specific selection of measures

In the event that continuing objectives have been identified beyond military withdrawal and those parts of the military worthy of support, it is necessary to determine the instruments and strategies which will ensure that these objectives are achieved in the most effective manner. The

response to a Coup d'Etat should depend on the extent to which the range of possible measures can succeed.

1. Immaterial incentives are based on a simple idea: actors aspire to gain recognition within their social environment. If the desired recognition fails to materialise or rejection is expressed instead, this comes at considerable social cost and may result in a change in attitude. However, this naturally depends on the actors actually aspiring to achieve recognition – in this case from governments in other countries and from international organisations. The example of Tandja demonstrates that this may not always be the case, as do other situations in which, for instance, former colonial powers expressed preferences for specific governments. As a result, the critical reflection of one's own verbal influence and the active involvement of individuals enjoying a high social status in dealings with the actors are thus essential to the successful use of immaterial incentives. In the event of having little social recognition, it is not very productive to break off contact entirely, as, with this, actors deprive themselves of all potential influence.
2. Material incentives operate according to a similar principle. They are designed to exploit the actors' pursuit of material prosperity. The idea is to influence the actors' behaviour by supplying material goods for

individuals, institutions or the country as a whole – or by not doing so. The success of these measures not only depends on governments regarding material prosperity as desirable. (Thus it is quite conceivable that the immaterial benefits of power hold more significance for the military.) It is also important that the funds made available or withheld are substantial. A "suspension", which usually only prevents support for new projects (example of the EU) or has absolutely no direct material consequences (example of the AU), is hardly going to guarantee success.

3. In addition, there is a third stipulation which should be met for both immaterial and material incentives: international actors must be in agreement. If some international actors condemn the Coup d'Etat and others praise it, or some cease cooperation while others expand it, the addressees are confronted with conflicting incentives. As a result, the scope for influence diminishes dramatically, as the putschists can, if necessary, seek recognition and affluence from international actors who share their interests.

If these three aspects are taken into consideration in the choice of instruments and measures, the probability that international actors will achieve their objectives of a civilian government and sustainable democratic stability increases.

## Literature

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