

UNDERSTANDING COUPS IN AFRICA

DATA AND TRENDS

*by STRATEGIES!
September 2023*



Introduction

Since 2021, the African continent has again been the scene of coups d'etat which upset the progress of countries, redefine relations between States, put regional, continental and international cooperation mechanisms to the test and lead decision-makers and analysts to review their evaluation grids of current dynamics.

In this context, **STRATEGIES!** Presents macro-trends devoted to the phenomenon of coups in Africa. The aim is to give the reader key elements to appreciate and analyze the phenomenon of coups d'état.

Africa Macro Trends is a summary of data, trends and analyses aimed at providing a quick overview of some of the key developments taking place in sub-Saharan Africa.

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In this edition of macro-trends in Africa

- I. Definition and typology of coups in Africa
- II. Causes and Explanatory Factors of Coups in Africa
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- IV. Overview of coups in Africa since the 1950s
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- VI. The African Union in the face of coups : Mechanisms, means of action and reasons for impotence
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I - Definition and typology of coups d'etat in Africa

What is a coup?

- **A coup is a political phenomenon** in which a group of people overthrows the current government, often by force and illegally.
- **The goal of a coup is to replace the existing government with a new one**, often led by the putschists themselves. Their goal is to seize executive power and control other state institutions.
- The coup d'état is generally characterized by **the participation or support of the armed forces**, which have greater coercive power than civilians.
- The coup often takes place **quickly and secretly**, in order to create an effect of surprise and deter any resistance.
- The coup d'etat differs from a **revolution**, which is a popular movement aimed at changing the political or social regime.

OUTLINE OF A TYPOLOGY OF COUPS D'ETAT

Settings	Kinds
Depending on the actors the actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Military coups or putsch, which are carried out by officers or soldiers• Constitutional coups, which are orchestrated by politicians, civil servants or businessmen.• Electoral coups, which are generally carried out by politicians already in power or who have a firm grip on the electoral system
Depending on the motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conservative coups , which aim to maintain or restore an old order.• Reform coups , which seek to bring about political or social change.
Depending on the methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Violent coups , which involve armed clashes or assassinations.• Peaceful coups , which are based on negotiation or persuasion.• Abuse of power coups, in which a group holding political, administrative and/or military power imposes its will on the entire population. This is done without the use of weapons, but nevertheless with psychological and administrative violence
Depending on the outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Successful coups ,• or failed coups .

OUTLINE OF A TYPOLOGY OF COUPS D'ETAT

Civilian Coup d'Etats		Military Coups d'Etats or Putsch
Constitutional coups	Electoral coups	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Constitutional coups are those that take place through legal means, but violate the spirit or the letter of the constitution.• These include, for example, constitutional amendments which allow the Head of State to extend his term of office beyond the fixed limit, or greatly extend executive power and limit fundamental rights.• They aim to maintain in power an authoritarian or corrupt regime that does not respect democratic principles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Electoral coups often involve abuse of administrative power and electoral fraud that distorts the outcome of the ballot. They are most often carried out by parties already in power or by groups of parties with a stranglehold on the electoral system.• They often violate the fundamental rights of opposition parties (right of assembly, right to speak, right to control the electoral process, etc.) and the rights of citizens.• Their aim is to maintain in power an authoritarian or corrupt regime or political order that does not respect democratic principles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Military coups or putsch are those carried out by the force of arms, overthrowing the government in place by a group of soldiers or officers.• These include, for example, armed uprisings, mutinies, or assassinations of the Head of State.• They aim to put an end to a regime deemed illegitimate or unpopular, which is facing political, economic or social crises.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• These types of coup are not mutually exclusive.• On the contrary, they can follow one another or be combined.• For example, a constitutional coup may provoke popular protest or armed rebellion, leading to a military coup.		



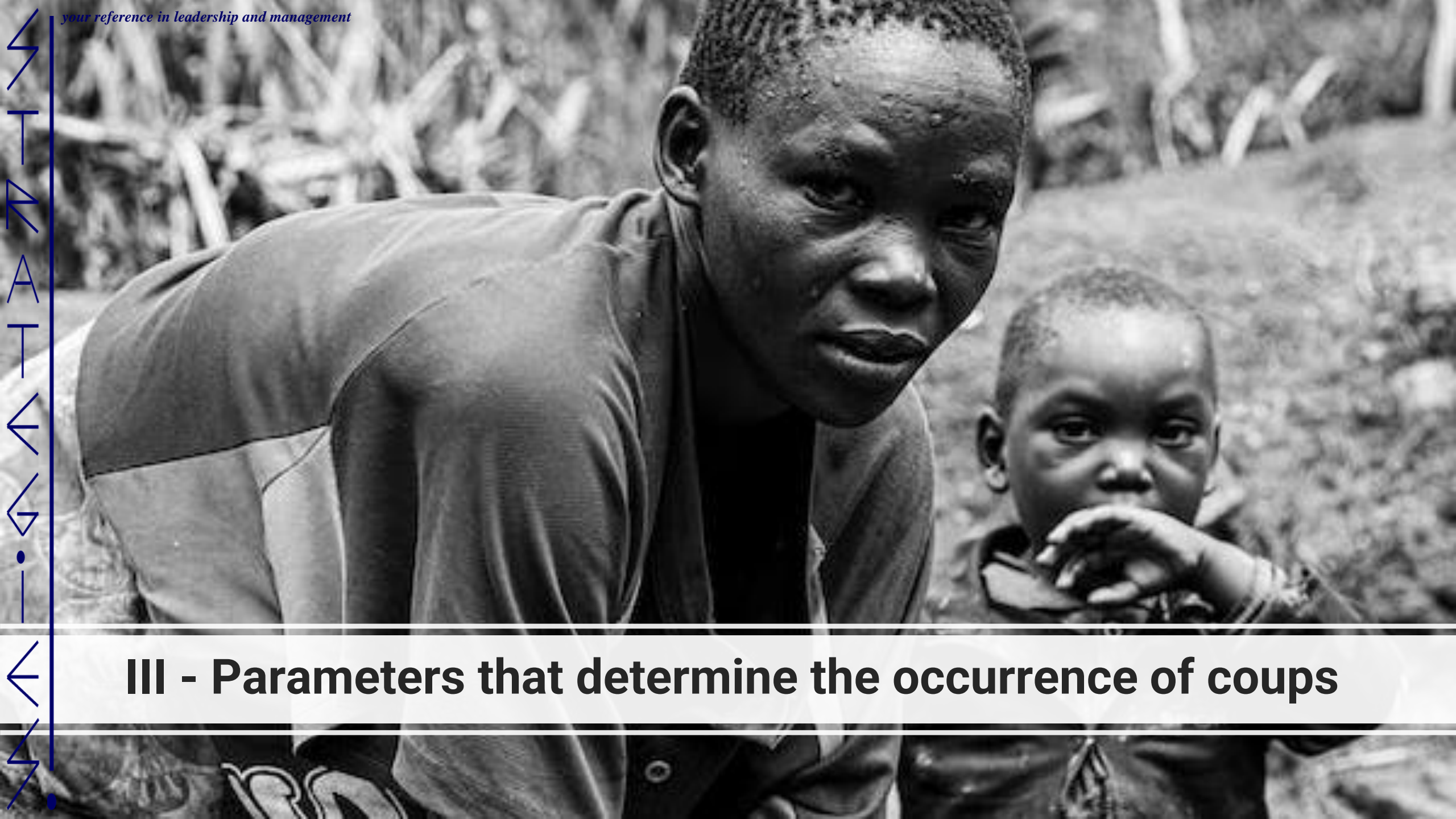
II - Causes and Explanatory Factors of Coups in Africa

Causes and internal explanatory factors of recent coups in Africa

1. **Poor governance and corruption**, generally of long duration, which produces:
 - **Poverty and underdevelopment**, creating widespread social discontent and frustrated public aspirations
 - **Dysfunctional institutions that encourage cronyism and nepotism**, causing a crisis of institutional confidence among the population and a feeling of impossibility of institutional alternation at the head of the state.
2. **Terrorism and insurrections**, which undermine the country's security and stability, and which highlight the role of the armed forces. Poor governance in some parts of the country is a key factor contributing to terrorism and insurgency.
3. **The lack of legitimacy and representativeness of power**, resulting from a lack of political dialogue, repression of opposition, or the manipulation of elections.
4. **"Anti-French" or "anti-Western" sentiment**, which is the result of unresolved colonial legacies and expresses a desire for national sovereignty in the face of outside interference or influence.

Causes and Explanatory External Factors of Recent Coups in Africa

1. **Tolerance of, and even complicity in, constitutional and electoral coups** for decades by regional, continental and international institutions and Western partner countries.
2. **The struggle for influence between the West and Russia in Africa**, resulting in political or military support for certain regimes or rebel groups.
3. **Pressure from regional and international organizations**, which can impose sanctions or mediate in the event of a political crisis or human rights violation.
4. **Globalization and digitalization**, which facilitate the circulation of information and ideas, but also false information and propaganda, as well as weapons and illicit funding.
5. **The West's incoherence in the face of military coups d'état legitimizes military coups as a means of alternation.** The fact that certain coups d'état, such as in Chad, are applauded while others, such as in Niger, are condemned suggests that Western interests take precedence over respect for democratic processes.



III - Parameters that determine the occurrence of coups

PRECISIONS ON THE PARAMETERS

- The parameters that are presented in this section were inspired by the work of **Jonathan Powell and Clayton Thyne**, two political science researchers who analyzed the explanatory factors of attempts to overthrow power between 1950 and 2010.
- Their study "**Global instances of coups from 1950 to 2010: A new dataset**", published in 2011 in the journal of Peace Research, is one of the most comprehensive and rigorous on the subject.
- These parameters are obviously to be qualified according to the historical, cultural and geopolitical contexts of each country.
- They also cannot predict with certainty when and where a coup will occur.
- Nevertheless, they offer a useful analytical framework for understanding political dynamics in Africa and the challenges facing democratic processes.

Parameters that determine the occurrence of coups

1. The level of economic development:

The poorer a country, the more likely it is to experience a coup.

Indeed, poverty creates social discontent, reduces the legitimacy of the government and weakens the state's capacity to control its territory and repress dissidents.



2. The political regime :

The more authoritarian a country is, the more likely it is to experience a coup.

Indeed, authoritarian regimes are often characterized by corruption, nepotism, repression and the exclusion of opponents, which generates frustrations within the elite and the population. Additionally, authoritarian regimes tend to have more powerful armed forces that are less loyal to the civilian government.

Parameters that determine the occurrence of coups

3. Political stability:

The more politically unstable a country, the more likely it is to experience a coup. Indeed, political instability translates into institutional crises, internal conflicts, electoral disputes or difficult democratic transitions, which create opportunities for military actors to impose themselves as arbiters or saviours.



4. External influence:

The more a country is dependent on or influenced by external actors, the more likely it is to experience a coup. Indeed, external actors may have divergent or conflicting interests with those of the government in place, and may support or encourage military factions to overthrow power. This may be the case of former colonial powers, such as France, which have maintained close ties with certain African countries, or new emerging powers, such as Russia or China, which seek to increase their influence on the continent.



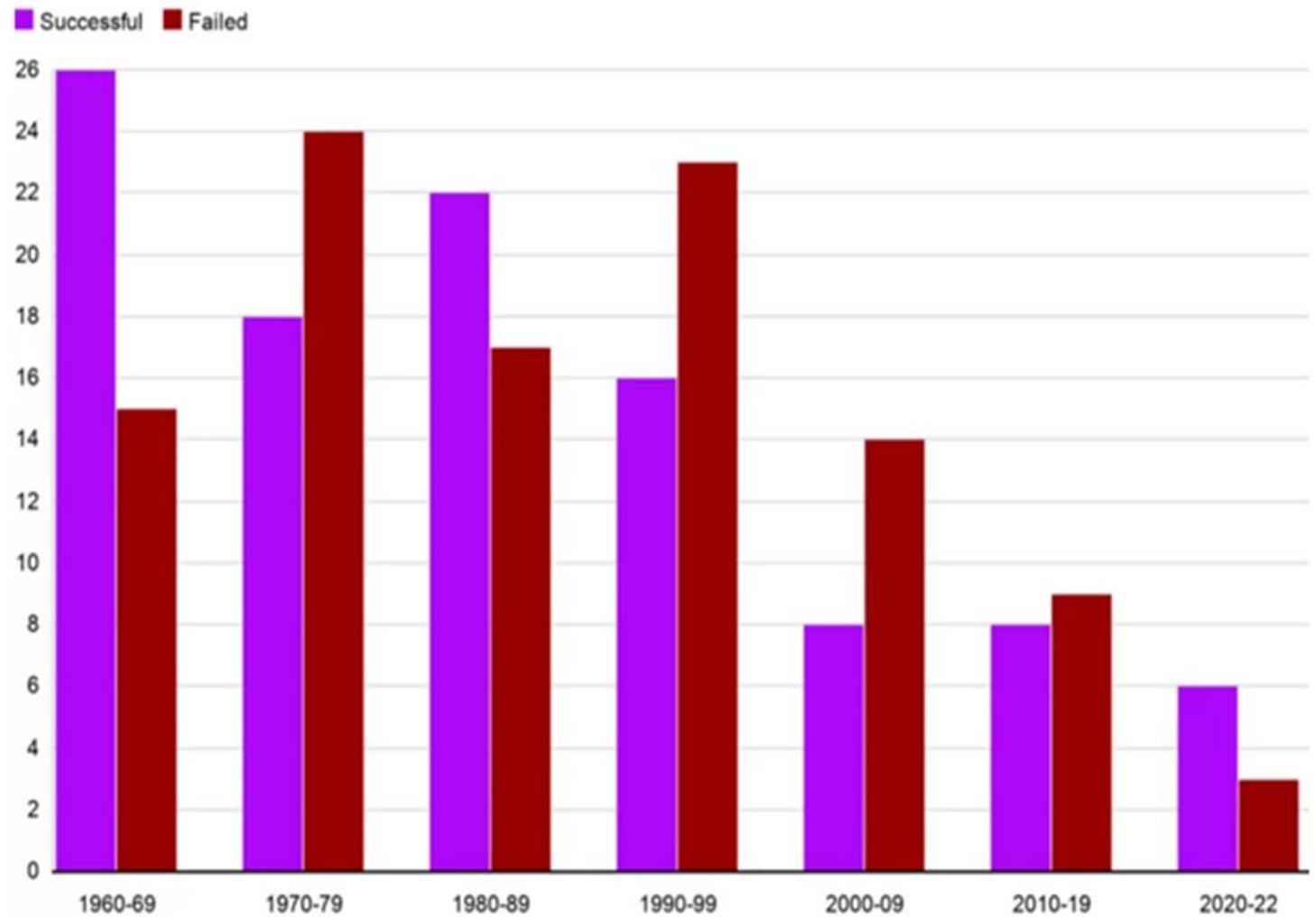
IV - Overview of coups d'état in Africa



Africa, a continent of coups ?

- The total number of attempted coups in Africa has remained remarkably constant, **averaging around four per year over the four decades between 1960 and 2000.**
- Coups fell to around **two a year over the next two decades until 2019.**
- Since the start of the 2020-2030 decade, **the continent has seen an acceleration in coups d'état.**
- After a period of relative calm between 2013 and 2020, **14 attempted coups have been recorded in Africa since 2021.**
- **If we count foiled plots (i.e. before the attempt), this figure rises to more than 30 since 2021.**

Military coups in Africa over the decades



*2022 until February 1st

Source : Recherches menées par les universités de Floride centrale et du Kentucky



Success rate of Military Coups in Africa

- Most successful coups in Africa took place between 1946 and 1991, during the Cold War, a period of intense rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.
- Between 1960 and 1979, the period of independence, when nationalist political leaders were strongly opposed by the former colonial powers, saw the greatest number of coups.
- 1980 was the second most turbulent year.

Decade	Total coups attempts	Successful	Success rate
1950-1959	6	3	50%
1960-1969	41	25	61%
1970-1979	42	18	42.9%
1980-1989	39	22	56.4%
1990-1999	39	16	41%
2000-2009	22	8	36.4%
2010-2019	17	8	47.1%
2020-2022	8	6	75%

Almost all African countries have experienced successful or failed Military Coups.

Between January 1950 and the end of August 2023, there were **221 successful and attempted coups d'état in Africa**, almost half (44%) of the attempted coups recorded worldwide over this period.

Africa has seen almost **as many successful coups as failed ones**.

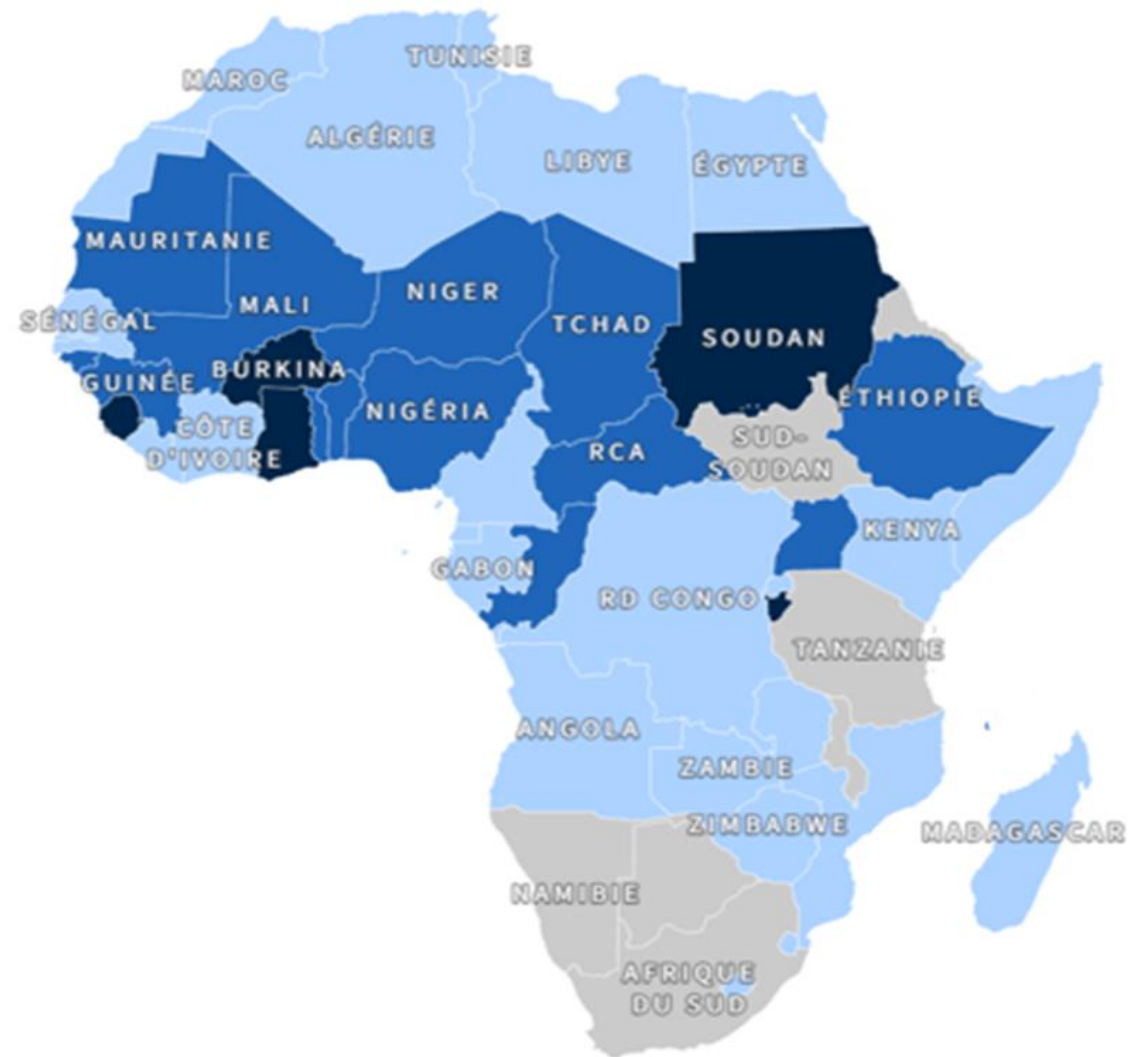
45 of the 54 African countries have suffered at least one attempted coup since 1950.

If we focus solely on successful coups, i.e. those whose perpetrators have remained in power for at least a week, **the number falls to 36, or two-thirds of African countries.**

Some countries, such as **Tanzania, Namibia, South Africa, Eritrea and South Sudan**, are not part of this phenomenon.

Number of coups, successful and unsuccessful, by country, since 1952

0 1-5 5-10 >10



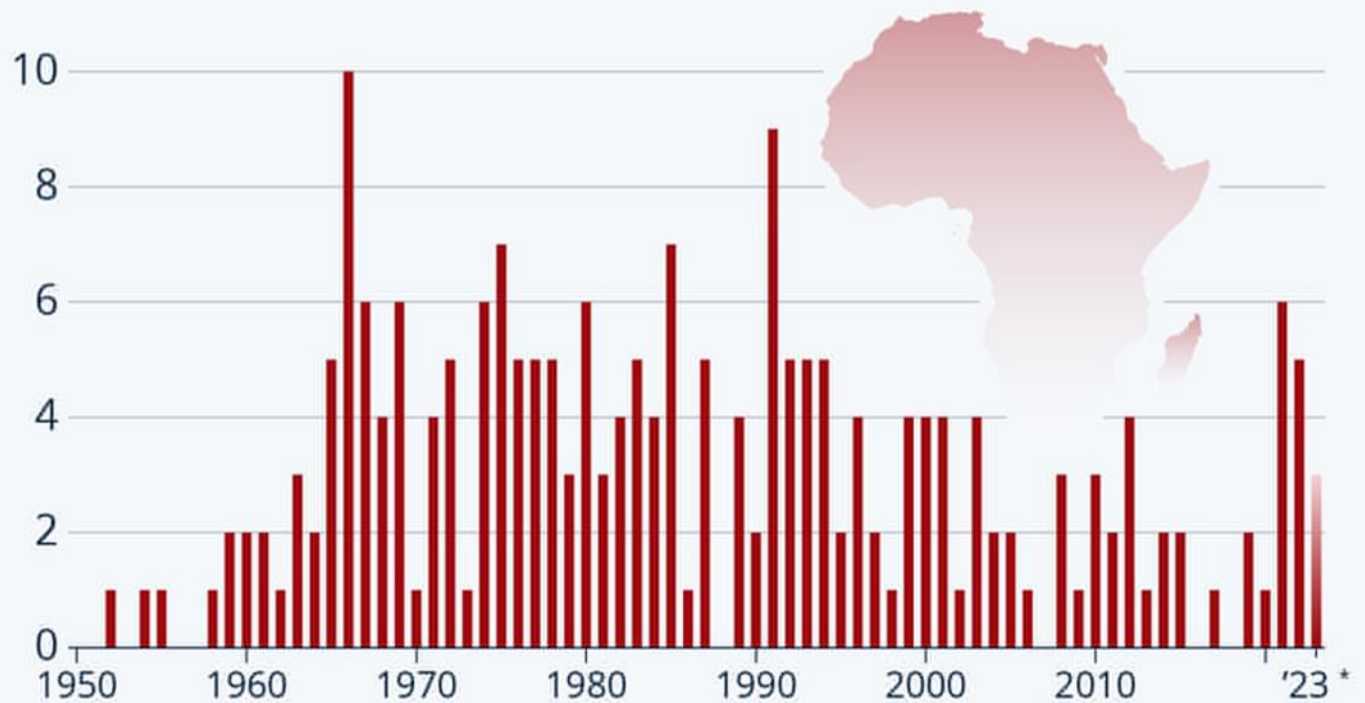
African countries most affected by coups d'état

- **Sudan** tops the list of African countries that have suffered the most coups d'état since 1950, with **17 successful or attempted**.

- After Sudan, **Burundi (11), Ghana and Sierra Leone (10)** are the African countries that have experienced the most attempted coups since the middle of the 20th century.

- **Burkina Faso** is the country with the highest number of successful coups (09).

- **Nigeria**, Africa's most populous country, has seen 8 attempted coups d'état, 6 of which were successful. Since 1999, it has enjoyed stability with power being transferred by election. Though some may qualify some of these elections as electoral coups.



* En date du 30 août 2023.

Sources : Powell and Thyne, Cline Center University of Illinois, VOA News, recherches Statista

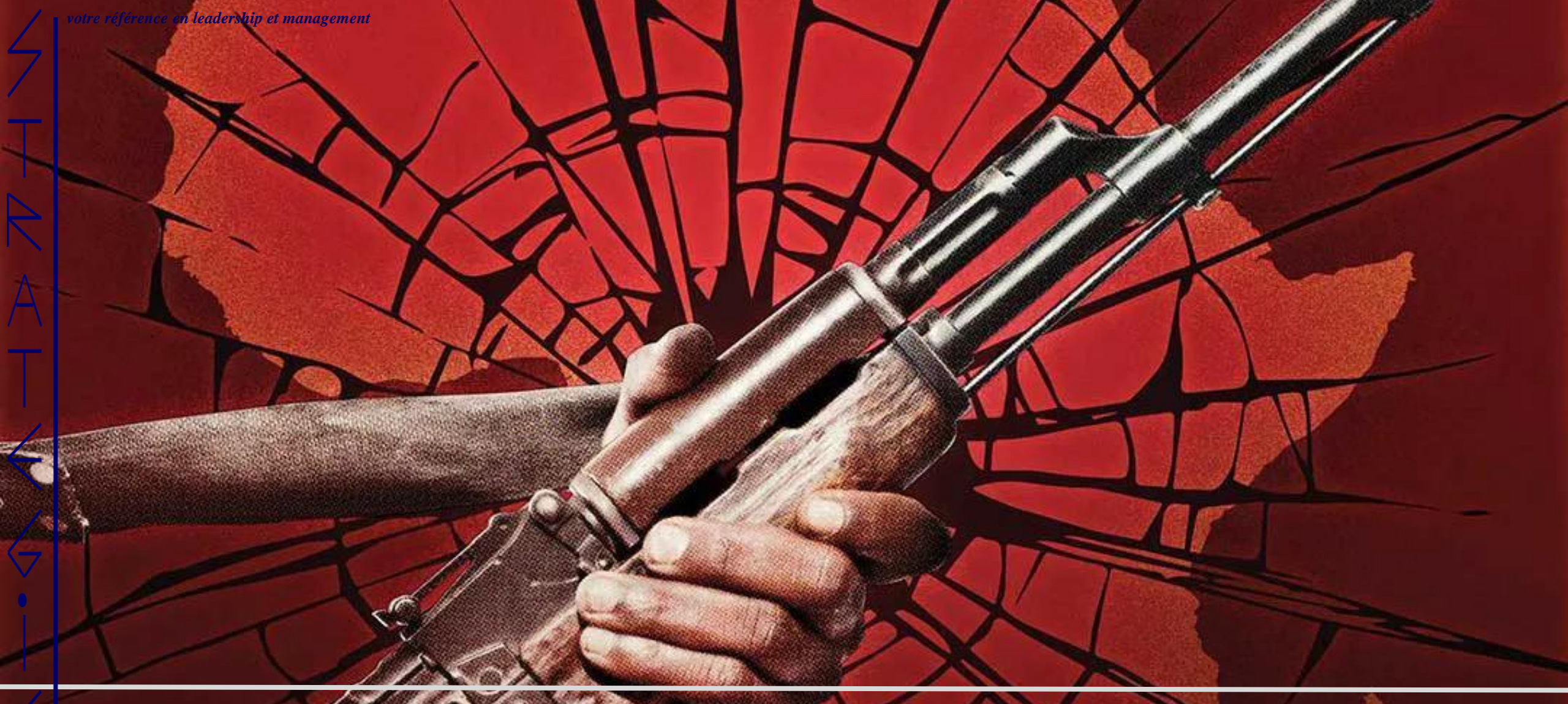




Dirigeants destitués: Afrique

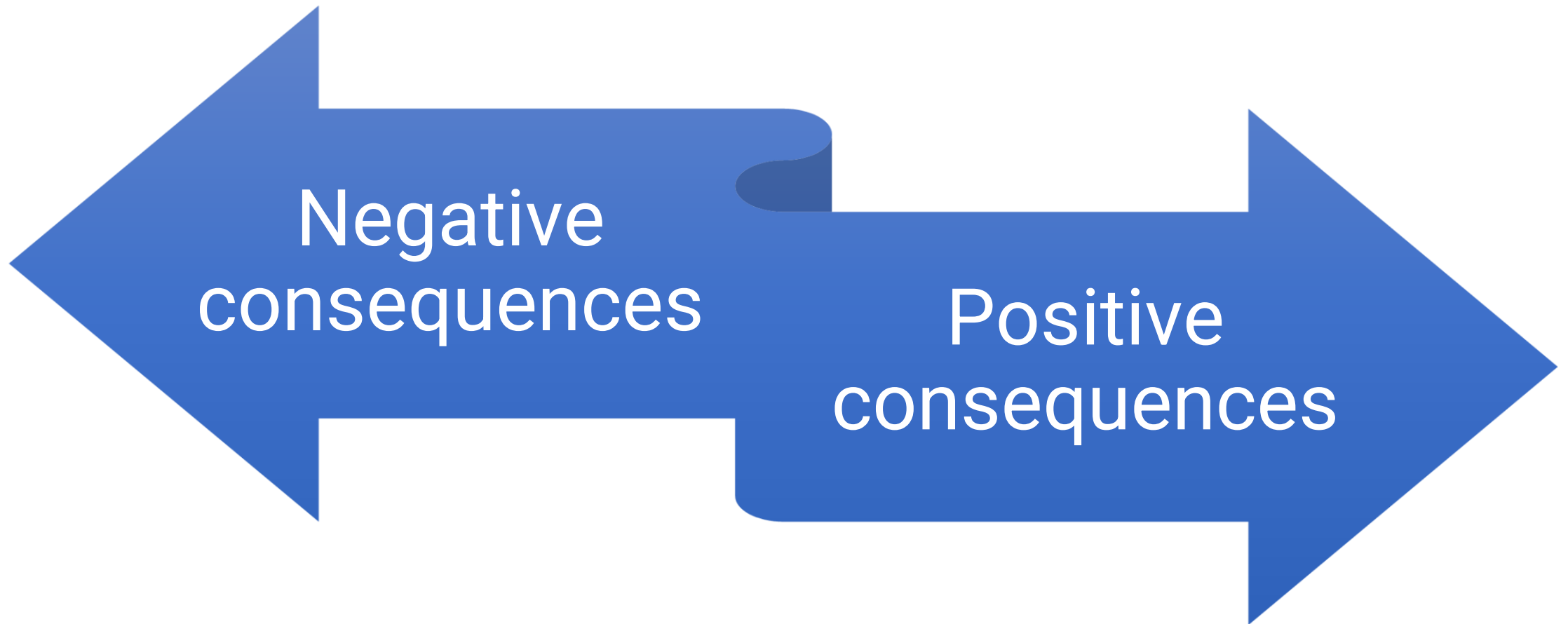
**LEADERS
DISMISSED
BETWEEN
1950 AND 2022**





v - Consequences of coups in Africa

Depending on the actors, the motivations, the context and the results obtained, we can distinguish two types of consequences:



Negative consequences of recent coups in Africa

Violence and human rights violations , which can accompany or follow coups d'etat, and which result in death, injury, displacement or refugees.

Political instability and uncertainty , which can compromise the functioning of institutions, respect for the constitution, or the holding of credible elections.

Economic slowdown or regression , which may result from business disruption, capital flight, or diplomatic isolation.

Social fragmentation or dislocation , which may arise from polarization of opinions, rising ethnic or religious tensions, or the emergence of separatist movements.

Positive consequences of recent coups in Africa

Political change and renewal , which can allow the emergence of new elites, new ideas, or new democratic practices.

Institutional reform or consolidation , which may lead to the adoption of a new constitution, the establishment of a democratic transition, or the organization of free elections.

Popular mobilization and participation , which can express an aspiration for change, a claim for rights, or a desire for dialogue.

Regional cooperation or integration , which can promote the peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for democratic principles, or economic development.

African Union



**VI - THE AFRICAN UNION AND COUPS D'ETAT:
MECHANISMS, MEANS OF ACTION AND REASONS FOR IMPOTENCE**

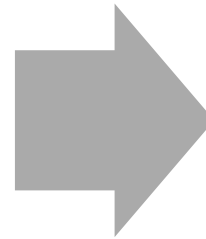
We will see below that that African Union instruments such as the Constitutive Act and the African Charter on Democracy Elections and Governance clearly prohibit military and civilian coup d'états - constitutional as well as electoral.

However, the African Union has limited significant action and notably sanctions, solely to military coups. A fact that has greatly impacted its credibility with African citizens as well as with military coup leaders.

One of the reasons advanced by military coup leaders today to justify their actions, which garners significant popular support, is the inaction of the African Union in the face of constitutional and electoral coups which have maintained corrupt, ineffective governments in place for decades.

Provisions and mechanisms against coups in Africa

The Constitutive Act of the AU, signed in 2000, which affirms respect for democratic principles, human rights, the rule of law and good governance as one of the objectives of the organization (section 4m). It also provides for the suspension of participation in AU activities of a country in which a government has taken power following an unconstitutional change of government (Article 23).



The Protocol relating to the establishment of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), which entered into force in 2003, which gives the PSC the mandate to promote peace, security and stability in Africa, by preventing and managing conflicts. The Protocol authorizes the PSC to take action against coup perpetrators, including targeted sanctions (Article 7 1 g).

Provisions and mechanisms against coups in Africa

The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), adopted in 2007 and entered into force in 2012, which enshrines the right of citizens to participate freely in the management of the public affairs of their country (article 3). It condemns unconstitutional changes of government, such as military or rebel coups, refusals to recognize electoral results or unconstitutional revisions of constitutions (article 23). It also provides for sanctions against the perpetrators of such acts, ranging from the freezing of assets to the exclusion of subregional and international organizations (article 25).



The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), which is responsible for promoting and protecting the rights guaranteed by the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The ACHPR adopted several resolutions condemning coups and their consequences on human rights in different African countries, such as Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Sudan.

Means of action of the African Union

The condemnation and suspension of countries responsible for military coups d'état, in accordance with Article 30 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. This measure aims to isolate illegitimate regimes and encourage them to restore constitutional order. For example, the CPS suspended Gabon after the military coup of August 30, 2023.

Mediation and dialogue between stakeholders, sending emissaries or observation missions to facilitate the peaceful resolution of conflicts. For example, the AU dispatched special envoys to Mali after the military coup of August 18, 2020 and to Sudan after the military coup of October 25, 2021.

Means of action of the African Union

Targeted pressure and sanctions against individuals or entities responsible for human rights violations or obstruction of the democratic process. For example, the AU imposed sanctions on some members of the military junta in Mali after the May 24, 2021 coup.

Prevention and awareness-raising , by strengthening the capacities of national and regional actors to promote democracy, good governance and the rule of law. For example, the AU launched the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) in 2003, which allows volunteer countries to undergo a review of their performance in these areas.

Reasons for the powerlessness of the African Union

The lack of legitimacy and credibility of the AU with the African populations, who often perceive the organization as a club of leaders who support each other to the detriment of the democratic aspirations of the citizens.

The AU is also accused of turning a blind eye to human rights violations, electoral fraud and attempts by certain heads of state to extend power illegally.



The AU's lack of financial, logistical and human resources to carry out its peace and security missions.

The AU depends largely on voluntary contributions from its member states, which are often insufficient or irregular, as well as support from international partners, who may have their own agendas and interests.

The AU also has limited military capacity to intervene in a crisis, despite the establishment of an African Standby Force (ASF) since 2003.



The lack of coordination and coherence between the various actors involved in the management of conflicts in Africa, in particular regional organizations (ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, etc.), the United Nations, the European Union, France and the United States United.

These actors may have divergent or contradictory approaches on the modalities and timelines for the return to constitutional order, which weakens the leadership and authority of the AU.

Reasons for the powerlessness of the African Union

The lack of anticipation and prevention of political crises by the AU, which often intervenes too late or reactively in the face of situations of instability.

The AU does not have an effective early warning and risk assessment system, nor a strategic framework to support electoral, institutional and reform processes in fragile or transition countries.



The lack of consideration of the root causes of coups in Africa, which are linked to problems of governance, development, social justice and security.

Coups are often a symptom of popular discontent with corruption, poverty, exclusion, impunity and violence. The AU must therefore strengthen its action in the areas of sustainable development, human rights, the fight against terrorism and the consolidation of the rule of law.



The structural inefficiency of the AU as a Member State organization.

The same Member States who are violating AU instruments are those who are its members. The AU is structured such that only its executive organ has real power. As a result, asking AU presidents to take action against constitutional and electoral coups, is asking the violators to punish themselves



VII - STRATEGIES! perspectives on ways forward

STRATEGIES! Reflections on Ways Forward

After the coup

Transitioning from military regimes to civilian, democratic states

Before the coup

Preventing coups d'Etats

Three key stakeholders

Action must be taken by at least three key stakeholders in both post and pre coup situations.



These include:

Citizens Movements

African regional and continental institutions

International institutions and partners

Post-coup situations

- Coup d'états are by definition surprise events. When they occur, there is a lapse within which reactions are justifiably highly emotional.
- In the current context, we have witnessed condemnation, jubilation and indifference.
- Beyond these emotional reactions, it is important that once a military regime has established itself in power, other stakeholders begin engagement.
- This engagement is crucial to:
 - Establishing the necessity for a return to civilian, democratic rule
 - Ensuring the transition is not decided upon by just a few individuals
 - Inserting the values of inclusion, justice, equity, democracy, etc. into the transition to ensure that the factors that led to a coup d'état are being resolved during the transition.

Areas of focus for all stakeholders when engaging with coup leaders

- 
- Democratic principles and values**
 - Transparency on Resources and Fight Against Corruption**
 - Citizen participation in governance**
 - Minimal social services**

Key elements to prioritize during transitions

Principles and democratic values

1. Fundamental rights
2. Rule of law
3. Consensual definition and implementation of the transition agreement
4. Specific mechanisms for the transition to democratic civilian governance

Key elements to prioritize during transitions

Transparency on resources and fight against corruption

- Reflection, mechanisms and systems on increased transparency in the collection and allocation of national resources, especially finances, mineral and natural resources
- Example – What are the systems and mechanisms that ensure that revenue generated from mineral resources from a remote area will actually provide social services to that area? This is a key question for the transition period.

Key elements to prioritize during transitions

Citizen participation in governance

- What are the means by which real and deep citizen participation is ensured during and after the transition?
- How do citizens increase their access to political and governance information, their ability to influence decision-making, their access to political positions and their ability to hold politicians accountable?
- How does the transition ensure that those who were excluded from power under the dictatorship: women, the disabled, young people, ethnic and religious minorities are integrated during and after the transition?

Key elements to prioritize during transitions

Minimal social services

- What are the minimum social services (water, electricity, education, health care) that must be provided in the short term to enable citizens to invest and be patient for long-term changes required for economic prosperity and democracy ?
- Transitions should define how access to these fundamental services will be assured to every citizen in the medium and long term.

Key suggestions for citizen movements

Stakeholders	Engagement timeline	Key elements to consider
<p>Citizen movements of all types:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unions• Private sector organizations• Feminist movements• Youth organizations• Political parties• Etc.	<p>A coup is a seizure of power, even in circumstances where other groups have advocated and protested for change.</p> <p>It is important that citizen movements immediately engage with the putschists, except when it is extremely dangerous.</p> <p>It is important that citizen movements speak out, get involved and ensure that they and the citizens they represent are integrated as part of the transition.</p> <p>If they do not do so, the putschists will remain the only political actors and the risk of falling into a new autocracy is very great.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most military coups are intended to be revolutionary. It is important that citizen movements engage publicly, as well as privately with coup leaders, to formulate critical demands in the four key areas:<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Democratic principles and values2. Resource transparency and fight against corruption3. Citizen participation in governance4. Minimum social services• This, depending on the specific circumstances of their country.

Key Suggestions for African Regional and Continental Institutions (Before and After Coups)

African regional and continental institutions have lost credibility among African citizens due to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inconsistency and inefficiency in crisis management on the continent• Perceived ineffectiveness in the face of the complex challenges facing the continent• Poor record in terms of sanctions, even explicit disapproval of constitutional and electoral coups.
To regain credibility and become an actor capable of truly engaging with military coup leaders, African institutions must:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognize past mistakes and non-compliance with their own charters and rules• Develop or recruit the skills needed to support African countries in the four key areas above and provide clear added value• Do the work to restore coherence between the AU and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in terms of approach to coups, sanctions, engagement, etc.• Build services that can genuinely add value to Member States in the complex crises they face, such as security, food security, climate change, etc. If member states and their citizens do not see added value in the AU and the RECs, they become increasingly irrelevant in stabilizing the continent.

Key Suggestions for International Institutions and Partners

(Before and
After Coups)

- Africa finds itself at a moment when the colonial and neocolonial chickens have come home to roost. Public opinion is decidedly anti-Western, both justifiably and unjustifiably so.
- It is important, at this time, to recognize this and integrate it into all approaches between the West and Africa. To restore credibility, especially with young Africans, and position themselves to engage with coup leaders, it will be important for Western partners and international organisations to:
 1. Acknowledge past mistakes and inconsistency in the handling of constitutional, electoral and military coups
 2. Build medium and long-term pathways for healing and restoration of the harm done during colonialism.
 3. Take an eye-level partnership approach. There is no longer tolerance for condescension in any form on the part of Africans.
 4. Multiply channels for frank discussion with multiple African stakeholders, both in government and in civil society.
 5. Use the competitive advantage of the West by being able to offer clear added value in the four key areas mentioned above.
- The relationship between France and its former colonies is excessively tense and completely irrational. At this time, France should step back and allow Western countries considered more "neutral" to lead initiatives and discussions.
- The West will have to fundamentally analyze and review its strategies and cooperation in Africa at multiple levels: development, economic, military, financial, etc. Particularly with regard to multilateral financial institutions.



About the authors

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Contact us



BP 3940 Douala, 322 Street
Bonamandone,
Behind ESAO-Bali College – face SOLEX



Phone : __ (237) 23 3 4 3 3 8 7 6 / 2
3 3 4 3 8 2 3 7

Cell: (237) 699 89 08 99



Website: www.strategiesconsultingfirm.com

E-mail: cabinetstrategies@gmail.com