

Debunking the Myth of the “Good” Coup d’État in Africa

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Abstract: In response to the recent coup in Niger, which ousted the country’s president-turned-strongman Mamadou Tandja, the capital erupted in pro-coup demonstrations. Many commentators and foreign governments also showed tacit support for the junta. What is the likelihood that this coup and the other coup regimes in Africa will lead to the institutionalization of durable and stable democracies? Based on historical analysis of past African coups that brought brief democratic transitions, this article argues that it is unlikely. For the four African coups that briefly put in place democratic institutions—Sierra Leone (1968), Ghana (1978), Sudan (1985), and Niger (1999)—the juntas and proceeding civilian governments failed to address core political and economic issues, lacked durability, and did not engender long-term political stability. To further debunk the myth of the so-called “good” coup d’état in Africa, this article also demonstrates that coup regimes, which consolidate governing authority in failed states, attempt to institutionalize autocracies.

Introduction

The story of deposed Nigerien President Mamadou Tandja is an all too familiar one in Africa. Although elected in generally free and fair elections, Tandja attempted to tighten his grip on the presidency in a blatant violation of Niger’s constitution.¹ In August 2009, after ten years in power, he pushed through a new constitution by referendum that extended his presidential mandate for three years so he could, in his own words, “finish some projects.”² Considering that opposition groups boycotted the referendum and Tandja had dissolved the country’s resistant parliament and constitutional court, the 92.5 percent of “yes” votes did not indicate genuinely popular support for the president.³ Rather, it demonstrated his success in systematically dismantling Niger’s democratic institutions.⁴

This transparent power grab, coupled with languishing socioeconomic conditions in the country, meant that there was little dismay among Nigeriens when a group of military officers arrested the president-turned-strongman on 18 February 2010.⁵ That same day, the junta, calling itself the *Conseil suprême de restauration de la démocratie* (CSRD), broadcasted over the radio its intention to “make Niger an example of democracy and good governance,” and to “save [the country] and its population from poverty, deception and corruption.”⁶ The response

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in Niger, where 10,000 people took the streets of the capital Niamey in pro-coup demonstrations, suggested that the CSRD enjoyed considerable popular support.⁷ While tactfully declining to praise the extralegal takeover in public, even Niger's nongovernmental organizations backed Tandja's ousting. Ali Idrissi, head of a prominent civil society coalition, commented, "Deep down, we are cheering it. For us, it's a good coup d'état."⁸

Sharing in the enthusiasm, the international community expressed tacit support for the coup. The Nigerian daily, *This Day*, called it "inevitable" and posited that "the panacea for coups is not to ban or condemn [them]."⁹ While foreign governments instinctively chastised the seizure of power, the vast majority of countries opted not to call for Tandja's restoration. Instead, they highlighted the positive steps that the CSRD and its leader Colonel Salou Djibo were taking. As the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs William Fitzgerald said, "[the CSRD] seems to be saying the right things...we've seen some encouraging signs."¹⁰ Likewise, Western media outlets pondered whether or not the coup was a positive occurrence. *The Christian Science Monitor*, for instance, featured an article with the headline "Niger coup: Can Africa use military power for good?" while *Newsweek* asked, "Is There Such Thing As A [sic] Good Coup?"¹¹

If one defines "good" as the institution of a durable democracy, the answer to this second question is an unqualified no. A look back at the history of African coups suggests that the Nigerien people's enthusiasm and the tacit support of the international community will prove to be unwarranted. Beyond the Niger case, a number of other African countries are in similar political circumstances. In West Africa alone, Guinea-Conakry (December 2008), Mauritania (August 2008), and Guinea-Bissau (April 2010) have recently endured military takeovers. While these coups and others around the continent ousted largely corrupt and autocratic regimes, this type of extralegal takeover has never succeeded in engendering durable democratic institutions throughout Africa's history.

Commentary attempting to predict the results of the coups in Niger and elsewhere is plentiful, but this article stands as the first empirical study analyzing the long-term polity results of coup-implemented democracies. Current scholarly literature on the topic focuses heavily on explaining why coups occur and developing models to determine coup risk.¹² During the 1960s and 1970s, however, a school of thought in academe existed, which viewed and promoted African militaries as progressive forces. A number of prominent scholars argued that military regimes were best positioned to politically and economically modernize African countries – a viewpoint mimicking the justification many coup regimes have used for taking power.¹³

While the prevalence of the military modernization model has faded considerably in recent decades, some of today's scholars continue to press for so-called "good" coups.¹⁴ Oxford economist Paul Collier wrote in 2009 that putsches "do not come cheap, but if they are the only way of removing a bad regime, then perhaps they are welcomed."¹⁵ Based on this reasoning, Collier has called for military takeovers in Zimbabwe and elsewhere.¹⁶ Although many Zimbabweans and international observers would not be sad to see the end of Mugabe's reign, the real difficulty would lie in establishing a durable democracy, which coups have universally failed to deliver.

Other scholars today stop short of outright support for coups but express hope that they could positively change the politics of African countries. Boubacar N’Diaye, for instance, wrote that the 3 August 2005 coup in Mauritania was the “best opportunity to turn the page on decades of the deposed quasi-military regime’s destructive politics.”¹⁷ Another scholar even suggested that the Mauritanian coup was “a model for political reform” in Arab North Africa.¹⁸ But, as N’Diaye himself conceded, “[the] transition process exemplified the African military junta leader’s familiar proclivity to manipulate transitions to fulfil [sic] suddenly awakened self-seeking political ambitions.”¹⁹ Thus, although academe has largely recognized the perils of coup-implemented democratic transitions, the idea that the military can be a welcomed force in African politics persists.

In addition to democratic transitions, policymakers oftentimes view the military consolidation of central authority during state failure as “good” coups.²⁰ This seemed to be the case, for instance, when the international community only half-heartedly condemned the 1996 Burundian putsch, which reestablished the country’s much deteriorated state structure. Belgium Foreign Minister Eric Derycke emphasized that the self-installed president, Pierre Buyoya, was “the least of all evils,” while France stated that “peace and the search for national reconciliation overrides everything else.”²¹ And, according to the United Nations’ (UN) Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), the United States “appeared to be softening its line” days after the takeover.²² Similar to other cases where coup regimes consolidated central authority, however, the Burundian putsch attempted to reinstitute autocracy.

Addressing the democracy deficit in Africa remains an acute challenge for policymakers and scholars.²³ While many African leaders attempt to build democratic façades around their regimes, they oftentimes rig elections and modify constitutions to extend their term limits. A Nigerian commentator aptly characterized the political developments on the continent when he wrote in 2005 that Africa is “demo-crazy.”²⁴ The difficulty of engendering African democracies through legal means, compounded with the unseemliness of many regimes, has made coups seem more palpable. The end result of these military takeovers, however, is invariably the same: the reestablishment (or attempted reestablishment) of autocratic institutions.

This article seeks to fully debunk the myth of the “good” coup d’état in Africa. First, the vast majority of successful African coups have not resulted in transitions to democracy. Second, for the small number of coup regimes that briefly put in place democratic institutions, the juntas and subsequent civilian governments lacked the will and/or capacity to address their respective country’s core political and economic problems; the politics were not durable; and, the brief democratic transitions failed to yield long-term stability as demonstrated by the prevalence of coups in proceeding years. Last, juntas that consolidated authority during state failure institutionalized self-administered autocracies or attempted to do so but were prevented by internal disorder and/or external political factors.

Methodology and Scope

This analysis employs data compiled by George Mason University’s Center for Systemic Peace of coups taking place worldwide between 1946 and 2008.²⁵ The center used Keesing’s Record of World Events to determine which transfers and attempted transfers of power fell within the

scope of a coup. In order to encourage accuracy and comprehensiveness, the data collectors also cross-referenced their determinations with Arthur S. Banks' *Cross-National Time Series Archive* and with *Archigos: A Database of Political Leaders*.²⁶ Geographically, the data pulled for this study encompasses the entire African continent including the predominantly-Arab countries in the north.

According to the dataset codebook, a coup d'état is defined as a "forceful seizure of executive authority and office by a dissident/opposition faction within the country's ruling or political elites that results in a substantial change in the executive leadership and the policies of the prior regime (although not necessarily in the nature of regime authority or mode of governance)."²⁷ It is important to note that the following events are not considered coup d'états: social revolutions, transfer of power to opposing force(s) during civil conflicts, popular uprisings, voluntary transfers of powers of authority, and the unseating of regimes by foreign invading forces.²⁸ The data is further parsed into specific coup outcomes, which include (1) successful coup, (2) attempted (failed) coup, (3) plotted coup, and (4) alleged coup plot.

This article pays particular attention to the first category of outcomes, successful coups, as it sheds the most light on determining the end results of these events. These results are identified as a change in polity that leads to a (1) democracy transition, (2) adverse regime change, (3) consolidation of authority, (4) state failure, and (5) no change/minor adverse change. The coup must "voluntarily transfer executive authority to an elected civilian government," indicated by an increased score to greater than zero on the polity index employed in this analysis, to qualify as a "democracy transition." An "adverse regime change" classifies a coup that results in a decrease of six or more points on the polity index. A "consolidation of authority" takes place when a coup reestablishes central governing authority after a transition period or full state failure. Conversely, "state failures" encompass a coup that leads to a "collapse of central authority." The final category of "no change/minor adverse change" characterizes a coup that does not impact the country's polity or results in a decrease of less than six points on the index.²⁹

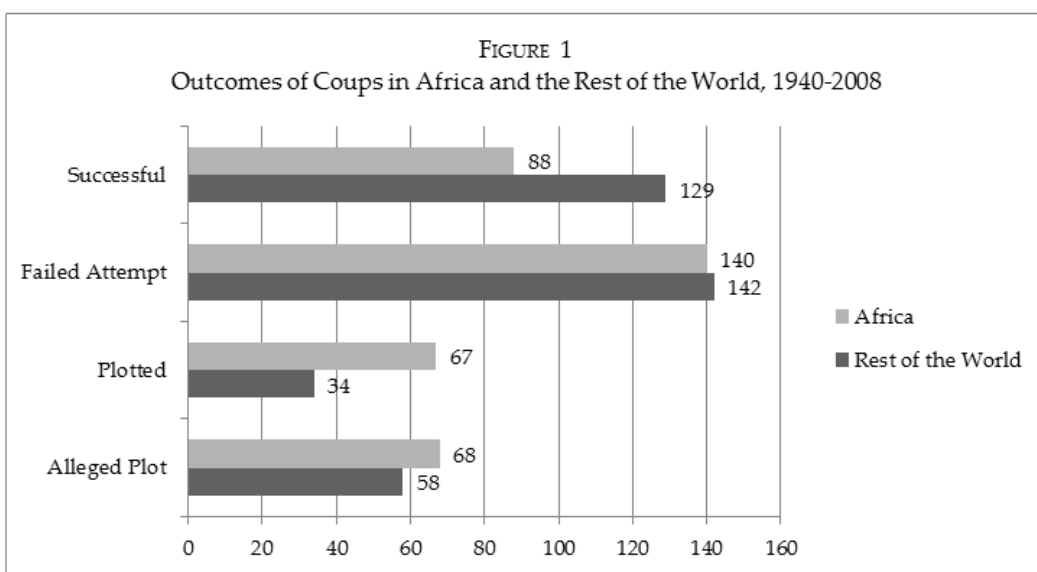
To determine the criteria for each result, the data collectors used the Polity IV Project's index scale, which annually measures a country's "polity" on a continuum between institutionalized democracy and institutionalized autocracy. According to *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, "polity" denotes a "political or government organization; a society or institution with an organized government; state; body politic."³⁰ On the one hand, an institutionalized democracy is defined as a political structure in which citizens have the ability to express dissent or support for alternative policies, institutional constraints limit executive power, and the legal code safeguards citizen civil liberties. On the other hand, the suppression of political participation, selection of executives by political elites, and limited institutional restraints on executive power characterize an institutionalized autocracy. Upon determination of individual scores for the level of democracy and for the level of autocracy, the autocracy point value is subtracted from the democracy value to render a unified polity score ranging from +10 (strongly democratic) to -10 (strongly autocratic) for each country.³¹

Lastly, the scope of this analysis is intentionally limited to counter the notion that some coups are "good" rather than address the broader and considerably more discussed topic of

democratization in Africa. As mentioned, there are two types of coup-implemented results that could plausibly be considered “good”—a coup that leads to a democratic transition or a coup that reestablishes the central authority of the state. This study is meant to fill the gap in academic literature as to why and how coups either fail to engender durable democracies or lead to authoritarian regimes during consolidations of central authority. Thus, although this article does not address the topic of how African countries can most effectively build durable democratic institutions, it demonstrates that coups are not a reliable path to this polity.

Coup d’états in Africa: A Bird’s Eye View

Between 1945 and 2008, approximately 363 successful coups, attempted coups, coup plots, or alleged coup plots occurred in Africa. The starkness of these figures is further highlighted when compared to the rest of the world, which altogether endured an equal number of coups during this same period. As shown in Figure 1, only eighty-eight of the 363 African coups, or 24.2 percent, led to successful transfers of power compared to 128 of 363, or 35.3 percent, in the rest of the world suggesting that African coups are less likely to succeed.

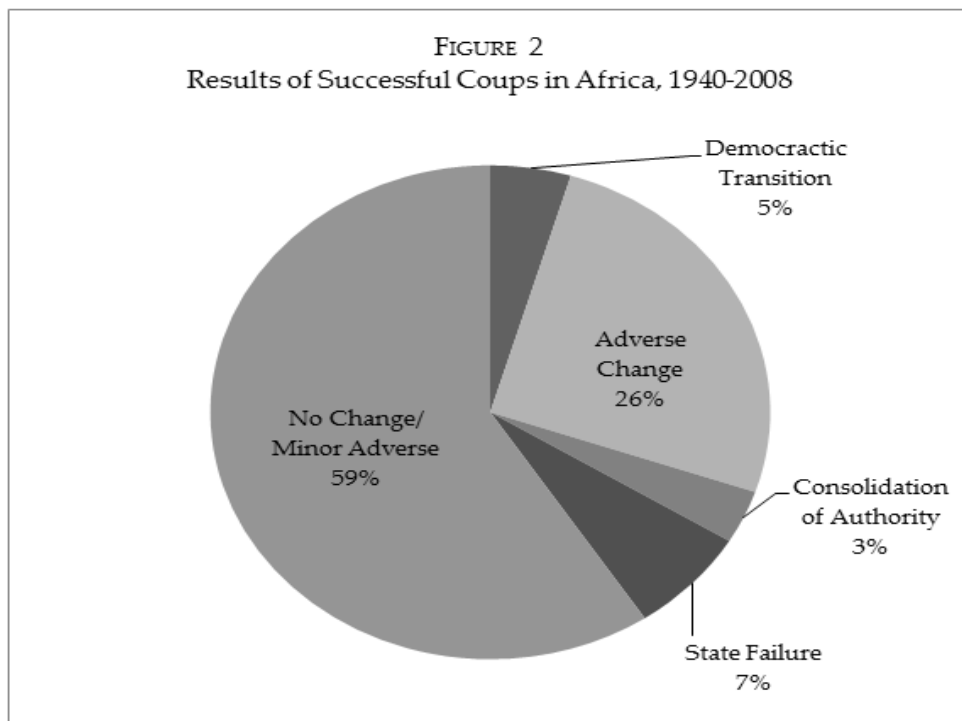


Furthermore, it was not until the 1980s—the decade in which the last African colonies gained independence—that the continent’s rate of coups outnumbered those taking place elsewhere, specifically by eighty-seven to fifty-five.³² Coups began to decline in Africa after the 1980s per the global trend, but they remained a commonly used method of taking power. During the 1990s, eighty-two putsches occurred, as many of the regimes propped up by Cold War alliances lost their superpower sponsorship. This rate seems to have abated only modestly as fifty coups took place between 2000 and 2008. According to one scholar, the continued prevalence of extralegal takeovers is due to the fact that “(a) African democracies are not yet consolidated and (b) there is a continued military threat to democracy all over the continent.”³³ This diagnosis of a “continued military threat,” however, does not adequately explain why some coups—i.e. so-

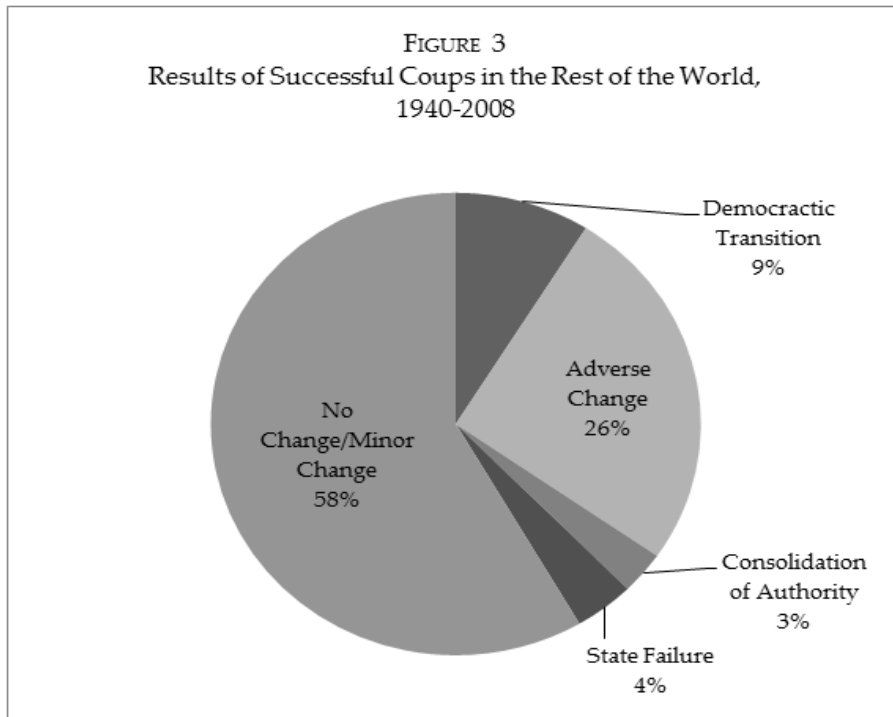
called “good” coups—succeed in orchestrating brief transitions to democracy or consolidating authority but fail to establish durable democratic institutions.

How many of the total 726 coups d’état worldwide could plausibly be considered “good” coups? In other words, how many led to democratic transitions or consolidations of authority during state failure? According to the Center for Systemic Peace, four coups (5 percent of the total) in Africa—Sierra Leone (1968), Ghana (1978), Sudan (1985), and Niger (1999)—put in place democratic institutions while nine coups (9 percent of the total) did so outside the continent.³⁴ Conversely, 26 percent of coups in both Africa and the rest of the world led to an adverse regime change. Thus, for approximately every one coup in Africa resulting in a democratic transition, five more pushed countries toward autocracy.

The vast majority of coups led to no change or a minor adverse change in politics suggesting that most coups simply amounted to power grabs. The juntas could have been motivated by a host of factors such as self-enrichment or aspiration for prestige. As this article demonstrates, coup leaders often had legitimate grievances against corrupt and incompetent governing regimes but lacked either the desire or capacity to substantially transform their countries’ governing institutions. Regardless of motivations, the fact that the mean number of coups, successful or otherwise, for countries previously experiencing a putsch rests at 6.89 indicates a correlation between these events and continued political instability.



Two result cases have missing data; valid percentages are represented in the chart.



Twenty-eight result cases have missing data; valid percentages are represented in the chart.

In addition, coups d’État have created more instances of state failure than have successfully consolidated authority. In Africa, only three coups—Burundi (1966), Benin (1972), Burundi (1996)—have successfully consolidated authority while twice as many have led to state failure. Thus, 7 percent of coups caused the collapse of central authority while only 3 percent consolidated authority. It will prove helpful to analyze the cases for each of these coup results—democratic transitions and consolidations of authority—to understand how they failed to institutionalize durable democracies.

Democratic Transitions

As mentioned, four coups in Africa—Sierra Leone (1968), Ghana (1978), Sudan (1985), and Niger (1999)—led to the brief institutionalization of democracy. An in-depth analysis reveals that these four coups followed similar narratives in which they ultimately failed to substantially improve their respective country’s polity. First, the coup regimes and the subsequent civilian governments could not muster either the capability or will to address the core economic and political problems facing their country. Second, the regimes lacked significant durability in that the civilian governments were ousted or slid into autocracy themselves shortly after the democratic transitions. Last, as the continued prevalence of coups indicates, they also failed to yield long-term stability. In the earliest of these cases, the deterioration of Sierra Leone’s polity after the “sergeants” revolt aptly demonstrates the shortcomings of coup-implemented democracies.

Sierra Leone (18 April 1968): The “Sergeants” Revolt

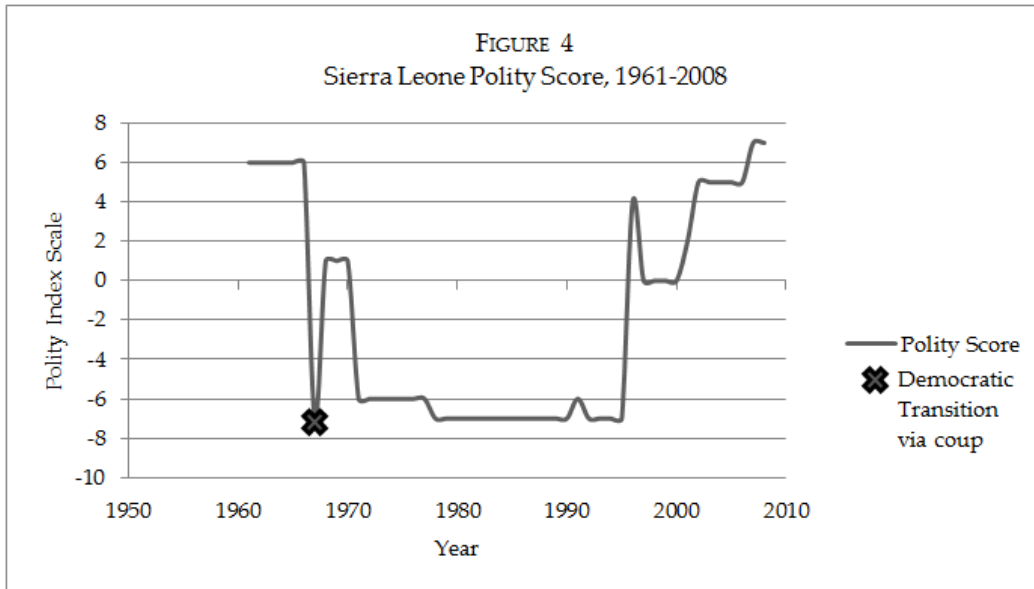
The “sergeants” revolt serves as an example of a coup regime failing to accomplish its stated objectives and the proceeding civilian government willfully creating an authoritarian polity. This story begins with Sierra Leone’s March 1967 elections in which Siaka Stevens’s All People’s Congress (APC) won the plurality of parliamentary seats in a hard fought campaign against the incumbent Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP). Before taking office, however, Stevens was arrested by the head of Sierra Leonean armed forces Brigadier General David Lansana who demanded that tribal representatives be elected prior to declaring the APC victory. The political tumult continued when a group of army officers, the National Reformation Council (NRC), subsequently ousted Lansana and declined to place the government under civilian control.³⁵

In a bid to restore Stevens’s election victory, a contingent of enlisted soldiers, calling itself the Anti-Corruption Revolutionary Movement (ACRM), launched the “sergeants” revolt on 18 April 1968. The group successfully placed Stevens in power but failed to address the political and economic issues facing Sierra Leone. As its name suggests, the ACRM vowed to take a hardline on corruption and labeled the NRC “more corrupt and selfish than the ousted civilian regime” in reference to the pre-March 1967 government.³⁶ The ACRM’s favoritism toward the APC, however, demonstrated that the junta was by no means nonpartisan or ethnically neutral. As scholar Jimmy D. Kandeh posited, “it is highly unlikely...the ACRM would have relinquished power to the SLPP.” In addition, ethnic Mendes, who generally supported the SLPP, were systematically purged from the armed forces.³⁷ The corruption did not let up once Stevens took office. A *Washington Post* correspondent wrote that, by 1980, Sierra Leone was losing “about \$140 million a year in cross-border diamond smuggling black market activities and corruption.”³⁸

The ACRM’s stated goal of establishing a pluralist democracy also fell far short under Stevens’s rule. In what some scholars have characterized as “redictorialization” Stevens showed a clear lack of will to maintain a democratic polity and attempted to institutionalize the APC as Sierra Leone’s unchallengeable ruling party. By 1971, he had officially declared the country a republic and created the Internal Security Unit (ISU) to intimidate political opponents. ISU and APC coercion ensured that the SLPP could not field any candidates in the 1973 general elections.³⁹ In the words of a regional expert, “Sierra Leone thus became a *de facto* one-party state.”⁴⁰ The one-party status of the country became legally formalized in 1978 when the APC pushed through a constitutional amendment banning all other political organizations.⁴¹

As Stevens’s slide toward autocracy shows, the democratic institutions put in place by the ACRM lacked durability. According to the polity index in Figure 4, Sierra Leone’s score plummeted to -6 in 1971, just two years after the “sergeants” revolt, and slid even further to -7 with the APC’s institutionalization of one-party rule. This degree of autocracy remained in place until 1995 with only a brief shift back to -6 in 1991 when Stevens’s handpicked successor Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh briefly reinstated a multiparty system. By 1991, however, the APC’s political authoritarianism and economic mismanagement had fermented a

rebel movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which plunged the country into a brutal eleven year civil war.⁴²



The rash of coups following Stevens’s installation further demonstrates that the ACRM coup failed to engender long-term political stability. First, an alleged plot and a failed attempt took place in 1970 and 1971, respectively. There were also three more successful coups in 1992, 1996, and 1997. In all, five failed attempts, two plots, and one alleged plot took place after the democratic transition. Thus, not only did the “sergeants” revolt fail to address the corruption that choked Sierra Leone’s political system, it installed a democratic regime that was both short-lived and fermented future political instability. While Stevens willfully manipulated the system in the APC’s favor, in the case of Ghanaian coup leader F.W. Akuffo, he possessed the will to reform his country’s institutions but not the capacity.

Ghana (5 July 1978): Akuffo’s Democratic Experiment

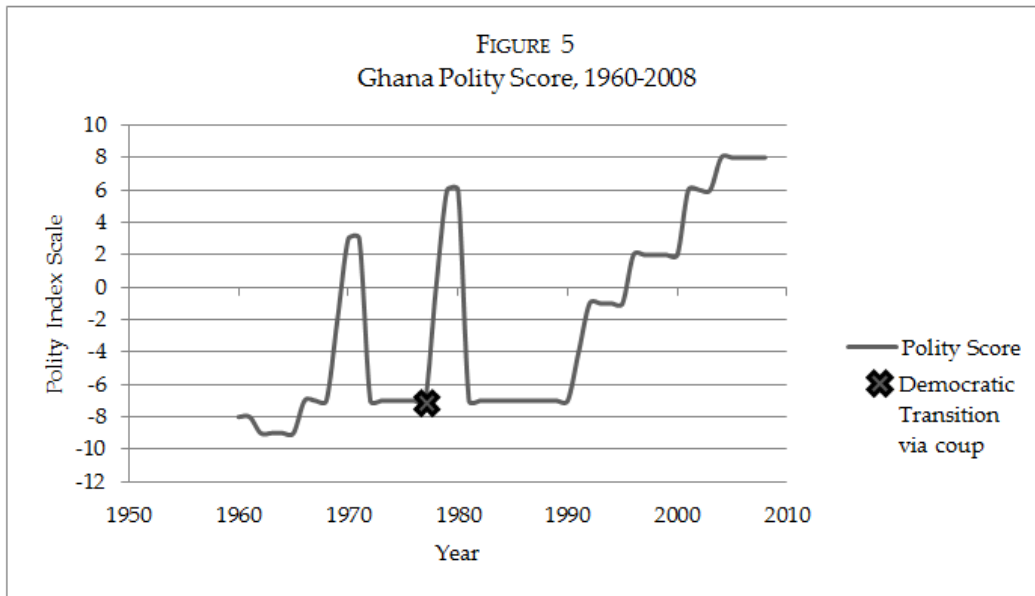
The 1978 Ghanaian coup led by Lieutenant General F.W. Akuffo shows that certain coup regimes were unable to follow through with intended reforms despite substantive efforts. Under Akuffo’s predecessor, General I.K. Acheampong, Ghanaians had become increasingly discontented with the country’s lack of economic development due in large part to an inflation rate hitting 73.1 percent by 1978, the skyrocketing cost of living, and a general shortage of goods and services.⁴³ This dire economic situation, coupled with the abject greed of high-level public officials, infused a culture of corruption in all ranks of the government. Among their many deviances, the government elite were known to divert the country’s cocoa sales to their personal offshore bank accounts. Rarely-paid bureaucrats, for their part, felt little choice but to charge *kalabule* (“bribes”) to citizens in order to feed their own families.⁴⁴

Akuffo saw his opportunity to seize power when Acheampong introduced a highly unpopular “no-party” political system, called UNIGOV. Students and professional groups, identifying Acheampong’s transparent attempt to extend his rule, took to the streets in droves for mass strikes and demonstrations in 1977 and 1978.⁴⁵ With the country in disarray, Akuffo arrested Acheampong on 5 July 1978 and declared himself the head of the government. Ghana’s new leader promised citizens that he would “ensure the unity and stability of the nation” by reviving the spiraling economy and holding elections before 1 July 1979.⁴⁶

Despite substantive reform efforts, Akuffo failed to bring these economic promises to fruition. A strict fiscal and monetary reform package, which included steps such as devaluing the cedi (Ghana’s currency) by 59 percent, reducing public spending, and controlling the money supply, not only failed to restrain the ballooning inflation rate but also rendered everyday goods and services increasingly scarce.⁴⁷ He also refrained from punishing the dishonest officials from Acheampong’s regime while the culture of corruption continued unabated under his watch.⁴⁸

Although Akuffo was initially hesitant to establish a pluralist democracy, his political agenda moved in that direction. After first attempting to repackage the UNIGOV system as “national government,” continued street protests eventually forced him to lift the ban against opposition parties on 1 January 1979.⁴⁹ Akuffo stayed on track to hold elections in July 1979, but they did not advance as scheduled due to continued social and political turbulence. After Flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings’s failed coup attempt just one month earlier, the charismatic officer successfully arrested Akuffo and took control of the government on 4 June 1979. To his credit, Rawlings conducted a “house cleaning” exercise against groups associated with corruption and moved forward with Akuffo’s planned elections.⁵⁰

The inefficacy of the civilian government, however, significantly weakened the durability of the newly-instituted democracy, which lasted little more than two years. Upon taking office on 24 September 1979, the elected president Dr. Hilla Limman and his People’s National Party (PNP) became immersed in factional struggles, refused to recognize the structural issues plaguing the country’s economy, and allowed corruption to continue unabated.⁵¹ At the urging of his military subordinates, Rawlings seized power again on New Year’s Eve 1981, suspended the 1979 constitution, and disbanded the government’s executive and legislative branches.⁵² And, thus, the democratic experiment begun by Akuffo was buried by one of its key implementers due in large part to the incompetence of the civilian government.



The brief democratic transition also failed to bring long-term stability to Ghana. As shown in Figure 5, the country immediately slid to -7 on the polity index where it remained for the following nine years under Rawlings’s leadership. Moreover, the frequency of coups stayed steady after Akuffo’s putsch. Before he took power in 1978, Ghana had endured two successful coups, three failed attempts, one plot, and one alleged plot. Similarly, after 5 July 1978, Ghana had seven coups consisting of two successful coups, three failed attempts, and two alleged plots. While Rawlings’s regime eventually instituted democratic reforms in the early 1990s, it undertook these steps only “under international and domestic pressure” according to the U.S. Department of State.⁵³ Indicating that Rawlings’s supporters have also yet to fully accept Ghana’s democratic system, his former bodyguards allegedly conspired to take power from then-president John A. Kufuor—a member of the opposing New Patriotic Party (NPP)—as recently as 2004.

The failure of Akuffo’s experiment demonstrates that juntas sometimes established democratic institutions but the proceeding civilian governments were often unable to address the country’s core problems. As a result, Ghana’s democratic regime did not last much more than two years and has remained susceptible to continued extralegal threats to its standing governments. This story is by no means unique to Ghana as it is also reflective of General al-Dahab’s 1985 coup in Sudan.

Sudan (6 April 1985): General Dahab’s Laudable Failure

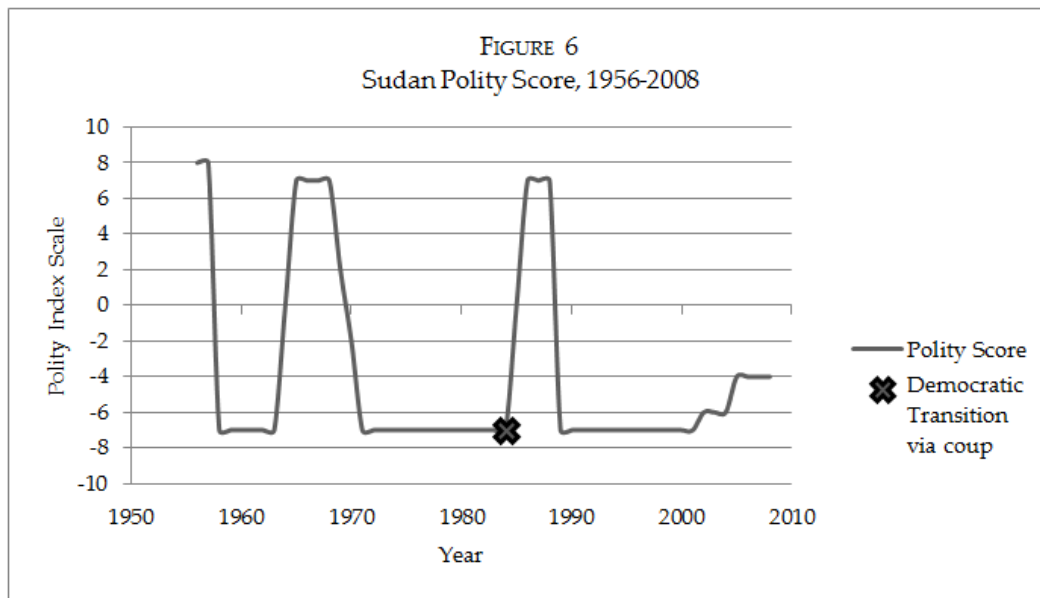
Despite General Suwar al-Dahab’s successful transition to democracy, his regime and the proceeding civilian government failed to bring durable democratic institutions or long-term political stability to Sudan. Al-Dahab was able to take power due to the inability of his predecessor, President Guufar Nimeiri, to effectively manage the core political and economic problems facing Sudan. Three critical issues plagued the country under Nimeiri: (1) the

recently-rejuvenated civil war raging with the Christian and animist south, (2) the incorporation of *Shari'a* law into the Sudanese legal code, and (3) economic stagnation. When Nimeiri fled to the United States for a medical check-up in the spring of 1985, massive street protests signaled to the military that it had to take action to quell the unrest. Instead of backing Nimeiri by muffling the demonstrations, al-Dahab officially dismissed the president on April 6, established the Transitional Military Council (TMC), and scheduled elections for the following year.⁵⁴

While the TMC followed through with the transfer to civilian rule to the surprise of many observers, it made little progress in addressing Sudan's problems. First, the TMC was unable to bring the south's main rebel leader John Garang into the political fold and subsequently pursued a military option to deal with the insurgents.⁵⁵ Second, despite rolling back certain aspects of the *Shari'a* reforms, al-Dahab declined an opportunity to completely repeal the laws making negotiations with the south even more tenuous.⁵⁶ Last, scholar Graham Thomas noted that under the TMC's supervision, there was a "continuing decline in the economy and the almost complete collapse of the infra structure [sic]."⁵⁷

For its part, the elected civilian government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi proved incapable of holding together a politically viable coalition and oversaw the crumbling of the country's nascent democratic structure. Economically, the government devalued the currency by 44.4 percent and raised the price of basic goods such as sugar and gas. These measures not only failed to reverse the country's economic decline but also proved widely unpopular as shown by the reemergence of nationwide protests.⁵⁸ While al-Mahdi and his Umma Party expressed their desire to abolish the imposition of *Shari'a* law, the *realpolitik* of the Sudanese political scene, namely the objections of the National Islamic Front (NIF) party, prevented any meaningful move in this direction.⁵⁹ The stalling of this repeal coupled with bolder attacks by Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) meant that the civil war worsened under al-Mahdi's leadership. In fact, Garang and his forces made significant headway with the capture of the city of Kurmuk, further dissuading the rebels from sitting down at the negotiating table.

By the time a robust northern military offensive and international pressure finally forced talks between the parties in early June 1989, the incompetence and ineffectiveness had already made the al-Mahdi government vulnerable. On 30 June 1989, a staunchly Islamic group within the Sudanese military installed the NIF's General Omar al-Bahsir as the new president resulting in a return to institutionalized autocracy.⁶⁰ As shown in Figure 6, Sudan's polity score fell from 7 to -7 accordingly rendering al-Dahab's coup-implemented democratic regime with a durability of approximately four years. Sudan's polity increased to -4 by 2008, but the country remains highly autocratic with al-Bashir continuing to hold on to the presidency.



In addition to the lack of durability, al-Dahab failed to usher in any sort of long-term political stability as seen with the Sierra Leone and Ghana cases. Five months after al-Dahab took power, Garang orchestrated an attempted coup. Similarly, after al-Bashir mounted his successful coup, a group of non-commissioned officers in Nuba launched a failed countercoup. In addition to three more coup plots and six alleged plots, there have been two failed coups since the Nuba attempt. In the most recent African coup to briefly institutionalize democracy taking place in Niger, the junta leader acted in the mold of al-Dahab by transferring power to civilians. Unlike the al-Mahdi government that fumbled Sudan’s democracy due to its ineffectiveness, the proceeding Nigerien government was both ineffective and willfully moved the country toward autocracy.

Niger (9 April 1999): The Slow Road to Autocracy

Despite coup leader Major Dauda Mallam Wanké’s institutionalization of democracy in 1999, the elected President Mamadou Tandja failed to improve economic conditions and ultimately attempted to consolidate power. Prior to the 1999 military takeover, then-president Ibrahim Baré Maïnassara’s mismanagement of the economy resulted in few opportunities for Nigeriens to make adequate livelihoods. The economic stagnation derived largely from a robust inflation rate and the government’s inability to responsibly manage public expenditures. Similarly, Niger remained dependent on the agriculture sector and natural resources, which were highly vulnerable to international price fluctuations and unpredictable weather.⁶¹ This economic vacuum left Nigeriens with some of the lowest standards of living throughout the world.

Much of the Nigerien people’s discontent also stemmed from the ruling party’s political manipulation. In the run up to the 1996 presidential elections, Amnesty International reported:

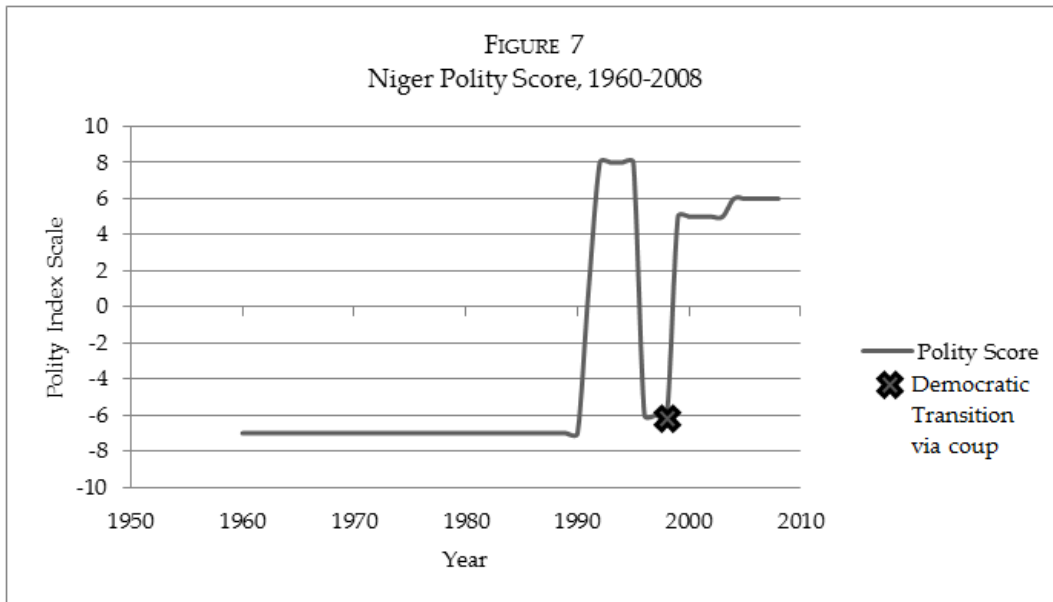
Hundreds of people were arrested solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and association. Party political leaders were placed under house arrest, and dozens of party members were held incommunicado and beaten. Many of them were publicly humiliated; some were exiled to the north of the country, others were subjected to mock executions.⁶²

Consistent with this political heavy handedness, Baré had the Nigerien supreme court nullify the opposition party's November 1999 local election victory.⁶³ As result, according to a South African journalist, the government "lacked the trust and confidence of its population."⁶⁴ The *mélange* of economic ineptitude and political manipulation bred widespread discontent, which consequently manifested into mass street protests.⁶⁵

Taking his cue from the civil unrest, Major Wanké had Baré assassinated and took control of the government on 9 April 1999. Wanké quickly established the *Conseil de Réconciliation Nationale* (CRN) and pronounced his intentions to hold presidential elections. As seen under al-Dahab's regime, Wanké followed through with his promise in this regard. The CRN established Niger's Fifth Republic, a French-styled semi-presidential democratic system, and elections that were deemed acceptable by international observers delivered the presidency to Tandja in November 1999.⁶⁶

After almost ten years in power, Tandja began to willfully dismantle the Fifth Republic's democratic institutions. This undermining of Niger's burgeoning democracy included *inter alia* his dissolution of the National Assembly and Constitutional Court as well as empowering his government to crackdown on media dissent prior to the August 2009 constitutional referendum.⁶⁷ This new constitution, which passed in the deeply flawed referendum vote, provided Tandja with an additional three years in office and eliminated presidential term limits.⁶⁸

Perhaps even more consequential to the Nigerien people, Tandja drastically failed to boost the economy or increase the country's development level. As of 1999, Niger had a per capita GDP of approximately \$360. According to the UNDP's Human Development Index, which ranks the education, health, as well as standard of living in all countries worldwide, Niger places last in the world.⁶⁹ Under Tandja, Nigeriens could not expect to live much over fifty years, and less than one and three adults knew how to read.⁷⁰ With the Fifth Republic's ten year lifespan, Wanké's coup outlasted the other democratic transitions, but as the August 2009 referendum demonstrated, its institutions were by no means durable.



Although the polity index does not include data beyond 2008, it would reflect a significant decline due to Tandja’s August 2009 referendum and other attempted steps to institutionalize autocracy.

The coup regime, which overthrew Tandja in February 2010, appears set to transition the country to civilian rule just as Major Wanké and the CRN did in 1999. The regime accepted a draft constitution of the Nigerien National Consultative Council (NCC), which called for a full democratic transition within twelve months of the takeover. Based on the constitution’s electoral provisions, presidential and parliamentary elections were held 31 January 2011, resulting in a run-off election scheduled for 12 March. It remains to be seen, however, if a newly-elected civilian government will succeed in building durable democratic institutions. Considering that the coup-implemented democracies in Sierra Leone, Ghana, Sudan, and Niger’s Fifth Republic had a mean lifespan of 4.5 years, the prospects of this most recent coup bringing a lasting democracy seem bleak.

As history shows, coups d’état have not been an effective tool for building durable democracies in Africa. In all the cases that led to brief democratic transitions, the military and/or the subsequent civilian regimes did not have either the political will (i.e. Sierra Leone and Niger) or the ability (i.e. Ghana and Sudan) to establish durable institutions. As a result, the democracies were either overthrown by an autocratically-oriented coup (i.e. Ghana and Sudan) or the new civilian government slid into autocracy itself (i.e. Sierra Leone and Niger). Along with these brief democratic transitions, some policymakers seemed to characterize consolidations of authority as “good” coups.

Consolidation of Authority

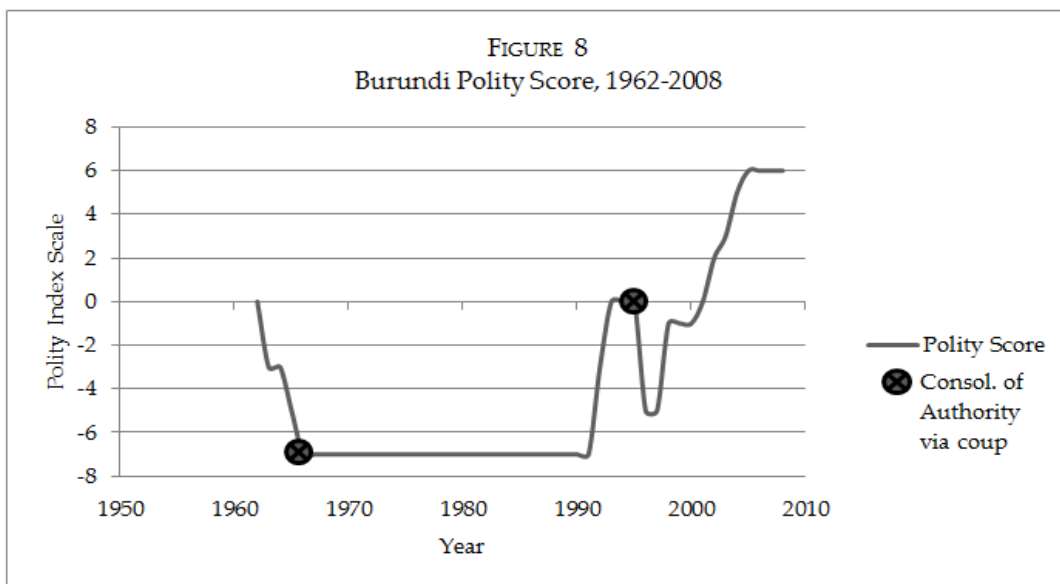
During state failure, three coups d’état—Burundi (1966 and 1996) and Benin (1996)—successfully consolidated central governing authority. What kind of polity generally emerged

from these putsches? A historical analysis of three cases shows that military juntas institutionalized self-administered autocracies or attempted to do so but were prevented by internal disorder and/or external political factors. Also, just as the coup-implemented democratic transitions failed to engender long-term political stability, these putsches also led to future coups.

Burundi (29 November 1966 & 25 July 1996): From Chaos to Genocide

Upon declaring independence from Belgium in July 1962, Burundi's ethnic tensions between the minority Tutsi and majority Hutu drove the country into chaos. When a Tutsi gunman assassinated the Hutu prime minister, Pierre Ngendandumwe, the monarchy of Mwami Mwambutsa became increasingly feeble. The tensions finally boiled over when Mwambutsa refused to recognize the election victory of the Hutu parties in parliament.⁷¹ This sparked a fierce Hutu revolt, which led to a number of political shifts. Ultimately, the then-prime minister and former army captain Michel Micombero emerged as the country's self-proclaimed president.⁷²

While Micombero's coup and declaration of the First Republic may have been welcomed initially by some Burundians for halting the anarchy, the relative calm came at the cost of living under a authoritarian and genocidal regime for twenty-five years. As indicated by the polity scale in Figure 8, Burundi remained at a -7 institutionalized autocracy until 1991. Like most autocratic regimes, it exhibited a highly repressive nature, but in the case of Micombero's government, this repressiveness degenerated into genocide by 1972. In the spring of that year, the Tutsi *Jeunes révolutionnaires rwagasore* were allowed to massacre approximately 100,000 to 200,000 Hutu, comprising of 5 percent of the country's population.⁷³



Due to the state failure, the years 1993 through 1995 are considered "interregnums" and thus are coded as "0" in the polity index.

As with coup-implemented democratic transition, the continuing number of coups after 1966 is evidence to the fact that Micombero’s seizure and consolidation of authority failed to yield long-term political stability. Since November 1966, Burundi has endured six failed coup attempts, one plotted coup, and two alleged plots. Moreover, the country has had two more successful coups that led to no polity change as well as one on 25 July 1996, which consolidated authority during another period of state failure.

Although the 1996 coup consolidated authority during a tumultuous period, the regime attempted to put in place an autocratic polity and failed to bring long-term stability. When the former-president Major Pierre Buyoya took power via coup, he immediately institutionalized an autocratic governing structure. His actions included *inter alia* suspending the National Assembly, banning opposition parties, and imposing a strict national curfew.⁷⁴ An intense regional diplomatic initiative led by former South African President Nelson Mandela, however, eventually pressured Buyoya to democratize. Although its polity score has steadily improved since 1997 as a result of the diplomatic effort, this trend veils a high degree of political instability still prevalent in the country. Subsequent to Buyoya’s 1996 consolidation of authority, Burundi has endured two more failed coup attempts, a plotted coup as well as an alleged plot.

The coups in Burundi demonstrate that consolidations of authority came at the heavy cost of authoritarianism and continued political instability. Burundians were able to escape autocratic rule in 1996 thanks in large part to the South African-led intervention, but instability in the country remains to this day as evidenced by the continued prevalence of coups. Unfortunately for the Beninese, their 1972 putsch mirrored Burundi’s 1966 consolidation as it ushered in an extended period of authoritarian rule.

Benin (26 October 1972): A Classic Power Grab

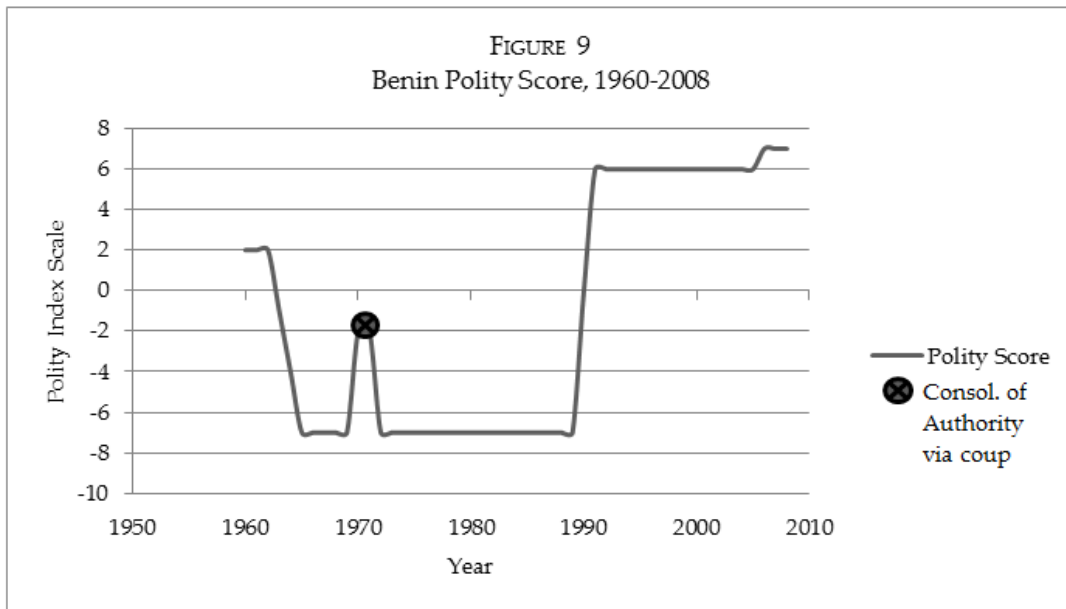
The Beninese consolidation brought the country nineteen years of communist rule that was only undone by internal disorder and shifts in the global political landscape. The political vacuum created by economic difficulties and fragmentation of the Beninese body politic allowed Major Mathieu Kérékou to seize power in 1972. Between 1960 and 1972, civil disorder in Benin had become increasingly acute as students and trade unions protested the government’s mismanagement of the economy. The country’s stark economic conditions were further exacerbated by its fractious political scene, which suffered five successful coups in the twelve years after independence. On October 26, the political tumult ultimately subsided after Kérékou’s successful consolidation of power.⁷⁵

Kérékou’s junta rapidly institutionalized an enduring Marxist-Leninist governing regime. Historian Chris Allen described the initial authority consolidation as follows:

Kérékou increased his own power by a series of administrative changes that strengthened the powers of the presidency and gradually downgraded or removed the coupmakers and their supporters in government... [and,] the new regime moved quickly against the local representatives of [political] networks—

chiefs, priests of local animist cults, and other rural notables—denouncing their past role and reducing their power.⁷⁶

Once the junta had consolidated power, the Beninese lived under these political conditions for twenty-seven years. As Figure 9 demonstrates, Benin's polity score slipped from -2 to -7 in 1972, and remained in this dismal state of autocracy until 1989.⁷⁷ Aside from expressing discontent, there was little that the Beninese people could do as the junta pushed forward its failed socialist economic agenda leaving much of the country's citizenry impoverished.⁷⁸



In concert with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and street protests that “rendered the country increasingly ungovernable,” Kérékou and the Beninese politburo saw little choice but to reform by 1991.⁷⁹ Almost two decades after taking power, the regime finally allowed multiparty presidential elections. This democratic transition—known as the *Renouveau Démocratique*—has made Benin one of the continent's strongest democracies. Given that this transition occurred largely due to external global developments and internal popular pressure, credit for this political stability does not rest with the former regime. In fact, the coup continued to have a destabilizing impact considering that the head of Kérékou's presidential guard Pascal Tawès attempted to overthrow the newly-elected president Nicéphore Soglo in 1992.

While the 1972 Burundian genocide stands out as the most startling of the events occurring under these coup-implemented regimes, the hardships faced by Beninese under Kérékou cannot be underemphasized in their own right. Moreover, Burundians in the 1990s seemed to be heading for a similar fate under Buyoya if the international community had not intervened. It is clear that these cases of authority consolidation are far from deserving the label “good” coups.

The way forward

The four African coups leading to brief democratic transitions—Sierra Leone (1968), Ghana (1978), Sudan (1985), and Niger (1999)—demonstrate that this method of regime change is not an effective tool for democratization. The juntas and subsequent civilian governments lacked the will and/or capacity to address their respective country’s core political and economic problems; the polities were not durable; and, the brief democratic transitions failed to yield long-term stability. In addition, juntas that consolidated authority during state failure either institutionalized autocracies or attempted to do so.

On the African continent, the idea of the “good” coup d’État is a myth. With that said, it is not a *fait accompli* that Niger will revert to autocracy; to the contrary, the fact that Niger held elections in January 2011 is an encouraging sign. But, Nigeriens should be wary of their post-coup government’s ability and willingness to establish a durable democracy. For its part, the international community must balance support for the nascent democratic polity in Niger to prevent its collapse—as seen in Ghana and Sudan—with strong disincentives to hinder moves toward the type of authoritarianism that arose in Sierra Leone and Niger’s Fifth Republic.

Moving forward, one of the best remedies to prevent future coups may be the thwarting of all extralegal takeovers by African leaders. The African Union (AU) took the correct step to suspend Niger’s seat in the body after the February 2010 coup, but many Nigeriens were asking why so little was done when Tandja became increasingly autocratic? The AU, regional groups, and sub-regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) must be much more proactive in addressing non-coup seizures of power.

Due to a host of factors including the legacy of distrust left from colonialism, it is important that African institutions take the lead in these interventions with financial and diplomatic support from the West. In fact, the current ECOWAS-led efforts to persuade Laurent Gbagbo to concede defeat in Côte d’Ivoire’s presidential poll are a step in the right direction. If the West African body successfully pressures Gbagbo to step down, it could very well be preventing a future coup before it arises.

Notes

- 1 U.S. Department of State 2010, “Niger.”
- 2 Anonymous 2010, *This Day* (Nigeria).
- 3 Anonymous 2009.
- 4 DoS 2010, “Niger.”
- 5 UNDP 2010.
- 6 Alex Perry, “A Coup in Niger Adds to West Africa’s Instability,” *Time*, 19 February 2010.
- 7 Anonymous 2010, BBC (UK).
- 8 Armstrong 2010.
- 9 Anonymous 2010, *This Day* (Nigeria).
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 McLure 2010.

- 12 Scholarly literature on explaining and modeling coups include inter alia Jenkins and Kposowa 1990; Jackman 1978; Lunde 1991; Belkin 2003; Fosu 2002.
- 13 Onwudiwe 2004, p. 26.
- 14 Most scholars today advocate methods other than coups to promote political democratization in Africa. Larry Diamond of Stanford University stressed that the “essence of democratic consolidation is a behavioral and attitudinal embrace of democratic principles and methods by both elites and mass” (1999, 20). In describing the Niger coup, former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia and professor at George Washington University, David Shinn, stated, “I don't believe there is a ‘good’ extralegal coup. What Tandja did by rejecting the decisions of Niger's established judicial and legislative institutions and extending himself in office was reprehensible. But the actions of the coup makers were equally wrong” (McLure 2010).
- 15 Collier 2009, p. 166.
- 16 Collier 2008.
- 17 N'Diaye 2009, p. 129.
- 18 Ibid., p. 130.
- 19 Ibid., p. 130.
- 20 In terms of the scholarly viewpoint of consolidations during state failure, Marion Levy posited that the military is the state institution that can provide “maximum levels of stability and control” (Kandeh 2004, p. 2).
- 21 IRIN 1996.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2010 survey, only nine of forty-eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa were considered “free,” and not a single country in North Africa achieved this rating.
- 24 Widner 2005, p. 216.
- 25 Marshall 2010.
- 26 Marshall and Marshall 2009, p. 1.
- 27 Ibid., p. 1.
- 28 Ibid., p. 1.
- 29 Ibid., p. 2.
- 30 Marshall and Jagers 2007, p. 1.
- 31 Ibid., p. 15.
- 32 This trend of decreasing coups is also discussed in McGowan 2003, p. 339-370.
- 33 Chuka Onwumechili, *African Democratization and Military Coups* (Westport: Praeger, 1998) xi.
- 34 The Center for Systemic Peace did not code the 26 March 1991 military takeover in Mali as a coup. According to the Coup d'état Events Codebook, this event falls under the category of “resignation of executive due to poor performance/loss of authority.” The codebook describes the takeover as follows: “Gen. Moussa Traoré's personalistic [sic] regime faced

increasing open dissent in late 1990 and early 1991 as a coalition of five political ‘associations’ challenged his rule with widespread demonstrations and riots. Severe repression failed to control the demonstrations and, on March 26, 1991, Traoré and his wife were arrested at the airport, apparently preparing to flee the country. The military took control and Lt. Col. Amadou Toumani Touré was selected to chair a National Reconciliation Council (CNR) to govern the country” (Marshall and Marshall 2009, p. 9).

- 35 DoS 2010, “Sierra Leone.”
- 36 Kandeh 2004, p. 146.
- 37 Ibid., p. 147.
- 38 Dash 1980.
- 39 Kandeh 2004, p. 147.
- 40 Cartwright 1978, p. 83.
- 41 DoS 2010, “Sierra Leone.”
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi 1981.
- 44 Jeffries 1989, p. 75-98.
- 45 DoS 2010, “Ghana.”
- 46 Quote on “unity and stability” sourced from Doder 1978. Economic intentions sourced from Anonymous 1978.
- 47 Rothchild and Gyimah-Boadi, p. 5.
- 48 Ibrahim 2003, p. 9.
- 49 Hettne 1980, p. 184.
- 50 Ibid., p. 186.
- 51 Jeffries 1989, p. 92.
- 52 DoS 2010, “Ghana.”
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Salih 1990, p. 200.
- 55 Ibid., p. 216.
- 56 Anderson 1999, p. 14.
- 57 Thomas 1990, p. 227.
- 58 Salih 1990, p. 211.
- 59 Ibid., p. 213.
- 60 DoS 2010, “Sudan.”
- 61 Nachegea and Fontaine 2006.
- 62 Amnesty International 1996.
- 63 Ismaël 2007, p. 42.
- 64 Nabakwe 1999.
- 65 Ismaël 2007, p. 42.
- 66 Anonymous 1999.
- 67 DoS 2010, “Niger.”

- 68 Ibid.
69 UNDP 2010.
70 Ibid.
71 Encyclopædia Britannica 2010, "Burundi."
72 DoS 2010, "Burundi."
73 Encyclopædia Britannica 2010, "Burundi."
74 DoS 2010, "Burundi."
75 Encyclopædia Britannica 2010, "Benin."
76 Allen 1989, p. 33.
77 Three attempted coups took place during this time period.
78 Ibid., p. 45.
79 Bierschenk 2009, p. 339.

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