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Democratic Regression in Africa:

**Understanding the Rising Spate of Military
Takeovers in the West African Sahel**

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Acknowledgment

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About CJID

The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), formerly the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ), is a West African media innovation and development think (and do) tank. Founded in 2014 as a non-governmental organisation in Nigeria. The Centre has been a leader in investigative journalism, civic technology, open data, verification, safety of journalists, elections and freedom of information and expression. It has a presence in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia and The Gambia.

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Abstract

Looking beyond the fears of a coup contagion, the thrust here centres on the social, political, and economic implications of democratic regression on the African continent. Notwithstanding the geopolitical contexts of these unconstitutional disruptions, as well as the local socio-political conditions that have catalyzed the coups, this critical juncture can serve to unify Africa's independent voice in global politics. Given typical international ambivalence, regional institutions and key states should take leadership to define a collective strategy that firmly guides the exit of the military juntas, to usher in a new age of democratic governance on the continent.

Introduction

A combination of geopolitics, extremist violence, and local socio-political conditions have created a perfect storm in the West African Sahel and its environs, leading to a steady attack on democratic institutions in the region. With 14 coup d'états attempted, and nine² successfully executed in the past 3 years, there are renewed fears of a gradual devolvement into the 1980s era military takeovers on the continent, ultimately undermining personal freedoms, civil liberties, and political participation.

African states are no strangers to coups. Altogether, the continent accounts for 44 percent of all global coup attempts between 1950 and 2022. In the early years of independence, especially between 1950 and 1979, there were at least 46 successful military takeovers in African states, further eroding the legitimacy of the newly independent and fledgling democracies. The continent's largest economy, Nigeria, experienced at least six successful coups, with the last military regime ending with the 1999 transition to democratic rule.

Africa experienced a noticeable decline in military takeovers since 2000. What is currently playing out against the backdrop of global economic downturn, domestic upheavals triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and widespread popular discontent in the Sahelian belt, have the potential of providing the catalyst for the dissolution of constitutional authority. This is evidenced by multiple coup attempts, the latest being the military takeover in Niger and Gabon, five weeks apart between 26th July and 30th August. Right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2023, six Sahelian states; Mali, Guinea, Chad, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and Gabon, in the central African region, have come under forced military rule, sparking speculations of another contagion. The thrust here is not just to offer an explanation of the contagion of coups d'états, but also the social, political, and economic implications for the region and continent.

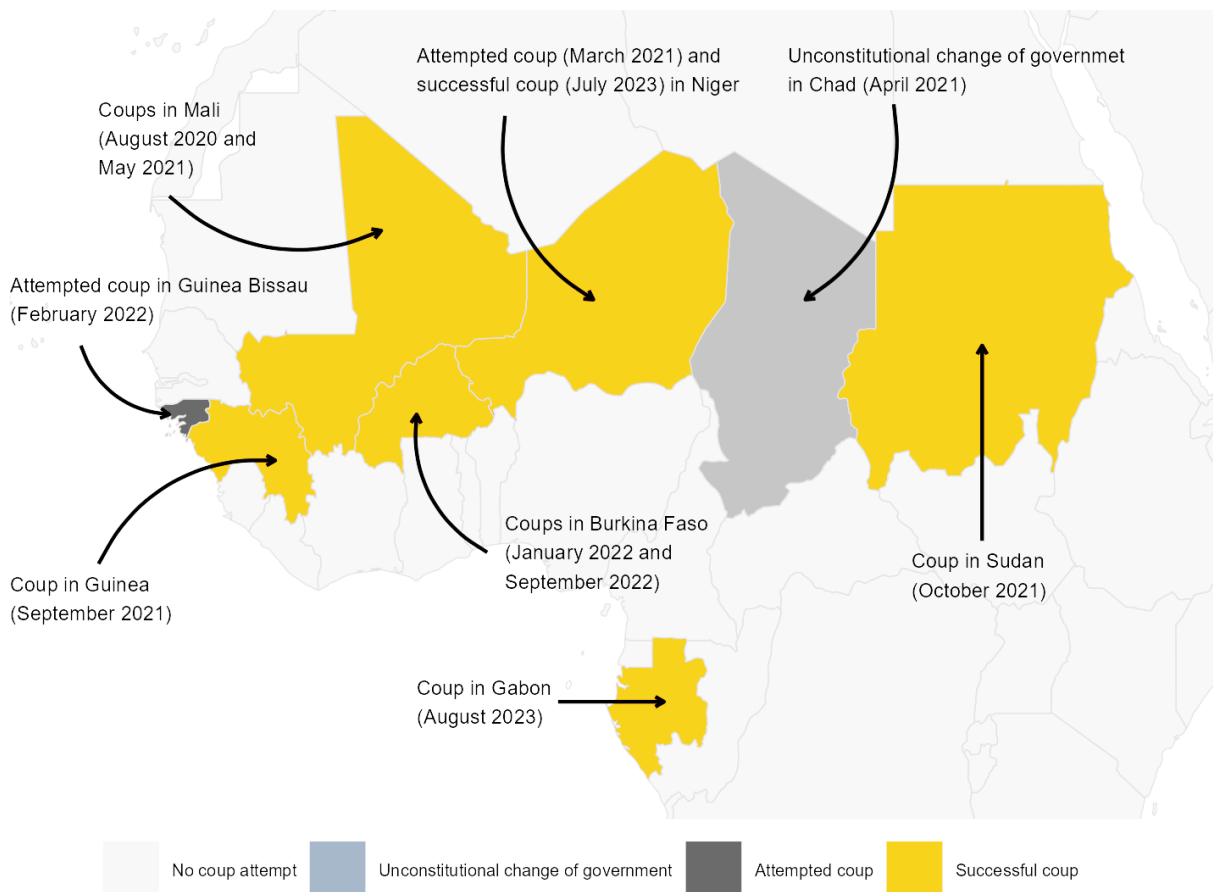
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1. ELOR NKEREUWEM writes from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C.
 2. This number includes military takeovers, some twice over in the same country, in the following sub-Saharan African states: Mali, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Gabon. Successful coups d'états occurred twice in both Mali and Burkina Faso.

What is Causing the Coups D'états?

Given the non-linear and complex nature of democratic recession and dissolution of constitutional order in the Sahel, speculating about definite causes does not appear to be ideal. It is more useful to explore the common themes of these military takeovers and, through this, deduce possible contributing factors to the emerging recourse to military actions. Understanding these contributing factors must play a significant role in defining pragmatic interventions.

Firstly, With Niger and Gabon as the latest manifestations, what appears to be most obvious is the geo-political context of these recent power takeovers. Clearly, democratic dissolution is not merely occurring at random across the continent but they are overwhelmingly concentrated in former French colonies, with the exception of Sudan.

Map of Africa showing current military coup outcomes since 2020-2023



Source: <https://www.idea.int/blog>

All successful/unsuccessful Military coups from 1950 - 2023



Source: <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05>

Secondly, military takeovers are happening in countries that had over time witnessed an uptick in the spread of extremist violence. Taking out Gabon which has had its share of civil unrest that spiked in 2016, all the other recent military takeovers have occurred in countries facing acute spread or clusters of violent extremist activities, particularly led by the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP), Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel), and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM).

Violent events and fatalities have risen steadily in the tri-state border region of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso since 2020. Additionally, as a result of turf clashes between IS Sahel and JNIM, the reported number of fatalities and violent incidents in the three countries spiked between 2021 and 2022, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). During the same period, in Burkina Faso and Mali, reported fatalities rose by 77 and 150 percent, respectively.

Consequently, rising insecurity has become a common theme in the justification for intervention by the various military juntas. This persists even in contexts where the data suggests otherwise. In Niger, for instance, violence against civilians, measured by reported fatalities declined, dropping by 16 percent, in the first half of 2023. In some cases, as in Sudan, the military intervention has resulted in escalated violence against civilians with rising fatalities. Since unrests sparked by extremist groups in the region have significantly disrupted socio-economic activities in the affected states, citizens experiencing hardship appear to find military intervention a welcome attraction.



Source: <https://www.wionews.com>

Thirdly, all the countries appear to have a good spread of perennial political discontent, with significant undemocratic political succession plans by incumbent leaders undermining and threatening the state. In Guinea, for instance, President Alpha Conde was ousted by the military following the manipulation of the constitution to extend presidential term limits, allowing him to run for a third term. This sparked popular protests and culminated in the coup d'état of September 2021. Similarly, the military takeover in Gabon followed years of protests against election fraud, which spiked in 2016, as the now ousted President Ali Bongo sought to extend his second term in the face of growing opposition. Violent protests erupted following the controversial 2016 elections, which saw him leading with very close margins, thereby perpetrating his family's five decades in power. The military took over on August 30, 2023, after Bongo won a third term.

All these countries, Mali, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Gabon, have a history of military coups. What perhaps distinguishes the current iteration of coups is the response of citizens to the return of the military to power. Unlike the mostly negative view of military takeovers in the 1990s, which saw significant rallying of civil society activism against military rule, recent coup protagonists have been received warmly, and celebrated. While it is not clear how widespread the support for the military junta is in all countries affected, support rallies appear cautiously spontaneous.

Yet, support for military takeovers have also occurred alongside sustained disinformation and anti-Western propaganda in some of the affected states. Russian disinformation warfare in the Sahel and neighboring states have, for instance, laid the ground for the pro-Russian sentiments that seem prevalent on the continent. Russia's use of unorthodox foreign policy approaches, especially the deployment of Private Military Companies (PMCs) into countries experiencing political fragility in Africa in pursuit of its political and economic interests call to question its role in Africa's future stability. Given the sophisticated and concerted involvement of Russia in Africa's conflict zones, and Moscow's apparent support for anti-democratic systems and institutions, the recent coup outcomes on the continent, with the military juntas locked in purported alliance with Russia, require a deeper probe and analysis.

The Geopolitics of Global Interests: Africa as a Proxy

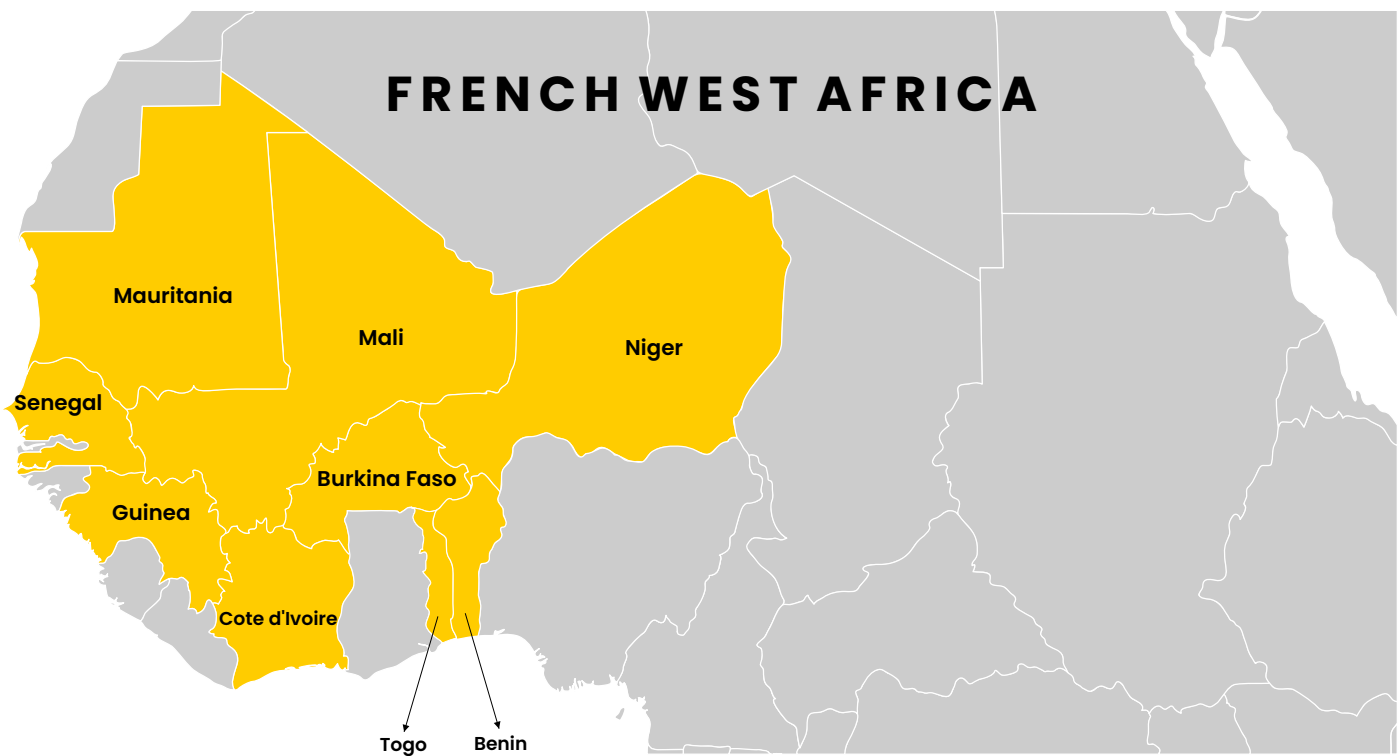
Today's military takeover is laced with palpable anti-Western sentiments, particularly targeted at France. As rebelling militaries dissolve democratic structures in the mostly francophone countries of the Sahel, the popular anti-French narrative is front and center, supplemented by a pro-Russia narrative.

The devolvement of French influence in its former African colonies is, perhaps, the ultimate actualization of World War II era concern in Paris that France's claim to any superpower status in global affairs was inextricably tied to maintaining a firm- and vicious- grip of her vast colonies, particularly in Africa. It is important to note that unlike the anti-colonial movements that sprouted after the War to end the rule of former imperialists, especially Britain and France, the current repudiation of France is majorly spearheaded by the militaries of the different African states that have experienced a coup. This was precisely the fear of France when African soldiers returning from WWII began to openly express contempt for France, having experienced, first-hand, the colonial power's humiliation during the war.



Source: www.aljazeera.com/news/

While the balkanization of French West Africa into small countries made them administratively easier to manage, they also became extremely weak entities tied wholesale to Paris. The 1956 *Loi Cadre*, which established territorial regions in Africa, and the 1958 referendum, which elected to maintain ties between former colonies and France, set the tone for the popular discontent that is now evidenced in the repudiation of France across the Sahel, and on the continent. Even back in 1958, the 'agreement' to remain in the French community was not absolute, with about 25% dissention in colonies like Niger.



Although the ambivalence shown by former French colonies towards total independence from France remains to date, rising economic hardships and a perception of unbridled exploitation by France has fueled deep resentments in several African countries. Perceived French meddling in local politics and selective support for/tolerance of undemocratic leadership, has also raised questions about Paris' role as an impartial arbiter. Certainly, the repudiation and severance of French/Francophone relationships will have substantive geo-political and economic consequences for both parties. For now, this fact appears to have been blithely dismissed by the new coup protagonists. While it is still too early to predict the long-term implications or ramifications of the recent coups in francophone Sahel, it remains to be seen whether or not decades of deep entanglements with France can be undone by mere fiat.

It is paradoxical that the upturn in France's military interventions and footprints in Africa over the last decade were mostly spurred by the rise in violent extremism and the quest to deploy an elaborate pro-Western counter-terrorism action that is overwhelmingly kinetic in nature. In Mali, France's boots on the ground strategy was a response to the direct call from Mali's embattled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2013 for assistance to stem the rising tide of extremist violence in the country. The hard military approach, while temporarily helping to lower extremist violence, did nothing to completely stop the rapid spread of jihadism throughout the Sahel. In frustration, France withdrew that support in 2022, even as the support of the Malian military also left a huge toll on civilian lives and livelihoods opportunities.

Altogether, the long history of colonial exploitation, coupled with post-independence tethering of African states to France; Paris' self-interested intervention in local politics; and the perceived failure of the French military to make a qualitative difference for them, eventually provided the incentives for today's patently anti-France sentiments driving the military takeovers. African states have also become proxies, for old and new external power in renewed contention for global power.



Source: adoc-photos/Corbis via Getty Images

Implications for the Region and Continent

Side-by-side with the rise of anti-West feelings across Africa is, paradoxically, what may well be a new phase of geo-political neutrality in the midst of socio-economic deprivation and myriad other domestic political and security challenges that are making military coups more acceptable, even celebrated. Two countries- Guinea and Gabon- illustrate the extent that lingering popular discontent unresolved can trigger and quickly degenerate into military takeover. Given the history and trajectory of military takeovers on the continent, the prospects for sustained peace and development are doubtful.

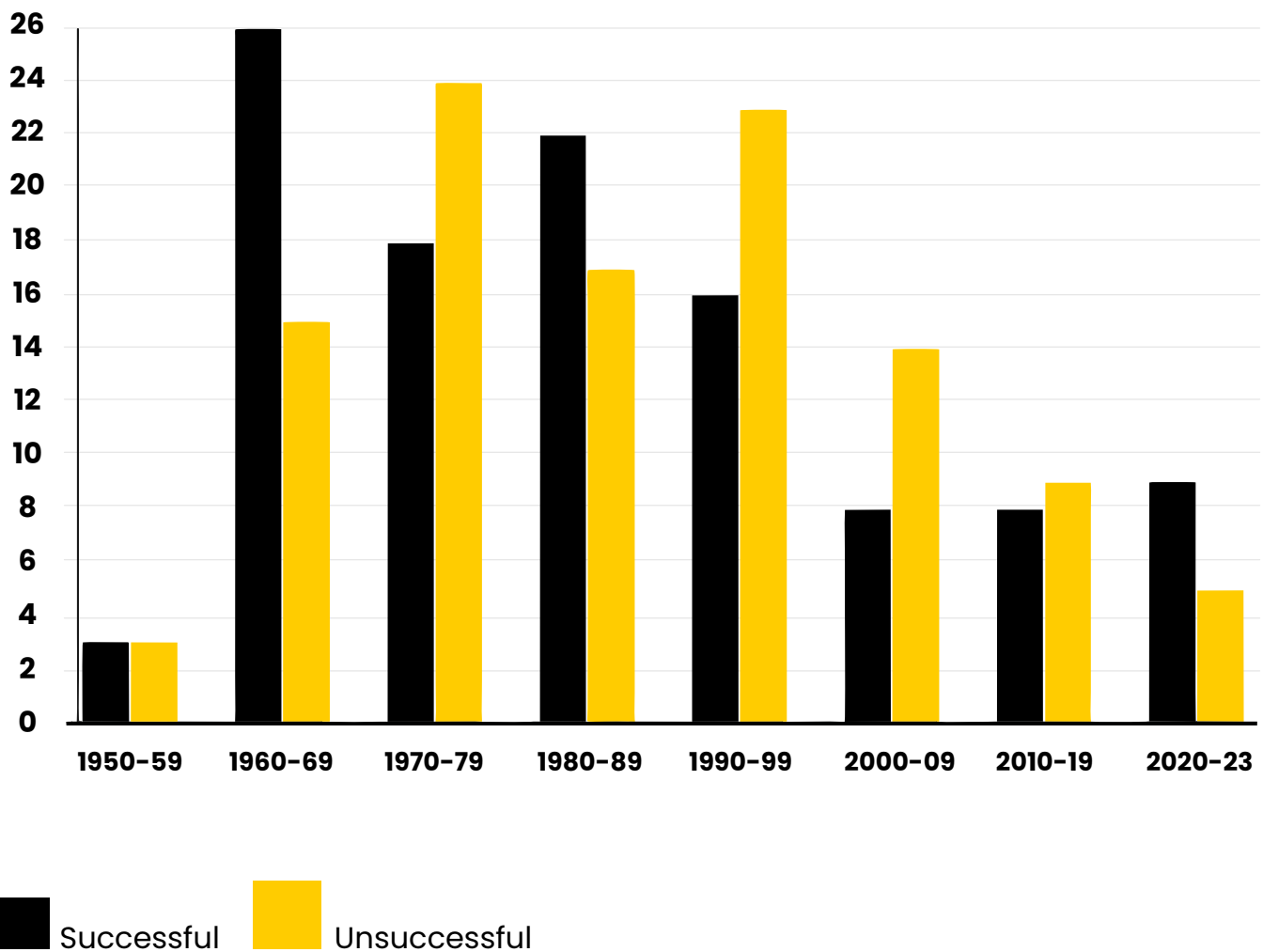
It might be the case, also, that francophone African countries are inadvertently leading the charge with their devolvement from France towards a new era of global geo-political neutrality vis-à-vis major global powers accustomed to taking the continent for granted. If indeed this is the case, what are the implications of an increasingly independent continent, one that is seeking to be its own persona, when it comes to playing skillfully in the non-altruistic game of international politics? What should the African Union (AU) and key regional groupings like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the East African Community (EAC), do in the face of emerging challenges- and opportunities- occasioned by the spate of military takeovers? Finally, how should major African powers with enough clouts and power like Nigeria act in the face of these new complexities?

Given the typical ambivalence of key global players like the United Nations Security Council, often impeded by disagreements between permanent seat holders on military interventions in African states, the focus must now turn to Africa's regional organizations and influential states within the affected West and Central regions to envision and create a long term strategy to stabilize the region and continent.

In a practical sense, military action against these military juntas will only compound and complicate the current situation, with a potential to further destabilize the region and expand existing complex humanitarian conditions. Diplomatic approaches that clearly define an exit strategy and make adequate provisions for accountability in the return to

constitutional order must be at the centre of any immediate or future negotiations. Regional institutions and influential states must extract commitment that military juntas abide with agreed exit timelines; making sure to diligently monitor development, moving forward. Typically, the earliest exit arrangement tends to come up within six months; in Mali, the junta promised to conduct multiparty elections in February 2024. Adherence to this timeline, and the willingness to impose sanctions in the event of any breach, will serve a major deterrence against coup plotters.

Military coups in Africa over the decades



Conclusion

Much of the show of public acquiescence and mass demonstrations to celebrate military takeovers in francophone Sahel and its environs may just be pointing to a sentimental yearning for the Thomas Sankara-styled interventions in the 1980s West Africa. This is particularly salient in Burkina Faso, where reverence for the late revolutionary, whose developmental plans for his country seemed way ahead of the times, remains firmly grounded.

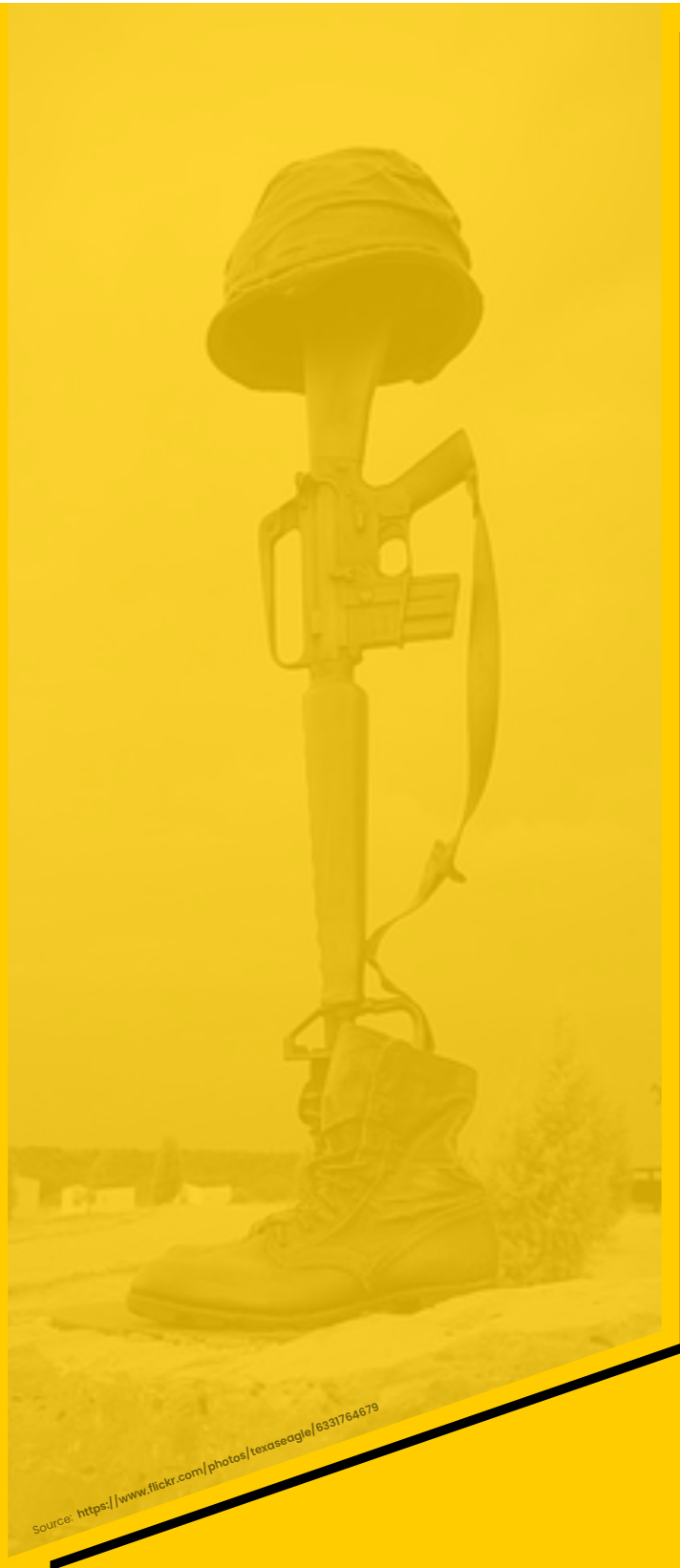
Still, the history of Africa is also a history of disappointments with the same era of military interventions, especially given how military regimes quickly undermined constitutional order and turned into kleptocrats to retain their firm hold on power. There is no doubt the problematic nature of some of the military takeovers, past and present, especially those cases where some coup leaders are themselves only interested in holding on to power at all cost. Under the circumstance, it is difficult to justify an unfettered support for these unconstitutional disruptions, or to trust in the good intentions of the coup protagonists.

A note of caution is important here, in terms of how leading states like Nigeria as well as relevant regional organizations like the ECOWAS and AU, should respond. Relevant action must straddle the delicate line which avoids cookie-cutter solutions, yet portends a fair, non-biased response that clearly indicates a firm and predictable institutional position. Additionally, there is the need to acknowledge that the mismanagement of political, economic, and security opportunities by supposedly democratic incumbent regimes contributed to the current spate of coups. A corollary to this is to aim for a frank peer-review assessment between African states. This way, other governments, just like citizens, can speak truth to their peers on issues of citizens welfare and governance.



Source: Victor Ulasi/AFP/Getty Images

At this critical juncture in the political life of Africa, especially for countries in the Sahel, global players like the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia would do best to support regional actors in a way that allows for long-term approaches towards steady and measurable socio-economic development in Africa. Selective international response, just to shore up dubious political leadership based on self-interested bilateral negotiations and arrangements, are counter-productive for regional peace and stability in the long run, as recent evidence has shown. To forestall further democratic reversal, there is perhaps no better time than now to rekindle the tired “African solutions to African problems” mantra.



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