DEMOCRACY, NOT MILITARY COUPS, IS OUR PREFERRED PATH

People-centred views on the need for democratic renewal across Africa
We are tired of coups. People have suffered, lost dear ones, were humiliated, impoverished and even killed. We don’t want coups.

FEMALE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSANT, ACCRA, GHANA (JUNE 2022)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracies across the globe have faced multiple challenges over the past decade, and Africa has been no exception. Constitutional manipulation has increased on the continent as some leaders attempt to extend their time in power. But perhaps the most striking factor has been a sudden upturn in military coups. Between 2020 and 2022, Africa experienced six coups and three coup attempts: a sharp rise from the previous two decades. Popular support for coup leadership has been prominent, albeit short-lived.

As part of UNDP’s efforts to address these events, this study adopts primarily a development-focused approach, in line with our organizational mandate. Developed as part of UNDP’s partnership with the AU Commission, the report supports continental leadership efforts in tackling unconstitutional changes of government (UCG). It offers a forward-looking perspective – both for preventing further coups and for harnessing opportunities for transformative change and sustained constitutional order.

The research findings are based on a vast perceptions survey, which captured the views of 8,000 citizens across Africa. Among the respondents, 5,000 are African citizens who were either caught in coups or equivalent UCG events, in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan. Their views were contrasted with those of 3,000 citizens from countries on a path of democratic transition or consolidation, namely The Gambia, Ghana and Tanzania. In the report, we refer to the former countries throughout as UCG settings, and the latter as democratic transition states (DTS).

As a result of this extensive survey, we have been able to interpret issues and trends through a uniquely people-centred dataset.

While coups and military rule were common episodes in Africa’s post-colonial history, a wave of democratization spread across the continent since the early 1990s. This yielded progress in favor of constitutional order. In many countries, democratic governance was established, and the peaceful change of political power through elections increased. Democratic governance became a continent-wide norm projected by the African Union (AU) through, for instance, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.

Against this backdrop, the recent resurgence in coups has accentuated a warning note. It raises the specter of democratic backsliding, turbulence and the close involvement of the military in political life. When power is seized through military means, it represents a critical risk for peace and democratic progress in each affected country, along with potential spill-over effects and wider destabilization.

The AU has denounced the trend, with high-level statements and communications signaling renewed effort to tackle what it terms unconstitutional changes of government (UCG). Similarly, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres lamented the “epidemic of coups d’états” unfolding on the world stage and urged “effective deterrence” from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

The coup events explored in this study are recent, and longer-term development consequences remain unknown. However, using methods based on country-level, survey, UNDP background research and impacts of earlier coups in Guinea (2008) and Mali (2012), the findings showed that these coups had left each country with an accumulated loss of GDP of 12.1 (Guinea) and 13.5 (Mali) of total gross domestic product (GDP), based on purchasing power parity (PPP), in the year of the coup.

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‘Since the elections will be conducted for the first time, some people don’t know how to even cast a vote. The government needs to inform the people on how the elections will be conducted.’

Ephemeral optimism

The soldiers and citizen data also reflect the ephemerality of this optimism, and related popular support for the military coup. Positive feelings were found to be in flux when respondents were asked how they felt ‘now’ (at the time of the research), as opposed to ‘then’ (during the political transition). This echoes trends elsewhere on the continent, where coups are popular at first, and suggests that support for coup leaders may be interpreted as a reaction against the status quo, rather than a wholehearted endorsement of military rule. Indeed, in Ghana and Burkina Faso, crowds turned against the same leaders they had cheered into power less than a year earlier. This sensitive interplay between hope, delivery and expectation contributes to the risk of prolonged turbulence in transitional contexts.

Limited delivery of inclusivity

Declining civic confidence in transitional governments is partly explained by limitations in the delivery of promised inclusivity. Except for Sudan (following the coup that pre-dates the current war between armed factions), all the UCG-country respondents cited a body acting as the transitional legislative council that, to some degree, reflected the countries’ diversity. All engaged in at least some dialogue with socio-political forces in their respective countries to reach consensus about the management of the transition. It was clear in all five cases that inclusive and consultative processes were to guide the drafting and execution of transition plans. All contexts, however, subsequently saw increasing criticism from political and civic actors precisely on the issue of inclusivity. There has also been a general sharpening of hostility between junta leadership and opposition voices.

Disruptive views on democracy and the military

In DTS countries, over two thirds of respondents said that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. In UCG contexts, just over half shared this view. The remainder were split between saying that a non-democratic government can sometimes be preferable (37 percent) or that, for them, the type of government system does not really matter (20 percent). These findings reflect disappointment with the delivery of democratically elected governments. This dissatisfaction further fuels a sense that non-democratic governance may present a legitimate alternative: an attitude that was more prevalent in the UCG countries. However, in both categories, fewer men than women indicated that a non-democratic system could be preferable. (A difference of 7 percentage points in UCG-country categories, and 4 points in DTS-category settings.) Further analysis of the soldiers and citizen data found that men were 55 percent more likely than women to say that a non-democratic government may be preferable in some circumstances. This finding suggests that improved gender parity and women’s rights are better achieved via democracy than without it.

Attitudes to the role of the military in government were also divergent. UCG-country respondents expressed greater tolerance for military engagement in government affairs, including stepping in when the state shows itself to be incompetent.

Some 22 percent more UCG- than DTS-category respondents said that when a democratic government is incompetent, the military should intervene.

Time for change

A desire for change was a recurring theme across the data, particularly among those supporting the recent coup. ‘Time for change’ was cited as the most important reason for supporting a military takeover (44 percent). Other priorities were ‘better governance’ (35 percent) and ‘security’ (21 percent), while 8 percent selected ‘don’t know’. DTS-category respondents selected three prominent reasons for supporting the results of the last election, namely ‘better governance’ (21 percent), ‘constitutional mandate’ (21 percent) and ‘time for change’ (16 percent).

When asked to elaborate on why alternatives to democracy may be justified, most respondents pointed to instances where democracy was ‘abused’ or ‘not working’. In UCG-country countries, more than half (63 percent) said this would warrant alternatives, while in DTS-category countries, 48 percent of respondents selected this answer. For these countries, a larger share pin-pointed ‘corruption’ as the second-highest reason (29 percent).

Disappointment with democratically elected leaders may therefore inspire readiness to consider alternative systems of government. This attitude was more pronounced in the countries that recently experienced a coup. When asked to rank government performance, similar numbers across both settings felt that improvement was necessary. However, scepticism was again higher among those in DTS-category countries.

Coup risk may spread

Lastly, the findings of the soldiers and citizen study suggest that coup risk may spread. In coup-affected countries, there is a clear risk for volatility to persist and constitutional order to continue eroding beyond transition timelines. (This is evidenced by the warfare between coup instigators in Sudan, which broke out from April 2021.) Coup leaders may also take inspiration from one another, increasingly bypassing the normative frameworks and efforts of regional institutions.

The five recently affected UCG countries are not the only states to experience this particular confluence of structural and proximate factors. This points to the potential for other cases to emerge on the continent. The research — and real-time events unfolding in Ghana and The Gambia during the study — have highlighted vulnerabilities even in states on a path of democratic transition or consolidation.

It is notable that citizens from some of the DTS countries, which are comparatively stable and developmentally advanced, cited higher levels of frustration and scepticism about government than were reported in the coup-affected countries. This discrepancy seems to indicate both higher expectations in these settings, as well as challenges that persist even in contexts with relative development progress. The research shows in a compelling manner that tolerance for ongoing inequality, government under-performance and elite well-enrichment is sharply waxing across the continent.
DEMOCRACY, NOT MILITARY COUPS, IS OUR PREFERRED PATH: PEOPLE-CENTRED VIEWS ON THE NEED FOR DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL ACROSS AFRICA UNDP 2023

1. CONCEPTUAL ANCHOR POINTS

Given the complexity of the issues and dynamics at play, the research team established a set of three conceptual anchor points to guide the process.

As articulated in AU instruments, UCG can take different forms. The first of this type of UCG namely military coups, is presently the most prominent, and is the primary focus of this report.

Acutely questions regarding both the implementation of these norms, and increasing levels of AU member states adherence to them, require continued attention. The normative framework on UCG is thus both still evolving, and in need of renewed commitment. Yet it remains a pertinent, useful and opportune frame through which to view recent developments and shape response strategies, while further strengthening regional leadership and influence. UNDP’s own deep partnership with the AU Commission and its various specialized agencies has been a further inspiration.

The starting point of this paper is that a development lens can help yield effective responses to ongoing militarization through complementing political perspectives and instruments to protect and advance development gains.

This approach highlights how different aspects of a country’s development context may influence the occurrence of military coups. It also sheds light on the development consequences that we might expect to see when coups take place. These may well be destructive, but the development lens also leaves to identify opportunities for securing positive outcomes towards future progress.

This lens derives from Agenda 2030, which, in Sustainable Development Goal 16, emphasizes the importance of meaningful and inclusive participation in governance processes. Agenda 2030 articulates related priorities in its Progress on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/75/21). These two categories do not represent a transformative, longer-term outcomes. This report was produced in the context of the new Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions (AFST), a joint initiative of UNDP and the AU Commission to provide integrated programming support to countries in Africa undergoing complex political transitions.

The trajectory linking inclusive political processes to inclusive outcomes is non-linear and complex. Yet states and societies that are more open and inclusive display greater prospectiveness, effectiveness and resilience in the long term. A substantial body of research demonstrates how the exclusion of marginalized and minority groups from political processes can render governance outcomes, whether quantified or informally perceived, constitutes a key factor in conflict and instability — while also affecting prospects for democratic consolidation.

Experience in peacebuilding highlights the importance of inclusive national dialogue processes for establishing trust and establishing a shared sense of a future, supported and sustained by national infrastructural for peace. These lessons are pertinent in considering post-coup process governance and peacebuilding. Women and young people’s contributions are key to sustainable peace, for instance. As a result, critical policy norms and processes have been generated around women, peace and security; as well as youth, peace and security. In order to enable democracy to work, all citizens must have access to participation and representation in institutions and processes — from election management and constitutional bodies to political parties and parliaments.

The concept of political inclusion signifies that every citizen should have an equal right and opportunity to participate, and contribute to, the functioning of these institutions and processes. Levels of representation and inclusiveness are critical indicators of the overall legitimacy of a given political process and its transformative, whether resulting from elections or following UCG events.

2. RESEARCH TOOLS

The study combined both qualitative and quantitative methods which are described in further detail below. The methods were designed to triangulate findings across the sources of data, recognizing the complexity of the issues at hand.

Country case selection:

The overall methodological approach has been to gather evidence and data for contrasting types of recent political transitions in Africa. This is based on working hypothesis that comparative analysis would yield insights. Specifically, the study contrast UCG-category countries, which have recently experienced a military coup or equivalent event, with ICTY-category countries, which appear to be on a path of democratic consolidation or transition.

These two categories do not represent a comprehensive typology of contemporary political transitions in Africa. However, they reflect the polarity between two prominent trends: either towards deepened democracy on the continent, as seen since the 1990s — or, seemingly towards its disruption. The study’s UCG focal countries are Botswana, Chad, Guinea, Malawi, and South Sudan, while the ICTY countries are The Gambia, Ghana and Tanzania. The emphasis of the analysis is on the first group of five countries that recently experienced a military coup (noting Chad’s case is particularly in this frame). The states in the second list have either experienced a substantial period of democratic transition (Ghana and Tanzania) — the latter also being the only-country included with no history of military coup, or they have, if only recently, embarked on a path towards democratic transition (The Gambia).

In addition to generating comparative lessons and insights, the inclusion of ICTY countries revealed potential limitations of government performance against citizens’ expectations, even in apparently functioning democracies.

Quantitative research instruments

The study captures the perspectives of approximately 6,000 African adults, drawn from eight focal countries, comparing and contrasting experiences across their locations. The report places these perspectives at the centre — ‘listening’ to them, while triangulating findings against other data and literature. To allow for a sufficient sample size, 1,000 survey responses were collected in each of the countries, using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). This generated a set of 6,000 respondents from UCG-category countries, and 3,000 from ICTY-category countries.

The figures on the following pages present a demographic profile of this vast sample. Participants from both settings reflect an even representation of women and men (women comprised 52 percent of respondents in UCG countries, and 50 percent from DTS settings), and the average age of respondents was 35. Respondents were mostly located in urban settings (70 percent UCG, and 58 percent in DTS countries), and across both contexts, just over half of the respondents were employed (56 percent in UCG and 62 percent in DTS).
The respondents from the eight focal countries were asked to think back to the time of the last national-level political event (whether UCG or election), and answer questions related to their experiences and perspectives, as well as supplementary questions related to their attitudes to different forms of government and government performance. Respondents were also asked how they viewed the future based on their assessment of, and confidence in, government performance and the overall direction of travel.

The specific political events discussed with the respondents in UCG-category countries were:
- Burkina Faso: Paul Kossi and Alassane Dramane becoming president through a military coup in February 2022;
- Chad: Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno (also known as Mahamat Kaka) became head of state through a military coup in September 2021; and
- Guinea: Mamady Doumbouya became prime minister — effectively becoming president — following the death of her predecessor.

The specific electoral events discussed with the respondents in DTS-category countries were:
- The Gambia: the re-election of Adama Barrow as president in December 2021;
- Ghana: the re-election of Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo as president in December 2020; and
- Tanzania: Samia Suluhu Hassan becoming president in March 2021, following the death of her predecessor.

Descriptive analysis of findings from the survey forms the basis of the primary data shared in this report. In addition, a second analysis of the dataset was conducted using multilevel logistic regression analysis and statistical modeling to further test emerging findings.

Qualitative research instruments
The primary soldiers and citizens dataset was supplemented by a range of qualitative research activities. Focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were conducted in two UCG-category focal countries (Burkina Faso and Sudan), and one DTS-category country (Ghana). The FGDs took place with four different groups in each country, of which one was limited to women only and one to youth.

The discussions took place in three different locations within each country to explore the varied views and experiences of the sample population. The discussions revolved around living conditions, the current government, the last change of government, the role of regional and international actors, and the inclusivity of political transitions. Twelve key informant interviews were also conducted in the same countries to further explore perspectives on the issues raised, through the perspectives of community leaders, civil society organizations (CSOs), women's organizations, and religious leaders. In total, 132 people participated in the qualitative research activities.

Broader case studies and literature reviews were commissioned for each of the eight focal countries. These aimed to assess historical contexts and developments leading up to, and informing, the political events in question, as framed by the key research questions. A review was also undertaken of a sample of the academic literature on democratization in Africa, military coups and political transition more broadly. The analysis was further informed by position papers that were commissioned on the role of the AU and RECs in relation to political transition, the role of the international development system responding to UCG, and a deep dive into the Sahel’s specific experiences in recent years.

The study also draws on the expertise of UNDP, with country offices providing significant support in the data-collection phase within each of the selected countries, and wider staff expertise engaged throughout the process. The research team collaborated closely with a range of other international institutions, including the AU, RECs/RM, the African Union Commission (AUC), African academic institutions, think tanks and CSOs. Multiple consultations across these and other stakeholders, and through a continual peer review process, generated a further essential dimension of the project.
The harm [of sanctions are] mostly on the masses, more than the ‘obstructors’. The coup makers are not affected. There should be individual penalties.

MALE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSANT, KHARTOUM, SUDAN (FEBRUARY 2022)
KEY MESSAGES

1. To mitigate coup risk, a development lens is essential

The study found that among the hybrid circumstances that shape vulnerability to coup risk, underdevelopment is prominent. Counterfactual analysis of the cost of coups further highlights that these events significantly slow down development.

These findings confirm that development perspectives should be at the centre of UCG response strategies. While coups are neither inevitable, nor necessarily likely, in all low-development contexts, secondary data shows clear correlations between heightened coup risk and stagnant growth, embryonic economic governance, multi-dimensional poverty, inequality, reduced youth and women’s participation, governance deficits and higher levels of military spend as a share of government budget. The findings confirm that coup risk can be viewed as a subset of state fragility.

Countries that experience contemporary coups perform poorly on global development indices (see examples in Figures 6 and 7). These rankings are not abstract, but represent millions of lives marred by exclusion, infringement of rights, restriction of opportunity and frustration. These grievances create a base of frustration that coup leaders can readily exploit. The fielders and citizens data reveals optimism and a heightened appetite for change among those who recently experienced a military coup, as well as their positive transformation to materialize from the turmoil. Poor government performance, corruption and failure to deliver security, inclusive development gains and related opportunities for populations all appear to create an appetite for change in any guise.

Coup leaders have explicitly invoked the giants of Africa’s post-colonial history in their rhetoric of revolution and transformation. In so doing they have captured the popular imagination. This appeal points to a yearning for a better quality of political leadership, which strives to meet civilians’ needs and aspirations. The base of readily exploitable grievances, linked to leaders’ failures to deliver inclusive development, creates fertile ground for coup to be staged. It is therefore critical to scale up development-oriented investment that will yield results and boost citizens’ confidence in a better future.
2. States must deepen democracy and reset their social contract with citizens

For African governments to build coup resilience, better governance, deeper democracy and inclusive development progress should be a guiding star. The quality of democracy and the prevalence of wider dysfunction in governance systems have been brought to the forefront. For too long, some states in the region have ruled behind a façade of democracy while deploying innately exclusionary models of governance. Democracy is at an inflection point on the continent, confronted by its own shortcomings and incompleteness.

A reset of the social contract is needed both to assist coup-affected states in moving forward and to help prevent future coups. To achieve this, governments should shift their focus to practical delivery that directly improves quality of life and opportunity for all segments of society. The initial popularity of coup leaders should serve as a rallying call for governments to do better in demonstrating inclusive and principled governance.

Limited inclusivity could create a crisis of legitimacy of governments and governance institutions. These include traditional institutions (which may shape an individual’s choices more than the government itself), the private sector and other economic actors, and social media influencers. Lived experience happens at grassroots and localised levels, whether in cities or villages. This demands a multi-level framing of the social contract that ties the local to the national, regional and global.

Deepening democracy and rebuilding the social contract are long-term endeavours. Key processes should be identified to signal to the population that inclusive development has been made a priority of the state. This can include setting up complaint mechanisms and clear service delivery standards with realistic implementation roadmaps.

FIGURE 8

PREFERENCE FOR DEMOCRACY OR OTHER KIND OF GOVERNMENT

WHOSE THREE STATEMENTS IS CLOSEST TO YOUR OWN OPINION?

55% IN THE UCG COUNTRIES BELIEVE THAT DEMOCRACY IS PREFERABLE

67% IN THE DTS COUNTRIES BELIEVE THAT DEMOCRACY IS PREFERABLE

Don't know

Out now

Non-democratic governance may be preferable

It doesn't matter for someone like me

It doesn't matter for someone like me

Don't know

16%

8%

17%

11%

20%

55%

67%

34%

48%

51%

41%

37%

49%

48%

51%

25%

34%

39%

41%

49%

51%

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IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PROGRAMMING

1. Strengthening continental and regional response mechanisms
   The findings of this report suggest five sets of specific priorities as the basis for a framework for policy and programming action in responding to contemporary coup risk in Africa.

   a. Building long-term coup resilience by addressing structural and institutional drivers
   Structural factors feed into grievances which, in turn, represent proximate factors that are readily triggered in support of military coups. Addressing these root causes is critical for longer-term coup prevention, or ‘coup-proofing’. Responding to the key structural drivers that contributed to coup vulnerability identified in this research suggests the following priorities: deepening democratic governance, a strategic reset of military relations, and inclusive economic development and poverty reduction.

   b. Preventing further coups
   The need for more proactive approaches to coup prevention is clear. Though possibly prevented in political risk assessments, the recent coup in Mali caught many off guard. Responses were stymied by delay and other challenges, while the risk of multiple coups in the same state became evident. Yet the gains of preventing crises and conflict, rather than reacting when they occur, have been recognized at the highest levels of international policy and decision-making for decades.

   While the practice of prevention lies behind principle, several actions can be identified to remedy this. Continental norms that prohibit UCG and discourage constitutional manipulation should be projected in a more consistent and robust manner. Complemented with sharper AU- and REC-deployable capacities, as mentioned above, this is a key avenue for assisting a coup-prevention agenda. Regional and international actors must engage proactively with countries where presidents are nearing the end of their term limits to secure public assurances that they will resign and allow for a peaceful transfer of power. Additional short- and medium-term priorities include boosting early warning and response, supporting problem-solving dialogue processes between political and military elites, and prioritizing programmatic investment in national infrastructures for peace.

   c. More effective responses when coups occur
   Regional and international partners, including development agencies and financial institutions, play a critical role in shaping the trajectory of coups. Partners need to support and sustain post-coup transition processes by developing a strategic entry points that boost inclusivity and effectiveness. In this way, the foundations for long-term renewal may be established. For example, UNDP’s approach in recent coup-affected contexts has been to ‘stay and deliver’ and to prevent the development agenda from being jeopardized.

   Partners must also improve response mechanisms in the event of future occurrences where prevention has failed. Transition plans can harness opportunities for positive transformation where they are based on, and run alongside, continuous and inclusive national dialogue processes, and are characterized by a readiness to address grievances across stakeholder groups. Specific priorities include strategic coordination across sectors and partners, continued assistance to vulnerable populations, advocating for meaningfully inclusive transition processes, and supporting the capacities of key transition institutions.

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