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Resurgent Military Political Adventurism in West Africa: Implications for the Survival of Democracy

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Abstract

The democratization efforts of the 1990s in West Africa appeared to have put paid to military political adventurism which had been the plague of that region since independence in the 1960s. But since the year 2000 there has been a resurgence of military intervention in the politics of some West African states and this calls for concern as well as pre-emptive measures. This study sets out to identify the pre-disposing factors and make suggestions for the sustainment of democracy. In the

process it was established that bad governance; corruption; poverty; insecurity; non-availability of the dividends of democracy in tangible quantity; inordinate ambition of some military officers; and the half-hearted response of ECOWAS to anti-democratic tendencies are prevalent pre-disposing factors. We have suggested that good governance, inclusive democracy, transparency and accountability should be strictly adhered to under the close watch of ECOWAS.

Key words: Coups, Governance, Democratization, Junta, Democracy, Competition, Election

Introduction

In recent times some countries in West Africa have experienced military coups thereby jeopardizing the moves towards entrenching democracy. We can recall that less than a decade after independence nearly all countries in West Africa had experienced military coup leading to military rule in most cases. The trend continued until the 1990s when the wave of democratization sweeping the world led to transition to democratic rule in most West African countries. This had been the situation until recently when the status quo is being challenged again by resurgent military political adventurism reminiscent of the experience of the 1960s/70s. In this study, we shall examine the closely knit nature of inter-state relationships in West Africa from the colonial days up to the establishment of the Economic community of West African states (ECOWAS) in order to demonstrate how events in some countries could easily infest others around it. The sub-par performance of the immediate post-independence governments in West Africa as well as the politicization of the supposedly apolitical military will also receive our attention. This will enable us to account for the rash of coups and counter coups in the 60's and 70's. It is instructive to note that the military juntas did not fare better in office. In fact most of them left their states worse than they met them. Thus by the late 80's / early 90's the generality of the people had become disenchanted with military rule and were clamouring for democracy. Thus a new wave of democratization swept through the West African sub-region leading to the entrenchment of democratic government in many of the states in the 1990s.

This development once again raised hopes of better life, good governance and rapid development just like the situation was at independence. Unfortunately this has not been the case. Massive corruption, poor infrastructural development, insecurity and visionless leadership have rendered the economy comatose leading to mass poverty, squalor and misery. This has bred a large pool of malcontents who have been hiding under the umbrella of ethnic and religious persuasions to assail the States either in an attempt to break away or draw attention to their predicament. In most cases the leadership has not risen boldly to the socio-economic and security challenges. The consequence has been their portrayal as weak, timid and not pro-

active thereby inadvertently inviting the restive military for another round of political adventurism. Given the scope of the study area, a country-by-country assessment cannot be accommodated in a study of this nature. We are therefore employing a thematic approach but where and when necessary particular States will be singled out for special treatment. The following themes are slated for discussion in the order in which they are listed:

1. Colonial and immediate post-independence experience;
2. Rash of coups and counter-coups in West Africa and the performance of the military regimes;
3. West Africa's post – 1990 Democratisation waves: a false dawn?
4. The state of democracy in West Africa presently.
5. ECOWAS and the management of the new wave of military intervention.
6. Concluding remarks.

Colonial and Immediate Post-Independence Experience

In pre-colonial times there were empires (Ghana, Mali and Songhai) and Jihad movements (Seku Ahmadu's, Alhaj Umar's and Dan Fodio's movements) which covered much of present day West Africa and which, either by accident or design, fostered robust inter-group relations and even some measure of amity (wittingly or unwittingly). And the collective bitter experience under colonial rule (British Portuguese or French) was a rallying platform for unity of purpose in the pursuit of freedom. This was given concrete expression through the formation of cross – national political parties at the initial stage of the resistance in British West African territories and later in the French West African territories. These parties were the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) and Rassemblement Democratique Africain (RDA) respectively. Although radical and more assertive political parties soon emerged in the different British West African colonies the camaraderie established through the initial effort remained right through the colonial period up to independence. And, of course, in the case of the French colonies the RDA and the legacies of the French colonial policies of "Assimilation" and "Association" largely sustained the fraternity up to independence. And so it was not surprising that by 1976 the West African countries could come together to establish a joint regional economic organisation known as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Thus hardly could any major socio-political event in a particular country remain isolated. The ripple effect or contagion effects are soon felt by the neighbours. Even in terms of performance of the post independence governments of the different countries the situation was not different. They all performed substantially below expectation. We can recall that on the eve of independence, there was the general belief that "...with independence all problems would be solved and life would become more abundant" (Ajayi 2007, p. 34).

Consequently, “(Rapid) transformation in developmental terms, social advancements in the areas of education, health, employment and other welfare indicators were largely anticipated and eagerly awaited” (Ajayi, 2007, p. 34). But this did not materialize because of the deleterious impact of the neo-colonial form and character of the emergent states as well as the corrupt and selfish orientation of the emergent leaders whom Basil Davidson euphemistically referred to as “pirates in power” (Davidson, 1993:243-265). This is virtually true of all the countries in West Africa, whether former British colonies or erstwhile French colonies and this partially explain the fact that when the coups started happening they cut across colonial divides.

Rash of Coups and Counter-Coups and the Performance of the Emergent Military Regimes

Arifalo (1982) has aptly described the first decade of independence in West Africa as the “decade of military coup d’etat and counter-coups” based on the frequency of military interventions in politics within the sub-region (Arifalo, 1982, p. 151). Togo experienced the first coup` on 13th January, 1963 and her neighbour, Dahomey (now Republic of Benin) was next in line on the 22nd of December, 1965. By 3rd January, 1966 it was the turn of Upper Volta (now Guinea Bissau) and barely two weeks later, 15th January, 1966 precisely, the army struck in Nigeria. Ghana joined the bandwagon on 24th July 1966. On January 13, 1967 Togo experienced another coup and this experience was replicated in Sierra Leone which had her first coup` on 22nd March, 1967 and experienced another one in April 1968. There followed a brief period of respite before the restive military struck in Ghana for the second time in January 1972.

Although divergent reasons were given by the political power usurpers for their intervention in the politics of these countries, certain factors cut across. Ajayi and Olupayimo (2009) have summarized the common factors as;

...the inability of the post-independence civilian administrations to fulfil their campaign promises thereby dashing the hopes of the people, prevalent corruption, ineptitude and general political decay, the politicization of the military and the contagion effects of coups in other places ... (Ajayi & Olupayimo, 2009, p. 176).

We must add that the military’s monopoly of the instruments of coercion and its nationalistic affectations were also strong pre-disposing factors. Thus an institution that was thought to be apolitical began to play leading role in the politics of West African states shortly after independence. But as Dare (1991) has rightly observed the much vaunted mission of the military in politics as a corrective agency or reactive intervener could not be sustained because it soon became part of the problem through

overstay in power and the accompanying self serving disposition which impacted negatively on its political performance (Dare, 1991, p. 17). It is hardly surprising therefore that, nearly all the military regimes in west Africa left their countries worse than they met them. For instance, in Nigeria, after several years of military rule with brief periods of civilian interregnum (1979-1983 and August, 26-Nov. 17, 1993) the popular verdict is aptly captured in the following statements:

... by the time of the last handover of power to civilians in 1999, the generality of the people in Nigeria had become disenchanted with military rule largely because of its overall noxious impact on the polity. It had entrenched a culture of violence, authoritarianism, massive corruption in high and low places, and left behind a depressed and prostrate economy through ineptitude, instability and impious experimentations ... it also bequeathed to the nation ethno-religious crises and a badly ruptured polity – consequences of the divided and rule tactics of some military rulers (Ajayi, 2003, p. 130).

The above submission is also true of the situation in most West African states that experienced military rule. The much touted Flight Lt. Jerry Rawlings' regime in Ghana was a mere flash in the pan. Even when he came back as a civilian president, in 1992-2001, the promises of transforming Ghana economically was still not met. In fact he was accused of mismanaging the external economic aids and grants received under the IMF and World Bank Economic Recovery Programme through manipulation of data to create the impression of positive economic performance under his watch (Omitoogun, 2003).

Even countries like Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Conakry that had relatively short spell of military rule were not better off. Peer influence and inordinate ambition which are evidently the push factors, beclouded the vision and mission of the military rulers in these countries. It is only Senegal that has enjoyed stable democratic dispensations from independence to date. But even here (i.e. Senegal) democracy faced an 'acid test' early in 2012 as we shall see later.

West Africa's Post-1990 Democratisation Waves: A False Dawn?

It has become necessary to take a step back from the current euphoria surrounding the democratization process in West Africa. This is necessary if the sub-region is to consolidate the current efforts in the light of the creeping pockets of military interventions. Obviously, the elected leaders in the region seems unaware of the distinction between democracy and democratization thus, many political leaders simply govern from the elitist perspective as they only accommodate the features and institutions of democracy while suffocating the essence of citizen participation in the decision making process. Africa will undoubtedly be unable to sustain democracy if

it fails to restructure political and economic spaces with an agenda which acknowledges its historical experiences, specificities, balance of forces, and location and role in the international milieu (Wamaby, 2007).

Morrow's (1992) over two decade's statement that 'Africa is in a scramble for existence' seems valid in explaining the African situation of today. It is clear that the increasing vulnerability of African States to external control and internal mismanagement especially in the models of democracy under practice makes government in the region to be out of tune with the realities and desires of the citizenry. In the midst of the euphoria of occupying political office, growing conflicts and contradictions of dwindling economies; attention had shifted from the struggles of the people at the grassroots to desires and struggles for elite protection and domination of the political space.

The late 1980s and 1990s were characterized by concerted struggle for democratization and the clamour for good governance on the African continent (Anyang' Nyong'o (1987); Chole and Ibrahim, 1995). The thirst for freedom and justice, the political fallouts from the structural adjustment programmes and the entrenched autocratic and repressive political systems dominant in the larger part of Africa's post-colonial history provided the incentive and legitimacy for popular democratic struggles in Africa. The democratic struggles triggered constitutional and political changes and reforms in many countries compelling the holding of elections and granting of civil and political freedom (Gyimah-Boadi, 2004; Bujra and Adejumobi, 2002). Between 1996 and 2006, 44 elections were conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, and between 2005 and 2007, 26 presidential and 28 parliamentary elections were held in Africa (UNECA, 2009: 17). By the early 2012, Twenty-seven African countries have held local and national elections.

According to Cargill (2011) "African States have the form – but not the substance – of Western-style democracy. They go through the motions of elections but those in power do everything they can to make sure the opposition is not in a position to win". The reality therefore is that Democracy has often been misinterpreted in Africa as something that only has to do with politics and the ruling elite rather than mass participation.

The State of Democracy in West Africa Presently

Across West Africa, elections that had culminated in civilian regimes had been held at several instances although not without much criticisms because most of the elections have been considered not free and fair. Liberia for instance has had a third general election since the end of its brutal civil war. Similarly, the general elections in Ivory Coast and Nigeria were historic: Ivory Coast's was the first since the end of civil war, and Nigeria's "better" election followed its 2007 "election-like

event”. Nevertheless, they illustrate, alongside the polls in Kenya in 2007 and Zimbabwe in 2008, the potential for violent elections in profoundly divided countries.

African democracy has been in a tight spot in recent times. Senegal, Mali and Guinea Bissau’s election in 2012 were seen as tests of political continuity in the region. Senegal succeeded, it stands out proudly as never having experienced military rule; but both Mali and Guinea Bissau have taken significant steps backwards. These are not isolated cases as there is a long history of coups d’état in the West African region. The reality is that for years, African democracy has been jeopardized by military uprisings still very present in the continent. The wave of independence in the 1960s was followed, after a few years, by a succession of coups in many countries, as we have noted previously.

In recent decades, however, much of Africa has stabilized, and the number of military uprisings has reduced significantly. In the previous century there were 42 coups d’état in the West African countries, dropping to a mere seven cases since the dawn of the new millennium. However in 2012, it is much of a stretch to think that coups are an infectious disease endemic to West Africa. We’ll take a look at some of the recent cases that have occurred since the start of this millennium.

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau, one of the world’s poorest countries, which is heavily dependent on foreign assistance, is not particularly known for its robust political values but for its coups, political assassinations and booming drug trade. The numbers are clear: since the country gained independence in 1974, no single elected leader has finished his term in office. The coup d’état of 14th April 2012 is clearly another struggle in a long history of elite competition for power, and a reaction to the former Prime Minister’s perceived domination of Guinea-Bissau’s politics.

The former President Malam Bacai Sanha, seen as a stabilizing force in the country, died in January 2012 of diabetes. The first round of the Presidential election, called in order to appoint his replacement, was peaceful, which led observers to regard the forthcoming second round with optimism, as the end of the political uncertainty caused by Sanha’s death. The first round gave an overwhelming majority (49 percent) to the former Prime Minister Carlos Gomes, Jr. Opposition candidates felt they did not stand a chance and claimed fraud, as well as calling for a boycott of the second round, thus triggering new political tensions. The army decided to act and took over effortlessly.

Mali

The upheavals in Guinea-Bissau and Mali are very different. For several decades after independence from France in 1960, Mali suffered droughts, rebellions, a coup and 23 years of military dictatorship until democratic elections in 1992. As

opposed to Guinea Bissau, in Mali, a group of mid-ranking military officers reversed an established democracy that had been functioning for 20 years. Mali was within weeks of presidential elections when army officers protested the weak support they received in the fight against Tuareg rebels.

The Tuaregs, seeking independence, started a rebellion against the Malian government in January 2012, inflicting serious losses on the soldiers in the north. The anger and dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of the government's response to the uprising of Tuareg tribes led to the coup on March 22, which forced President Toure into exile. Many Malians supported the military coup because they knew how corrupt the administration was, and not necessarily because they preferred military regime. This must have forcibly struck Mali's military Junta who quickly handed power back to a civilian administration, after which Dioncounda Traoré (not Toure), was sworn in as interim President. Mali was regarded as a model of African democracy until military seized power in March 2012 and the north fell under al-Qaeda control. Presidential polls in August 2013 were part of a designated return to civilian rule.

Senegal

Senegal has been hailed as one of West Africa's democratic success stories, being alone among its mainland neighbours never to have suffered a coup d'état. Senegal is widely regarded as one of West Africa's more stable democracies but its leaders have shown a pattern of overstaying their welcome.

Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade came to power in 2000 riding an electoral wave of reform. But by late 2011 when he sought and received a court's permission to run for a third term, despite the constitution's specific ban on it, he angered the country's voters. Wade's third term bid would have resulted in imposition of unpopular government on the people, in addition to progressive weakening of key institutions and rules which the administration had pursued through constitutional amendments. The development drew global concern but there was little or no attempt by either the African Union or ECOWAS to stop the illegality that was brewing in one of Africa's most stable democracies. The outcome of the 2012 elections is a deserved one for the Senegalese public and opposition that worked hard, on their own, against Wade's political machine as he tore apart key institutions and rules in what could have significantly affected the course of democracy in Senegal.

Perhaps the ability of Senegal's opposition to unite when it mattered most is the most important lesson for West Africa's new democracies. In a region where it is anathema for the opposition to work together, the capacity of Senegal's opposition to unite at critical moments must be commended. The significance rests not only in the rarity of oppositions working together in the region; but that it happened within three

weeks after the end of first round elections. It was superlative to see opposition parties, set aside their differences and for candidates, many near or past their prime and who would never have another jab at the exalted office, put aside personal ambition to save the nation. This feat together with active and vigilant civil society stopped Wade's civilian coup that could significantly rewrite the course of democracy in Senegal.

Niger

Niger is the country that precedes Mali in the string of coups that have overthrown West African presidents. Niger's President, Mamadou Tandja, appointed a new Constitutional Court specifically to allow him to hold a referendum in order to extend his term beyond 2009. He thus sought a third term in office and the removal of term limits, leading to a serious political crisis. On 18 February 2010, however, the soldiers attacked the presidential palace and announced the formation of a Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy, chaired by Chief of Squadron Djib Salou. The military officers claimed they wanted to restore democratic rule in Niger. In 2011, upon the completion of the one-year transition plan designed by the Independent National Consultative Council (Conseil Consultatif National), presidential elections were held. Subsequently, the opposition National Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) of Mahamadou Issoufou, assumed power; Niger looks set to emerge as an example of a successful post-coup transition.

Guinea

In Guinea, the dictator Lansana Conte died of diabetes on 22 December 2008 after 24 years in office. This left a power vacuum that brought on a struggle for control of the country, which was solved by a coup. Captain Moussa Camara Dadis, as leader of the junta, was also the country's president. A year later, he was wounded during an assassination attempt by his former aide-de-camp. While he left for Morocco to receive treatment, his Vice President Sekouba Kanate, also in uniform, relieved him in leading the National Council for Democracy and Development (Conseil National de la Democratie et du Development, CNDD). In November 2010 elections were held, which were characterized by strong inter-ethnic rivalry between rival parties. Alpha Conde, leader of the opposition, won the presidential elections, and Camara stepped down. However, on 18 July 2011, the resident of President Conde was attacked, in an assassination attempt which points out the West African country's fragile transition to democratic rule.

Mauritania

In 2003, Mauritania underwent a failed uprising. However, in 2005, soldiers led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall did manage to put an end to Maaouya Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya's 21-year-old regime. The bloodless coup was followed by the adoption

of a new constitution the next year and presidential elections in March 2007. Still, stability did not last long, and by August 2008, the first freely elected president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdullahi, was ousted by a coup led by General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz.

What triggered the take-over was Abdallahi's decree trying to dismiss four military top commanders. The coup leaders created a transitional government of national unity to hold elections in July 18, 2009. The newly elected President was coup leader General Abdel Aziz. Despite opposition protests, alleging massive irregularities in the electoral process, the international community, including the African Union, enthusiastically welcomed the Mauritanian election results.

Despite the string of coups, it is not possible to condemn the West African countries as a whole. They experienced, as seen in the cases described, different dilemmas caused by domestic complexities. Nevertheless, at the same time, there are common threads one might identify in understanding the political movements and shifting power dynamics in the Sahel: high levels of corruption, sit-tight disposition, drug trafficking and intolerable economic situations; their post-colonial history and the legitimacy the armies gained during the independence process; and the high percentage of people living in poverty (according to the UNDP Human Development Report of 2011, of 186 countries, Guinea Bissau ranks lowest in human development, at number 176, with Mali just one step above it on the list).

Furthermore, the democratic instability is due to a process of balancing powers within the different elite factions and ethnic groups. As the result of fragility of the democratization process, the economic conditions and the human rights situation in these countries worsen. This leads us to the examination of the role of ECOWAS in ensuring good governance and discouraging military intervention in the region.

ECOWAS and the Management of the New Wave of Military Intervention

In all of these coups and unconstitutional changes of government, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) swiftly rose in condemnation and imposed sanctions (except in the case of Mauritania, which had pulled out of ECOWAS in December 2000). Despite sanctions by ECOWAS, undemocratic changes of government in West Africa seem to be the norm rather than the exception. These events question the ability of ECOWAS to deal effectively with these complexities. Disaffections with the leadership style of ECOWAS has seen the move by a sub-regional organization, the West African Economic and Monetary Union, to create a security commission to deal with the security challenges facing the francophone countries. An analysis of this emerging issue is important because of its many negative implications for peace and stability in the region.

In response to the most recent military interventions that succeeded, the West African regional bloc ECOWAS agreed on April 26th 2012, after an emergency summit, to send troops to Mali and Guinea-Bissau. Their mandate is meant to help swiftly reinstate civilian rule, with presidential elections within the 12 months. ECOWAS threatened sanctions if junta leaders try to cling to power, demonstrating its commitment to implement the 2001 ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.

On the surface, ECOWAS seems to be responding swiftly to these changes in the region. Nevertheless, unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa are a symptom of deeply imbedded problems, such as lack of economic opportunities, youth unrest, organized crimes, piracy, endemic corruption that could paralyze state apparatuses, and more spending on military armaments than public spending for basic services.

For ECOWAS to be seen as responsive, it needs to move from the rhetoric of “swift” sanctions to the actual encouragement and nudging of its ruling elites to respect the rule of law, protect human rights, provide avenues for economic growth in their respective countries, actively nip corruption in the bud, and observe democratic principles, such as the imposition of term limits on serving presidents. No doubt, this is a re-awakening call for ECOWAS to pause, reflect, reinvent itself, and come up with relevant solutions as a regional organization to solve the myriad security issues confronting the region. Otherwise, it could lose relevance in the region and further alienate its francophone members.

The trajectories of coups in West Africa are not the same; for instance, in Guinea Bissau, no president has ever completed a full term since the country gained independence in 1974. On the other hand, is Mali which had an established democracy before the coup`. Reasons for the toppling of the governments in the region were poor economic conditions, endemic corruption, interference of the military in political matters in the case of Guinea Bissau and absence of institutional reforms.

Therefore, a critical question to ask is: why are coups pervasive in the West African region, despite ECOWAS’ imposition of sanctions on the affected countries? The answer lies in the fact that ECOWAS has largely ignored the actions of sitting presidents that might not be in tune with the needs and aspirations of their citizenry, and has only reacted when there is an unconstitutional change of government by “swiftly” imposing sanctions. This seems to support the argument of some people that regional organizations in Africa protect the incumbents in democratic states, even if they exhibit anti-democratic tendencies.

The frequency of coups in West Africa also reflects the absence of inclusive democracy and good governance in member states. This is evidence of non-adherence to the norms and principles of ECOWAS that normally would have strengthened the political legitimacy and institutional authority of ECOWAS in governance matters. Over the years, there has been increasing fragmentation of political authorities between the francophone – and Anglophone-member countries in the region, which was recently demonstrated in the diplomatic intervention of Burkina Faso – a francophone country – in facilitating the resignation of the deposed president in Mali, which was a key requirement for negotiations with the military junta.

This also reveals a divergence in the course of action to be taken in the event of political crises in member states. Nigeria, which is the powerhouse of ECOWAS, favours military intervention as a solution to all political crises, while the francophone countries prefer subtle diplomacy. Furthermore, the insecurity of the ruling elites in the region and their quest for survival, which increases their focus on self-preservation with the resulting manipulating of constitutions and electoral laws, tends to heat up the polity and provide incentives for the military to carry out coups. ECOWAS needs to deal decisively with this in an inclusive and comprehensive manner.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing, resurgent military political adventurism constitutes a real danger to the consolidation of democracy in West Africa. The military power usurpers have been capitalizing on the malaise afflicting the democratic dispensations to intervene in politics thereby truncating the consolidation process. Granted that miss-governance, corruption, insecurity, the non-availability of the dividends of democracy, selfish orientations and parochial tendencies are rampart ‘vices’ under the democratic dispensations, military intervention is not the solution going by the antecedents of military regimes in the region. It is our belief that the worst democratic regime is preferable to authoritarian military regimes chiefly because it is still amenable to reform. This must have informed the action of opposition elements in Senegal, in April 2012, who, rather than create opportunities for military intervention, preferred to close their ranks and prevent sitting President Wade from realizing his inordinate ambition of a third term in office. ECOWAS tame reactions to situation such as this; the divisive tendencies within the organization and the non-adherence to its norms and principles by some member countries are gradually rendering the body irrelevant. Thus, for it to command respect and authority it must put its house in order; stick to its principles; enforce its norms; champion good governance and maintain zero tolerance for military political adventurism or any form of unconstitutional rule in the region.

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