

## Book Review

# The Resurgence of Military Coups and Democratic Relapse in Africa

Adeoye Akinola (ed.)

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*The Resurgence of Military Coups and Democratic Relapse in Africa* is an edited book that presents a view of the notable spread of military coups across the African continent in recent years. The editor of the book, Adeoye Akinola, is head of Research and Teaching, and head of the African Union Studies Unit at the Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. The book gathered insights from different scholars who ventured into the complex tapestry of political instability that has characterised many African nations, especially in the Sahel region. The book opens with a comprehensive analysis of the historical context of military interventions in African politics, enhancing the discourse around coups and governance in Africa.

In the preface, the editor adopts a critical tone about the state of democracy in Africa when he says, ‘Despite notable instances of political transformation, a good number of African nations still struggle beyond the superficiality of periodic elections and intermittent political transitions.’<sup>1</sup> The primary argument of the book centres on the thesis that recurring military coups are symptomatic of deeper issues within African governance, particularly reflecting on how established political elites manoeuvre constitutional norms to maintain power. The contributions within the book span diverse analytical lenses – from the political economy of coup d’états to examinations of historical trends and the nature of contemporary military states.<sup>2</sup> Each chapter brings an addition to understanding why these coups are no longer anomalies but rather, in many contexts, increasingly accepted reactions to political shortcomings.

The prevailing themes tackled in this book include the fragility of democracy in Africa (Chapters 2–3, and Chapter 10), the political and economic ramifications of military interventions (Chapter 1 and Chapter 6), and the active roles of both regional and international actors in these processes (Chapters 8–9). Particularly, the book calls for revisiting the relationships between military forces and civilian governments, highlighting the need for sustainable democratic practices. Chapter 4 stands as a fascinating chapter as Gwinyai R Taruvinga discusses the role of misgovernance as a critical element in the occurrence of military coups: ‘The breakdown of the social contract in Mali has been key to two consecutive military coups.’<sup>3</sup> This assertion encapsulates the essence of the argument forwarded by the book, emphasising that the discontent of the electorate with the failings in governance can result in upheaval against operational state structures.

Arguably, there is a critical link between the decline of democratic governance and the resurgence of military interventions in African nations. The book effectively highlights that, as democratic institutions weaken due to corruption and mismanagement, military coups become perceived as necessary solutions to restore stability. Through various case studies including Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo, Akinola and the contributors illustrate how these coups are symptomatic of a broader crisis in governance, underlining the urgent need for stakeholders to engage in strengthening democratic resilience to break this troubling cycle.

Akinola and the authors made use of a good number of methodologies, including quantitative analyses of coup frequencies and qualitative case studies that unveil particular instances of democratic regression. The book reflects a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating political science, sociology, and historical analysis. A good example is Chapter 5, which comprises Issaka K Souaré's discussion of patterns and case studies of military coups. The chapter shows statistical compilations that reveal trends in coup occurrences over the decades, 'From 1952 to 2022, 98 successful military coups have been recorded on the continent.'<sup>4</sup> Such data-driven insights give the text reliability and solid grounds in empirical evidence.

The book boasts some important strengths. One such strength is the timely exploration of recent coups within context, which are not discussed as mere reactions, but include a larger narrative of governance and resistance against power consolidation. This perspective is crucial, taking into account the chaotic political landscape in regions, such as the Sahel, where coups have become a regular occurrence. Moreover, the diversity of chapters provides a clear understanding of the issue. From evaluating the role of foreign military actors<sup>5</sup> to discussing the challenges of military coups, the book captures the multifaceted nature of modern African politics.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Akinola's editing style provides for a coherent narrative, which allows individual contributors to present their unique perspectives. Additionally, the accessible and engaging writing style, characterised by clear language and relatable examples, enhances readability. By avoiding overly technical jargon and presenting information in a straightforward manner, the book invites a broad audience to engage with its important themes, making the analysis of military coups and democratic decline approachable and compelling.

The book, however, lacks an in-depth criticism on the role of international actors in sustaining authoritarian rule and military juntas. The book could benefit from a more extensive consideration of international actors' complicity in enabling authoritarian regimes and military juntas. Despite the identification in the book of some foreign influences, a deeper exploration of this area could further illuminate how external powers shape the internal politics of African states.

Akinola's book contributes to the broad literature on coups and political transitions in Africa by offering contemporary analysis and case studies that represent the current state of affairs on the continent, such as Zimbabwe, Mali, and Burkina Faso. The book serves as both a historical account and a guide for future research, emphasising the need to address issues of underlying governance that result in military interventions. This publication

holds significant implications for further study in the field of African governance. By emphasising the intersection of local grievances and military actions, it motivates scholars to explore the causal relationships between governance structures and coup outcomes. The call for measuring democratic performance not only during elections but also extending the accountability and effectiveness of governance practices is particularly pertinent for future research.

Scholars and students of African studies, political science, and international relations are the intended audience for this volume. Additionally, policymakers and practitioners working on governance and security in Africa will find the insights helpful in understanding the dynamics contributing to political instability. The balanced structure of the book merges rigorous academic scrutiny with concrete implications, making it suitable for both scholars and policymakers interested in African governance.

In conclusion, *The Resurgence of Military Coups and Democratic Relapse in Africa* is a crucial contribution to contemporary discussions surrounding governance in Africa. Adeoye Akinola and the contributing authors present a compelling analysis of the causes and implications of coups while challenging readers to rethink the narratives surrounding military interventions. The book is not only informative but also serves as a clarion call for a fresh assessment of what democracy means in the African context, highlighting the need for deeper engagement with the underlying issues.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> A Akinola (ed.), *The Resurgence of Military Coups and Democratic Relapse in Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), v.
- <sup>2</sup> O Fagbadebo, 'Historicising Coup d'états in Africa', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 29–64; A Akinola & RC Makombe, 'The Nature of Post-colonial African States and Military Coups: A Convergence', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 65–92.
- <sup>3</sup> GR Taruvinga, 'Military Coups and the Question of Misgovernance: A Malian Case Study', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 94.
- <sup>4</sup> IK Souaré, 'Patterns and Case Studies of Military Coups in Contemporary Africa: 1952–2022', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 134.
- <sup>5</sup> A Akinola, 'Military Coups and Democratisation in Africa: Rethinking the Role of Foreign Military Actors', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 177–202.
- <sup>6</sup> M Dwyer, 'Coups and Internal Military Dynamics', in Akinola, *The Resurgence of Military Coups*, 159–176.