



spotlight

BACK IN BUSINESS OR NEVER OUT?

Military Coups and Political Militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa

This Spotlight discusses the resurgence of military coups in Sub-Saharan Africa. We argue that an analytical and political focus on coup events misses out on the bigger picture of military influence in politics. Introducing the new Multidimensional Measures of Militarization (M³) dataset, we demonstrate that African countries that were part of the recent wave of coups, previously showed signs of political militarization such as military veto powers and impunity. We conclude that these subtle forms of military influence can serve as early warning indicators for military coups.



August 6, 2023: General Abdourahmane Tchiani, Commander of the Presidential Guard Regiment, who headed the transitional government, attends the demonstration of coup supporters at a stadium in the capital city of Niger, Niamey. Photo: © picture alliance / AA | Balima Boureima.

BY MARKUS BAYER, FELIX S. BETHKE, AUREL CROISSANT AND NIKITAS SCHEEDER

On July 26, 2023, the military of Niger announced that they had ousted the democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum. Bazoum resumed office only two years earlier in 2021 and survived a coup attempt in the same year. One month later, on August 30, General Brice Clotaire Oligui Nguema of Gabon's presidential guard unseated Gabon's President Ali Bongo and established the Committee for the Transition and Restoration of Institutions as ruling junta. These are just two examples of a longer list of successful and unsuccessful attempts by

African militaries in recent years to take over government by force. Particularly relevant for German foreign policy was the coup in Mali in 2021, which ultimately led to the end of the UN and EU missions intended to stabilize the country and the withdrawal of German troops by the end of 2023.

While having been a frequent and global phenomenon between the late 1950s and the early 1990s, military coups have seemed to be out of date since the new millennium. As depicted by Figure 1 below, the number of (attempted) military coups peaked at 18 per year in 1966 and fell to an average of only two per year in the period between 2001 and 2018.

It is notable that apart from the coup in Myanmar in 2021, all 15 coups within the recent three years occurred in Africa. The coups in Mali (2020; 2021), Niger (2021; 2023), Sudan (2021; 2021; 2023), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022; 2022), Guinea-Bissau (2022; 2022), Sao Tome and Principe (2022), and Gabon (2023) illustrate plainly that the military seems to be back in the business of politics in Africa. Or isn't it more likely that it has never been out of business, instead asserting political influence via more subtle means from behind the scenes?

BEYOND COUP-ISM: ASSESSING MORE SUBTLE WAYS OF MILITARY INFLUENCE

Military coups are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to military influence on political decision making. Focusing on the most extreme form of military interference in politics can lead to the so-called "fallacy of coup-ism" – a systematic underestimation of the real political influence of the military.¹ To stay in the picture: Neglecting these more sub-

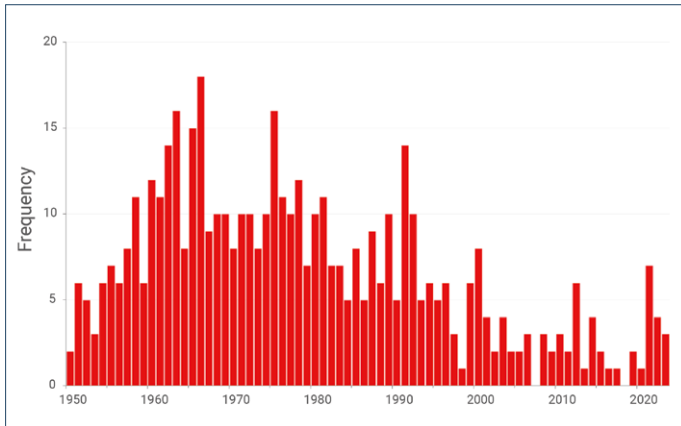


Figure 1: Global incidences of coups and coup-attempts between 1950 and 2022.²

tle forms of direct or indirect political influence by the military means “sailing on sight” and risking to hit the iceberg, instead of using the sonar and taking a look beneath the surface. Accordingly, it is important to study processes of political militarization, understood as an increase in key decision-making power of the military and influence in the inner workings of the ruling coalition, – since these have serious consequences for the persistence of democracy and authoritarian regimes:

If soldiers, for example, occupy important government positions, enjoy legal impunity, or wield a de-facto veto-power within the ruling regime, they can prevent effective civilian control over the military. Further, if the armed forces are engaged in repression against political opponents, elections become a farce or even impossible.

An increasing political influence of the military also might “spill over” to other areas and translate into higher military expenditure or a bigger army. This, in turn, results in a higher degree of material militarization. Alike, increasing the size of the armed forces and/or handing over new missions – like law-enforcement – to the military will also expand its social influence and contribute to societal militarization.

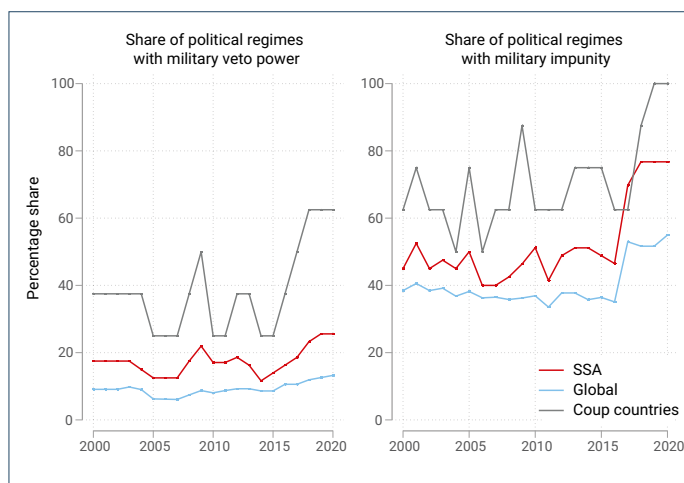


Figure 2: Trends in political militarization over time (2000–2020).

Accordingly, the degree of militarization can be interpreted as a warning against the risk of military coups.

ANALYZING POLITICAL MILITARIZATION IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICA

We analyze the development of political militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa over the last 20 years using two measures from M³-Dataset: (1) military veto-power and (2) military impunity. Our first measure examines, if the military possesses significant political veto-powers, which means that the political executive has to seek approval by the military for relevant decisions. This was most visible, for example, during leadership change in Togo in 2005. After the death of long-term incumbent President Gnassingbé Eyadéma, instead of following the rules in the constitution, his son Faure Gnassingbé took over. This illegal leadership change occurred because military leaders who were loyal to Faure’s father prevented the constitutionally assigned transfer of power to the leader of the National Assembly.

Our second measure refers to prerogatives for members of the armed forces in the form of legal impunity when they engage in illegal activities, such as violations of human rights, corruption, or severe cases of insubordination. For instance, the Nigerian Army has been accused of resorting to extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention in its fight against Boko Haram. Despite these serious allegations, impunity remained widespread at all levels according to the US Department of State.³

Figure 2 shows the proportion of countries that feature such conditions of military veto power (left-panel) and military impunity (right-panel) respectively between 2000 and 2020. For comparison, we analyze three different groups: First, the global share of countries, second, the share of countries in SSA, and third, the group of eight African countries that experienced a coup during the recent wave of coups (2020–2023).⁴

As shown in the left panel of figure 2, as a prelude to the renewed peak in coup events in the most recent years, we observe an increase in the share of political regimes where the military possesses veto-powers. This increase is only subtle at the global level, but quite strong in Sub-Saharan African countries. Here, the share of regimes with military veto-power increases from 11.6% in 2014 to more than 25% in 2020. In other words: The number of countries in which the military had political veto-power doubled in Sub-Sahara Africa prior to the recent coup wave. This trend is even more pronounced if we look only at those African countries that eventually experienced a coup. Here, the share of regimes with a military that already exercised a veto-power before they overthrew their respective government increased from 25 to a staggering 62.5%.

We observe a similar pattern, with even more extreme shifts, when looking at the development of military impunity. There appears to be a global push for an increase in

M³ DATASET

The data for this article mainly stems from the new Multidimensional Measures of Militarization (M³) Dataset. The M³-Dataset represents a global dataset. It draws on a conceptualization of militarization as a multidimensional phenomenon, differentiating between the dimension of material, political and societal militarization. The dataset provides 30 variables and, overall, 140.000 observations for the period between 1990 and 2020.

More information can be found on the M³-Homepage: <https://m3-militarization.com> or the article introducing the dataset:

Bayer, M.; Croissant, A.; Izadi, R.; Scheeder, N. (2023): Multidimensional Measures of Militarization (M³): A Global Dataset. *Armed Forces & Society*, DOI: 10.1177/0095327X231215295.

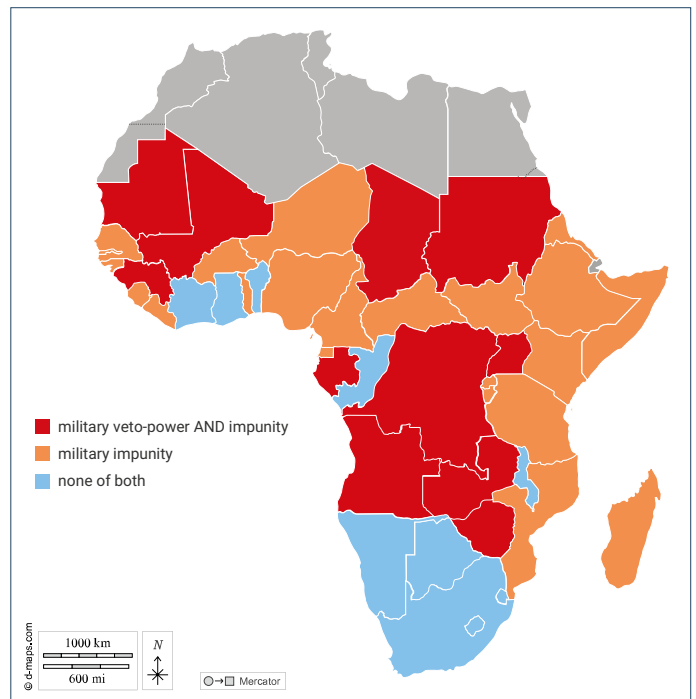
military impunity between 2016 and 2020. However, this trend is substantially more pronounced in Sub-Saharan African countries and most extreme in countries that witnessed a coup between 2020 and 2023. By 2020 almost 80 percent of the region's militaries de facto enjoyed impunity; a worrying trend in itself, which however becomes even more important when looking at the group of countries that witnessed a coup from 2020 onwards: every country in this group, by 2020, had a military that was not held accountable for crimes committed by its members.

MILITARIZATION AS EARLY WARNING INDICATOR

As we have seen – by analyzing the two factors of military veto-power and military impunity – the recent coup-wave is only the tip of the iceberg of militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa. Countries experiencing coups in this wave were affected by this trend in particular but they are not the only cases. Although the reasons for coups are manifold, both factors (veto-power and military impunity) together seem to be good indicators of coup risk: Militaries with impunity have little reason to fear punishment in the event of a coup, even if it fails, whereas the fact that the military already has substantial veto-power signals the vulnerability of civilian politics vis-à-vis the military. A weak civilian government unable to hold the military accountable and to wield effective control is further delegitimized by a lack of performance prompting the military to take over power completely. This was the case in many states of the current coup wave, where Islamist incursions proved to be a challenge for civilian governments. Studying militarization thus can help us see below the waterline and identify countries at risk of experiencing military coups. Following this line, which countries are currently at risk?

As shown by the map (Map 1) below, out of the 43 Sub-Saharan countries covered by the M³-Dataset only ten⁵ did not show signs of either a military veto-power or impunity in 2020. In these countries a military coup seems currently unlikely. In all other 33 countries the military enjoys a de facto impunity, which we consider a risk factor. In 11 of them⁶, the military also exercises substantial de facto veto-power. Given that previous coups are also known as

a structural factor that increases the likelihood of future coups⁷, we – besides those countries that already witnessed coups in the recent waves – regard Zimbabwe (which witnessed a coup in 2017), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (with a coup attempt in 2022), as the most likely cases for a future coup. Of course, our analysis showed that coups also occurred in countries where the military did not wield veto-power but enjoyed impunity. This group includes several cases with a strong tradition of military takeovers (like Burundi and Benin) or current threats of violent conflict (such as Cameroon and Mozambique), both of which often trigger military coups. Those cases are also located in the danger zone of militarization and coup-plotting.



Map 1: Prevalence of the risk factors military veto-power or impunity in Sub-Saharan African countries in 2020 (map source: <https://d-maps.com/m/africa/afrique/afrique10.svg>, personal editing).

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In sum, it is evident that the recent surge in military coups in Sub-Saharan Africa is accompanied by a broader trend of political militarization. To address this concerning issue, we propose the following policy recommendations. Strengthening institutions for effective civilian control over the military is crucial, which foremost entails reforms to limit military veto powers, ensuring that key political decisions remain under civilian authority. This is a delicate matter because, as described above, a change in the status quo can trigger a coup. Increasing civilian control of the military is therefore a long-term project. However, this process can be supported from outside, for example by attaching conditions to collaborations such as international peacekeeping missions, which – due to the overseas and risk allowances – often provide financial gains for military personnel. Cutting off such sources of income can also help to reduce the willingness to support coups within such militaries. Additionally, legal frameworks must be reinforced to hold members of the armed forc-

es accountable for illegal activities, such as human rights violations and corruption. In this regard, the international community, including regional organizations, should collaborate to monitor and address political militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa. Establishing mechanisms for early warning can help identify and respond to countries at risk of military coups. Though our analysis above cannot be considered as a sophisticated forecasting model, it illustrates the potential to integrate indicators of militarization into established frameworks such as the PREVIEW data tool of the German foreign office. However, it is essential to recognize that addressing political militarization requires a multifaceted and collaborative approach involving regional and domestic stakeholders.

PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.

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