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# INSIGHTS

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**THE ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY, THE AFRICAN UNION  
AND MILITARY COUPS IN AFRICA: BETWEEN INDIFFERENCE,  
PROHIBITION AND ILLUSION**

## **Introduction**

More recently, the resurgence of military coups in Africa, namely in Guinea Conakry, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Sudan, seems to have revived the debate on how the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and African Union (AU) should react to these unconstitutional devolutions of political power. It should be noted that since 2002, OAU has undergone a transformation and has become the AU. However, it was under the OAU that thought was given to the prohibition of coups d'état. A military coup can be defined as an unconstitutional, anti-

democratic practice by the army or part of it to occupy State institutions and seize State power. This paper, devoted to the OAU-AU's reaction to military coups in Africa, will show that the pan-African organisation is aware of the difficulties generated by this practice, but unfortunately does not seem to have the resources to deal with it. From a binary perspective, the aim is to show that the OAU has gone from indifference to prohibition of military coups in Africa, before indicating how it has subsequently proved incapable of implementing its

own decisions due to a number of constraints.

### **I- From indifference to banning military coups by OAU-AU**

From its inception on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the OAU seems to have been indifferent to military coups on the continent. However, this indifference was transformed at the end of the 1990s by the prohibition of military coups.

#### **A-The OAU's disregard for military coups in Africa**

In order to reconcile the Monrovia and Casablanca groups which were at loggerheads over how to envisage African unity in the 1960s, the OAU was established, with the fundamental aim of contributing to the liberation of the other African territories still under the yoke of colonisation and to the fight against apartheid in South Africa. The fight against military coups was not yet on the OAU's agenda for at least two reasons. Firstly, in its principles, the OAU had made it a point of honour not to interfere in the internal affairs of its member states. This principle was reflected in its conception of African disputes, which were limited exclusively

to inter-state conflicts whose resolution was envisaged by peaceful means through the establishment of a mediation, conciliation and arbitration committee or through the Cairo mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution. Secondly, the monolithic nature of African states in the 1960s prevented the OAU from taking measures to promote political pluralism and thus combat military coups d'état. This is why governments resulting from military coups such as those of General Ankrah, who toppled Nkrumah in 1966 in Ghana, and Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who assassinated Sylvanus Olympio in a putsch in 1963, were quickly admitted to the OAU.

#### **B-Ban on military coups in Africa by the OAU**

In the 1990s, the context of democratisation seemed more favourable to the prohibition of military coups in Africa. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the La Baule speech and the demands of pressure groups and political parties within Africa - what has been described as the "sub-Saharan African Spring" - forced the political leaders of many states to undertake reforms to promote democracy in a

context marked by the economic slump triggered by the fall in commodity prices. It was in response to these concerns about promoting democratisation that the OAU decided to prohibit military coups d'état on the continent, a prohibition that has been reiterated within the framework of the AU. Article 4 of the Constitutive Act of the AU condemns and rejects unconstitutional changes of government, which is a normative achievement of the OAU insofar as the Harare (1997), Algiers (1999) and Lomé (2000) declarations already established the prohibition of putsches as a norm. In all likelihood, this ban on military coups in Africa is also part of a liberal shift on the international scene marked by Western pressure on Africa not only in the context of the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), but above all in the context of the implementation of security system reform (SSR), one of the postulates of which concerns the application of the Clausewitzian principle of military authorities subordination to civilian political authorities with a view to deepening democracy.

## **II- OAU-AU difficulties in complying with the ban on military coups in Africa**

To better understand the OAU-AU's difficulties in preventing military coups d'état in Africa, it is important to look back at the resurgence of coups and how the AU dealt with them, in order to put into perspective the reasons for the organisation's ineffectiveness in this area.

### **A- Resurgence of military coups in Africa and AU's response**

With the adoption of norms prohibiting coups d'état, a decline in their occurrence on the African political scene since the late 1990s would have been expected. It is true that military coups in Africa have been on the decline for the past two decades. Over the period 2011-2021, researchers counted less than one coup d'état per year. Of the 486 successful and unsuccessful coups d'état in the world since 1950, 214, 106 of them successful, have taken place in Africa. The latest seizures of power by force have raised concerns about the possible dismantling of the democratic advances made on the continent. In other words, the occurrence of these military coups, indirectly, provides

information about the inability of the pan-African organisation to apply its own decisions.

The procedure for dealing with military coups also poses a problem, since it is impossible, at least for public opinion, to grasp the concrete actions taken by the pan-African organisation in this area. Its peace and security architecture, built around the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the Central African Early Warning Mechanism (MARAC), the Peace Fund, the Council of the Wise and the African Standby Force (ASF), provides for a right of intervention by its member states in the event of war crimes or crimes against humanity. But this right to intervene has never been applied, even when a military coup has led to an escalation of tensions that could be classified as a war crime, as was the case in the CAR in 2013, after Michel Djotodia seized power by force. Furthermore, the prevalence of subsidiarity between the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the AU, a principle of sharing competences between the actors best able to resolve situations, often gives the impression of inaction on the part of the African Union. In West Africa recently, ECOWAS was at the centre of the fight

against military coups d'état, even though it was confronted with the logic of power orchestrated by foreign actors. In Central Africa, particularly in Chad in 2021, the Economic Community of Central African States remained complicit in its silence in the face of France's legitimisation of the military coup. This inability of the RECs to tackle the problem of military coups is often blamed on the AU, which should have taken energetic action in response to the failure of its regional partners.

### **B-Reasons for the AU's inability to combat military coups in Africa**

Many reasons, far from the least important, can explain the AU's inability to prevent coups d'état in Africa. These include the illegitimacy of some of its members, their monopolisation of power, the nature of the AU and its lack of resources. It should be noted that some African Heads of State have seized power by force of arms and have transformed themselves, through often rigged elections, into democrats. This is the case of Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Egyptian Marshal Al-Sissi, among others. It would therefore be impossible for them to

address the issue of military coups without questioning the way in which they themselves came to power. What's more, the AU, whatever people may say, is an international intergovernmental organisation. It was established on the initiative of sovereign States, most of which are very proud of their sovereignty. For this reason, it has no means of coercion capable of imposing anything on them. In addition, the question of resources and even power as relations and possession of material and immaterial capacities also arises, since the AU is dependent on external funding to ensure its operating and investment budget. Worse still, it does not have a continental army capable of imposing its will, given that the ASF is not currently operational. Military coups often involve the major powers in order to satisfy their geopolitical and geostrategic ambitions. In order to prevent military coups, the AU would need to have an army capable of deterring both external and internal intervention. Its actions to promote democracy within the continent should focus not only on legitimising the ways in which power is devolved, but also on the socio-political, social and cultural

anchoring of armies in order to facilitate civil-military relations. .

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the OAU AU, by banning military coups d'état in Africa, was seeking to speed up the democratisation process in its member States by promoting the culture of political morality. The calls currently being made to strengthen the standards prohibiting these practices of devolution of power seem to be fuelled by the illusion that the law will bring peace to the political scene, whilst forgetting that the law, especially in its application, is often the disguised language of force or power. Instead of getting to the root of the problem, the OAU-AU has confined itself to its symptoms. It would have been important for it to address the real problems, the root causes of military coups d'état in Africa, such as the monopolisation of power by political leaders, foreign dependence, in particular the geopolitical rivalries of the major powers seeking to establish or even maintain their areas of influence on the continent, the nature of the State and the alienation of the armed and security forces. Even on these issues, the AU currently has no coherent, relevant and

effective response, unless it transforms itself into a federal state with an army capable of internal and external deterrence. In the light of the above, it seems increasingly plausible to think that the continental organisation's ban on coups d'état was a show of force aimed much more at donors in order to secure rents than a wise, well-thought-out decision whose objective was to promote the well-being of the African populations.

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